

SOMETIMES IT'S PERSONAL
LUKE 9:10-27

Have you ever been lost in a crowd? There are all kinds of times and places where we are part of crowd – shopping in the January sales, where there are great crowds of people pushing their way to find the best bargains; there are crowds at football matches, or rugby internationals; we are part even of a small crowd at Church, where we become part of larger group of people. How does it feel to be part of a crowd? There are times when it is a frightening place to be, perhaps most of all for small children; there are times when children are part of crowd and they can't see the parent, they have lost the person who is looking after them and they start to cry because they are lost in a crowd; all they see is a forest of legs and they're not sure which ones belong to their parent; when the crowd surges towards the door or the gate of a train or a bus and the people at the front are swept along by people behind, a crowd can be a frightening experience!

There are times when being part of crowd can also be a comforting thing. To be part of a group that thinks the same way as you do, means that you're not the only person who believes. Some people come to Church to be part of a big group and want to slip in quietly at the back and remain anonymous as part of the crowd; they don't want to be talked to or quizzed about who they are or where they come from; they want to be part of a crowd; they don't want to be picked out. Some people have come to Christian faith as part of a crowd, at some event like a Billy Graham rally and have made a response as part of a crowd of people also responding at the same time and there is safety and courage in numbers!

We have a God who doesn't always deal in crowds; He doesn't always leave us to sit safely at the back untouched and hidden in the crowd. Sometimes that relationship becomes personal and we have to react in a personal way to Jesus. We read 2 incidents today from Luke chapter 9, both of which start off with crowds or groups, but both of which become personal encounters with Jesus and both leave people in no doubt as to what Jesus promises to us and expects of us personally. There are times, like today, when it becomes a matter of personal faith: as part of a crowd we have our own views and ways of expressing faith that we keep to ourselves most of the time; but then times come along when we're asked to stand up in public and say 'this is what I believe!'

The feeding of 5000 people is the only miracle, other than the resurrection of Jesus at Easter, that is told in all 4 gospels. Usually, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John have different selections of Jesus' miracles; this is the only 1 they all tell. It begins with Jesus trying to be alone for a debrief session with the disciples after they had been out in the towns and villages, but the crowd followed them. Jesus, gracious as ever, "*welcomed...*" (9:11) It was getting late and the disciples were rightly anxious for the needs of this great crowd of people; they wanted Jesus to send them away so that they could find food and accommodation in the villages around about. But Jesus *said "You give..."* (9:13) How on earth could they feed this huge crowd? John tells us that a little

boy's packed lunch provided 5 loaves and 2 fish and "*Taking...*" (9:16f) Some scholars have made up all kinds of explanations for what happened, but these eye-witness accounts are clear; Jesus fed 5000 people with only 5 loaves and 2 fish and there was plenty for everyone and still some left over.

We know nothing about this crowd of people; we know none of their names, who they were, what they did, why they were there. For us, this is simply an anonymous crowd of 5000 men, with a few women and children. Yet, in the midst of that crowd there are 2 personal notions: 1) "*they all...*" (9:17) Everyone had his/her needs met! "This incident brought home the truth that God in Christ can supply any need." (Morris) There is a broader scope here – all and each went home satisfied and happy. No-one was missed out; everyone was included and though we don't know their names, Jesus gave them all that they needed that evening. 2) challenge to disciples "*You...*" (9:13) This is not for someone else to do, but here the disciples were presented with a personal challenge, a goal to achieve, a target to meet; 'you do it!' All of a sudden this moved from being a theoretical problem to a personal challenge! In both of these ways this crowd scene became a personal encounter with the Lord Jesus, for people to believe and for disciples to serve.

This was followed some time later by a much smaller crowd. "*Once when...*" (9:18) There were 12 people with Jesus, perhaps a few more; they were sitting together in a house or on a hillside. Then Jesus came up with a question: "*Who do...*" (9:18b) That was easy, because all they had to do was recite the list of ways in which people were talking about Jesus: some said He was John the Baptist come back to life after Herod had killed him; some said He was Elijah, the greatest Old Testament prophet of them all, or another prophet come back to life; that was why He was able to work these wonders and miracles. That was easy; they could go round the circle and tell Jesus what people were saying; there was no commitment to any of that; they were simply reporting. They say that when at dinner with friends you should never talk about religion and politics; these are contentious subjects, but we do it; we can talk about religion and the good it has done and the perceived problems that religion causes; we can talk about other people's views and how some want to get rid of religion altogether and some of us will talk like that all day and all night and we are simply discussing the world and the way it goes.

