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Introduction

This story begins with Jesus being so crowded by people that he got into a boat and sat in it, while the crowd sat on the shore. It is worth wondering how big a crowd the bible passage is referring to. In imagining the scene, we can wonder how many people could have been there, if they were all to hear Jesus speaking in the open air and without a microphone.

As well as taking some time to imagine the scene as it may have been in Jesus' day, in preparation for reading the text, perhaps we could think for ourselves of the idea of being crowded: the places we feel crowded; in tube stations; or on busy railway platforms; in city centre shops; or on urban roads. Perhaps we can also feel crowded on the internet, by twitter, Facebook, notifications and news feeds. It is important not to forget the crowd when reading the text, so many grains of wheat, each different under the microscope, but in the open hand of the farmer, they all look the same. Crowds are places where we can choose to think of our individuality as secondary to our group identity – crowds may be places where being and belonging matter more than our individual beliefs.

Can you think of time when you joined in a crowd of like-minded people; for example at a public event, or a rally, or a march, or a picnic, or a concert? When was that? How did it feel for you? What happened next?

Have you ever felt threatened by a crowd? When was that? How did it feel?

Text

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying:

“Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen! ... Hear then the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

Comment

For some reconciliation is a hope or dream that we might find a perfect world, a place where trouble and persecution does not come, or if it does, it can be resolved easily and quickly. The reality of our world does not reflect this very often. We can find that trouble and persecution may become ingrained in our societies, perhaps so much so that we do not even see it for what it truly is.

It is easy to slip into thinking that those who ‘hear and understand’ are simply those who agree with us. We naturally enjoy the company of ‘like minded’ people and find encouragement and comfort in their friendship.

In our preparation for reading this text we considered the crowd, and the power of crowd dynamics to enable people to put aside their individual ideas for a common ideal or goal. Jesus addresses a crowd of people all united in hearing his words but in his use of this parable he divides them again by their receptiveness to His message. Is this a courageous thing to do – dividing his audience when he could have united them by simply feeding them platitudes? Or was it a foolish thing for Jesus to allocate roles to different types of listener like this? As a disciple, or as a preacher, in church should we use this text to decide what kind of faith others have? Or is it about discerning the conditions in our own hearts for hearing the gospel?

Do we have memories of times when, in a crowd, we have gone against our better judgement? Perhaps at school, in the workplace, or in our lives of faith?

Or can we think of ideas we held as very important for a short time and then abandoned, or ideas we find are choked by the worries about this life and the love for riches.

What is the effect on a crowd of letting the individuals within that crowd think for themselves? In this parable Jesus allows and uses difference to define the community of faithful and those who need to listen more carefully to God’s word with the ears god has given them are challenged in this text.

Jesus clearly placed the value of acceptance of the faith in hearing and understanding, and this might have led to some in his crowd of followers no longer feeling they belonged. Is this a risk your congregation or faith community would take?

‘And the seeds sown in the good soil stand for those who hear the message and understand it: they bear fruit, some as much as one hundred, others sixty, and others thirty’

Response

One of the difficulties of finding a response to this passage is the very familiarity of the text. Why not try reading the story in several versions? Or from different places around the church, if you are in a worship context.

Or

Take some time yourself to listen to God.

What does the metaphor of different types of soil bring to your understanding of how to see religious faith as more sophisticated than simply a ‘crowd-belief’?

Can you find new ways to balance your own individuality and the need to share beliefs and ideas within a faith community?

Prayer

Crowded God
I see peoples all around you
Some are shallow, they won't stay long
Some are worried, and can't let their concerns go
Some are distracted by the crowd, on their phones, always fidgeting.
In the crowd, who am I to you?
What place can I have in your Kingdom?
If I find stillness, can I hear and understand,
Even through the crowd?
Hear my one voice among many,
May my faith grow in my heart:
One willing, seeking heart, ready to listen and understand.
AMEN

Season: Ordinary time

Themes: Exclusion and Prejudice