

## Crowds

People are duly impressed by this miracle of abundance and provision, but there is this little blip that gets stuck between the feeding of the crowd and Jesus walking on water: “When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king; he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.” I would like us to really pay close attention to that, because first of all that is actually a real danger, people can get swept up in mobs and movements a lot easier than you think. For someone who doesn’t actually like crowds, I have somewhat accidentally been a part of some pretty epic ones, mostly in my late teens and early twenties when doing crowd things seemed like the right thing to do. A lot of my crowd experience had to do with my choice of university. I sometimes joke that what I really studied most intensively in college was crowds and standing in line. Going to a school like Penn State you find yourself immersed in crowds quite a bit. I remember walking out from my dorm complex to my first home football game. As I got out past the big high rise towers of East Halls I saw a sea of people and cars, RVs, tents and wall to wall people, many of whom weren’t even going to bother cramming into Beaver Stadium for the game. At that time the stadium could hold 96,000 people, they have since boosted their capacity to well over 100,000. That, friends and neighbors, is a heck of a crowd.

During my time in those crowds we seemed to like to throw things. At one point it was marshmallows. How? Why? I have no idea, but enough people caught the idea and the student section became a chaotic blur of flying white sugar puffs, which of course turned into a sticky mess and led to a much stricter security sweep for any mallow contraband. But the crowd decided throwing things was fun, so after the great marshmallow crackdown people discovered the plastic lids they put on sodas at the stadium made pretty keen Frisbees and looked every bit as cool as marshmallows whizzing around the student section. The lids were pretty light and mostly harmless, but some jokers decided that full cups of ice fly pretty well too, so things got pretty dangerous and there were arrests. After that the crowd calmed down a little, until it snowed. Snow happens a lot in State College, a peculiarity of where it sits in the mountains, it seems to get levels of snow that are more suited for places like Erie and Buffalo where the lakes keep everything nice and moist. It snowed early on a Saturday morning and so they didn’t have time to shovel the stadium out properly. What followed made national news, it was the biggest snowball fight I have ever seen. Roughly 20,000 people sitting in sloped stadium seating, raining snow balls from the high ground and people below trying to fire back, but at a serious disadvantage. Campus police were at a loss, they managed to restrain and arrest a few of the most visible hurlers, but only the ones they could get to without being swamped by walls of snowballs themselves. From the middle of the crowd it was an amazing thing, but I didn’t really appreciate the scope of the mayhem until I saw it on TV later. We had been naughty children.

The other “crowd” experience that has made an impact on my understanding is what they call a “mosh pit,” and I have been in some pretty impressive/scary ones. I have always been bigger than average and for the most part I’m not easily pushed around, so the experience of being “in the pit” at a big show was unnerving at first. You are completely trapped and at the mercy of the crowd, everybody around you is too, you give up your autonomy when you enter the pit. No one is in control, it is simply the undulation of a mass of people. At first it’s terrifying, and then it’s exhilarating, and finally you come away exhausted, but in a strangely satisfying way.

It teaches you something similar to the experience of being in a storm or rough seas, but with a much more human scale. Crowds of people are capable of things that individuals really are not. In some ways

Jesus has an ability to manage the crowd, in providing for their need, in seeing them with compassion, but when it comes time to read that the crowd might become dangerous, he knows when to cut and run. He can feel when it gets dangerous, and it's not a good feeling. This crowd has seen him do something miraculous, something that only a prophet from God could do (they had a story about Elisha doing something like it). And they were anxious and waiting for the Messiah, they were suffering and they wanted to vent their anger like teens at a punk rock show. They were looking for something to make them feel like winners like people at a football game. They see Jesus and they decide that he should be a king.

We need to be pretty clear about the fact that Jesus does not actually want to be king in the way they want him to be, that is not the connection and the role he wants to play. We can confuse the thing that Jesus is: Lord, with King pretty easily, because to us, Lord is royal title. But what Jesus is really working on is being a Lord of a different sort. In other places he talks to his disciples as a teacher, a shepherd, a leader, a friend, a brother, even a master, and sometimes he does even use the metaphor of a king, but not the way this crowd wanted. There was nothing metaphorical about their desire, they wanted him to be their champion and a challenger to Herod, Caesar and whoever else might try to knock them down. The miracles riled them up because they saw he had the power of God in him, like Elisha in the book of kings, he did the same kind of "magic." It was time for him to stop fiddling around with loaves and fishes and start getting rid of Caesar and his corrupt puppet rulers, in other words they had violent plans for their king.

I think Jesus understands the danger of crowds pretty well, he knew that if they came to make him king, far from being in control of the situation, he would be utterly out of control, and they would use him to make terrible things happen. It can start innocently enough, a football game, a concert, some good natured snowball throwing, a bit of moshing around in the mud. In those crowds some bad individuals might do unsavory things sure, but that's not the biggest threat. It's that the crowd really has a life of its own. No one person can stop it. Believe me, I've seen the performer on stage at the concert, ask people in the pit to tone it down. I've seen players on the football team, even the very revered (at the time) Joe Paterno, get on a bullhorn and ask the student section to please knock off the mayhem. We didn't, even when the cops showed up, the snow still flew, we knew they just couldn't arrest all of us. Maybe the crowd would have come to its senses, but for Jesus the damage would have already been done, he would have been labeled and dissident and a rebel (people were looking for that in him anyway) and his ability to do what he was really there to do would have been diminished.

It's pretty simple really, once you become king, you give up the option of being a lot of other things. You shut down your ability to teach, you abdicate your role as a friend and brother and you become a sovereign. Your disciples, if they're following your lead, begin to strive to become kings like you, and they begin to compete for the throne (as they showed some inclination to do). Jesus wanted nothing to do with being a king like that, he understood that the temptation of that model came from the adversary. He knew where the crowds loyalty really lay, with the power, with the miracles, with their imagination of a powerful Messiah. He knew they wouldn't stick, he knew they couldn't be the Kingdom of Heaven on those terms, only by becoming his disciples, not just his subjects, only by following him, not just by bowing to him, by taking up their cross, not their crown. Jesus is rightly wary of the crowd, and he seems to know when it is time to leave them behind. I think we would do well to learn that lesson from him.