But then it becomes personal: "*But what...*" (9:20) That's an altogether different question. The answer to that question means a personal commitment to the answer. 'This is what I believe' is a whole different thing. We are no longer just talking about the world and the way it works and the place religion plays; this is now about what I believe. "*The Christ...*" (9:20b) The 'Messiah; the chosen one; the One whom God has sent to save world.' It is Peter who puts his head above the parapet first; maybe the others are sitting in embarrassed silence, they are not sure what to say; they are not willing to make that kind of personal commitment; maybe they believed it, but they weren't sure how to put it into words; maybe they were not even sure yet what they believed.

Jesus turned any views they may have had of the Messiah upside down. This is a picture by Holman Hunt called 'The shadow of the cross'. Holman Hunt was an English Pre-Raphaelite painter who worked mainly in Victorian times; his paintings could be romanticised versions of reality and this is a case in point; this is a work of his imagination in a sense, to make a point. The painting shows Jesus as an adult, working in the carpenter's shop, stretching out after finishing a piece of work and the sun is coming through the window and is creating the shape of the cross behind His outstretched arms. All the tools, the hammer and the nails are around Him in the shop. Hunt is saying that from very beginning, the cross on which Jesus would die has been overshadowing Him. It is certainly true by time He explains what the Messiah will do. "*The Son...*" (9:21) This is the first time Jesus puts that idea into words. The Messiah who God has sent will suffer and die and be raised; for the first time the shadow of the cross hangs over the disciples' lives.

"All very interesting, Jesus" you might say if you were in that small crowd. This is about Jesus and what He will do and the kind of Messiah He will be; you've just been introduced to a new idea, one you've never thought about before and it needs digesting before you can make up your mind about it. But before you have the chance to do that, again Jesus makes it personal: "*If anyone...*" (9:23) Now this is about the kind of disciple those in the room will be; they are now challenged about the kind of people they will be and their own personal reaction and response to Jesus. Will they stand side by side with Jesus, or will they be ashamed of Him and leave Him? Will they see the importance and value of Jesus' ways or will they embrace the values and standards of the world around them? They must decide and this is never a group decision; it has to be a personal decision; there is a cost to following Jesus and there's more of that at the end of the chapter: "*I will...*" (9:57f) Have a look at these words of Jesus for yourself.

I don't know what you're thinking as you listen. I can tell from your faces, some of the time how you respond to preaching, but I can never really tell what you think or feel. You might be sitting there thinking 'I'm hidden in the crowd and the preacher can't see me and can't get at me!' Fair enough, that's true, I can't! There is a certain safety in numbers; if this were a 1-to-1, face-to-face conversation and when I stop speaking you need to react to me because there is no-one else there; but in a crowd of 180 people it is not nearly so personal to me! The problem is, God is not so easily put away. Even in a crowd of this size there are times when we are brought face-to-face with the living God and there are times when we sense that some kind of personal response and reaction is needed. There are times when people say to me 'that sermon was just for me' and that is one of these personal encounters with the living Lord who meets our own personal needs or who calls us to make our own personal response. We can each go away satisfied by Jesus, meeting our own personal needs; we can also go away personally challenged: 'you serve...'

There is a world of a difference between having views on religion and personal faith. Almost everyone has views on religion and some are very well-able to express them, but that is very different from a personal faith that says

'this is what I believe!' There are times when we hide from that personal faith behind having views on religion. There are also times when we can hide no longer, times when it becomes personal and we have to deal with it. There are faith questions: 'what do you believe?' that can only be answered personally; or questions about commitment: 'will you follow Jesus, even if there's cost involved?' that can only be answered personally; or questions about service: 'will you do this job, that job, this kind of Christian service?' that can only be answered personally. There are times when we can't escape, when we can't hide in the crowd, because the living Lord, Jesus, finds us and He challenges us and there is no place to hide.

"I know..." (2 Tim 1:12) There's a personal confession of faith, one man's personal declaration of Christian faith. There are times when it is comfortable to hide in a crowd, to be anonymous and no-one knows what we think, what we believe. However, there are times when it becomes personal, when we say 'this is what I believe; this is how I will live; this is my service.' Don't run away from these personal moments; don't be frightened of them; embrace them because these moments are precious, turning points sometimes on our journey of faith. Do we want to be just a face in crowd? That's fine by me, but God knows you and me by name; what we need, and what we should be; with Jesus sometimes it's personal!