

Proper 18 C

Large crowds were following Jesus. How nice that must have been.

To be a leader with no followers is no fun. I've seen people suffer in that.

I can tell you preaching, even walking down the aisle in procession feels better when we have a large crowd here.

Success in our world is a thing that must be measured.

How hard one works is less important than the result of the work these days.

Outcomes, rather than inputs, must be our standard, and those must be measurable, in today's management culture. Metrics rule.

And so, we want to see upward trends, growing numbers, and large crowds.

Ask almost any church leader how something went, and they will first tell you how many people came.

Sadly, only a few. Happily, more than we expected!

It is a dreary calculus, if our sense of well-being in the Lord's work is entirely derived by how many came.

Some greater measurement than the fullness of the pews or plates must be sought, for the Lord's work is surely sometimes done with small crowds, when two or three are gathered together in his name, even in the prayer closet of an individual encounter with the living God.

Large crowds feel good on Sunday morning, but of course, they can be a problem.

Social science research shows how we lose our way as moral actors in large crowds.

Otherwise generally decent people are carried away in a crowd.

They may ignore the needs of others, even the injured, even those being attacked.

They push and shove and terrible things happen, at soccer matches and football games.

I don't think I've heard an adult use a foul word around my children since last year; but they'll get the chance to expand their vocabulary when we go to Athens next weekend.

In less dramatic ways, we also lose our way metaphorically in large crowds.

The church, between its inception as a gathering of Jesus' closest witnesses and most ardent followers,

grew in couple of centuries into a movement that included the Emperor of the Romans.

And with him, all sorts of insincere hangers-on.

The church grew rich and landed and came to be closely associated with those who ruled, and contained those who could tell you little enough about the Savior's vision.

And the passionate Galilean peasants were forgotten in the great crowd the church began.

So some people call for small crowds, small crowds that remember and keep up the passion of following Jesus.

That can be found in the sectarian impulse that keeps some churches small; always finding some reason to shrink, some issue of purity, doctrine, or personal dislike that keeps the herd a certain size.

And the undesired shrinking of the church in the post-industrial world has meant smaller crowds as well.

Joseph Ratzinger, the last pope spoke of "facing a new and different kind of epoch in the church's history, where Christianity will again be characterized more by the mustard seed, where it will exist

in small, seemingly insignificant groups that nonetheless live an intense struggle against evil and bring good into the world -- that let God in."

The church may chose to be a small crowd or have smallness imposed upon it by the times in which it lives.

The blessing of such a season might be the shared passion and clarity of mission the little group can share.

So Jesus may have been concerned about the large group that was following him.

Perhaps it felt like a day at the fair or on the way to the coliseum, with some there for novelty and excitement and a miracle about which to tell their neighbors.

Perhaps it seemed time to see if the crowd would shrink if he spoke frankly about the cost of following him.

He told them that they must love him more than their families,

That they must be willing to give up their lives for his sake,

That they must be willing to take up a cross like his if they wished to follow him.

And perhaps hardest of all for us to hear, that one's possessions would get in the way of following him.

So he advised them to consider the cost before they continued to follow him.

This Christian way would not be a way that fit easily with the ways of the world, and perhaps those more committed to the ways of the world than to him might want to find another rabbi.

And so perhaps the crowd grew slimmer and yet more sincere.

Be sure, however, that this story is surrounded by Jesus' teaching about recruiting indiscriminately for the kingdom.

When you have a party, we heard him say last week, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.

And just before, he told his parable about the man whose intended guests would not come to his big dinner party.

Who sent his servants out to collect again the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.

And when told there was still room, he sent them to bring in the inhabitants of the highways and the hedgerows, saying "I want my house to be full."

In such parables, the master seems to stand in the allegorical place of God.

And so we would be justified in hearing this as the voice of a divine generosity.

There is plenty good room in the kingdom that is to come, plenty good room in the church too.

Large crowds feel good when we gather in the Lord's name; large crowds are God's hope for humanity.

Indeed, a great cloud of witnesses, a vast number, too many to count, from every people, tribe and language.

That is the divine hope and ours as well, that a great crowd will come together.

A great crowd deeply formed by and for its faith in Jesus, sincere and real its commitment to him.

That is the church and people we hope to be.

The most loving, gentle, and biggest crowd ever. The Jesus crowd, that has put all its trust in him.