

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Crowds and Quiet

Rev. Catherine Buchan

Sunday 19th February 2012

1 Kings 19:1-10

Mark 3:7-19

Last summer I was with my children at the Bught Park in Inverness when Newtonmore won the Camanachd Cup. At the end of the tense match, the Newtonmore crowd simply surged forward on to the pitch, trying to get as close as possible to the players and the presentation and the cup. I held back, but then I realised that Andrew was out of sight, lost from me among the mass of people, so off I went to join them and try to find him: obviously I did! I don't like crowds. I have never wanted to be one of a screaming crowd at a rock concert, for instance. But some people do enjoy the crowd experience: being part of a crowd gives them an identity that is bigger than their own sense of self; they can lose themselves and express themselves more freely in a crowd.

Jesus drew crowds. We know this, but here Mark shows us a bit what it was like. It was frightening! They were on the lake-side and Jesus had to tell his disciples to get a boat ready in case he was crushed by the mob. This wasn't the kind of crowd you see for a royal walk-about, or a papal visit: nicely controlled by police and cordons. This was a mob, determined to get as close to Jesus as possible. It could be dangerous, dangerous to itself, dangerous to Jesus' person, and certainly dangerous to his message and what he stood for. This was a crowd who came, not to listen, but because they had heard that he healed. This was a crowd no longer content to wait for Jesus to reach out and touch them, but who pushed in to touch him. It was a crowd who knew what they wanted and were determined to get it, and if touching Jesus was how it happened then they would do just that. From the way that Mark tells the story, it would seem that Jesus was regarded rather as some sort of tangible magic, rather than as a person with a message. For Jesus, preaching the good news should go along with healing, which was a sign of God's kingdom, but on this occasion teaching and preaching was simply impossible.

The crowd came from all over the territory of Palestine. You might say that they represented the nation. Certainly they represented the need and desperation of the nation. If Jesus needed a reminder of how much he and his message was needed, then he got it by the lake-side. We might see how much Jesus' message is needed today as we witness the response of our neighbours to psychic evenings at a local pub, or to dealing with death and bereavement. Nowadays, for many, when a death happens, especially a tragic one, the funeral and eventual grave-stone are not tribute enough, and we see roadside shrines and flowers left in symbolic places, left out of love, yes, but also because people have nowhere to go with their grief and their questions. If Jesus' nation was desperate for healing of the body, our nation is desperate for reassurance, for purpose, for certainty, for love, for answers.

Jesus saw the desperation of the nation, but he did not remain by the lake-side, to be acclaimed by unclean spirits. Staying there would be too dangerous: for himself, as it would draw attention to himself, and the content of the demons' message might get to Herod's ears. It was too dangerous for his mission as well: people were not getting the real picture when they pressed on him determined for healing at all costs in this way. He did what he could for the crowd, even though many of them would go away without hearing the good news he came to bring, and misinterpreting what he was doing and why. He did what he could, and then he headed for the hills.

He went up "the mountain". What mountain? We are not told and it doesn't matter. In the Bible going up a hill or a mountain is often, very often, what you do to meet with God. Not that we don't see people - including Jesus - meeting with God elsewhere, but going up a mountain tells us to look out for something special. He went and from the crowd, those who really wanted to be with him, who wanted to follow, went too. These were those who were prepared to make a bit of an effort, prepared to stand out from the vast crowd and be part of something more focussed. Or maybe these were those who wanted the importance of being in the inner circle with Jesus - motives are never un-mixed! And they went, as did Jesus, up the mountain.

Moses went up a mountain to meet God and receive the commandments. Elijah met with God when he confronted the prophets of Baal, and then, he met with him again, on a different mountain, when, as we read today, he was low and dejected and thought it had all been in vain. Later in Mark's gospel we will see Jesus transfigured on a mountain, and crucified on a hill and in the other gospels we see him ascend to heaven from a mountain. So Jesus went up the mountain. Jesus, maybe shaken by the scene at the lake-side, went to meet with God, to tell him about it and gain his advice and help.

And the advice he was given was to go to the nation of Palestine, who had come to him, with a team of twelve disciples. In appointing twelve, he was showing that his ministry and his message was for the whole nation. Twelve was endlessly significant for the Jews. When we look back to the history of Scotland or even of the highlands, we know that there were clans and that certain clans lived in certain areas. We, as we cannot forget, are in Macpherson territory! But how many clans were there? Do you know? I don't. I could probably do some research and find out, but it's not something that I know instinctively. But for the Jews it was different. They never forgot the twelve sons of Jacob and the twelve tribes who descended from them to make up the nation. And although some of the tribes had been lost in history and tribal allegiance was not what it had been, nor tribal territory, twelve always stood for the whole nation.

Jesus appointed twelve. Not eleven and himself to make up the number, but twelve and himself. He was not one of the nation, he was above and other. He was saying something about his status, when he appointed twelve, but saying it very obliquely. But when the nation came to him in their need, his response was to appoint a team symbolic of that nation to help him go out in his name, with his message and his power and meet the need. They were to go out, but first they were to come with him to learn. And we are given the names of the disciples: Simon, James, John, Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Thaddeus, Simon the Zealot, and Judas Iscariot. Ordinary people. Ordinary names - at least in their context.

Some of them we know about. From the book of Acts we know what happened to James, John's brother, who was killed for the gospel. From Acts we know something of Peter's activities, and fairly reliable tradition tells us of his end in Rome. From the book of Revelation we know that John ended up exiled on Patmos, and tradition tells us a bit about Andrew, apostle to the Greeks and Thomas who is said to have reached India. We know from the Gospels about Judas and his end. But what of the rest? What do you know about Philip, who is not the same Philip who met with the Ethiopian official in the book of Acts? What do you know of Thaddeus, or Bartholomew, or the other James, or Simon the Zealot, or Matthew (except that he put pen to paper to write a gospel)? You may have picked up snippets of variously reliable tradition, but probably little more. Jesus called these people, and some made their mark on the church, and others didn't, or not in a memorable way, but served quietly and faithfully none-the-less.

Yet Jesus knew them individually. From the large and growing crowd of disciples - learners, who were coming and going around him; from the heaving crowds on the lake shore, Jesus summoned these twelve deliberately and by name. When I go into the school to take an assembly, I often ask for children to help me, and usually almost every had goes up to volunteer. Especially in

Newtonmore school where there are more children, as often as not I choose at random and by pointing, not by name and for personal reasons. But that is not how Jesus chose and it is not how he chooses today, either.

It may seem random to us, but Jesus chooses us to serve him because he knows us. He knows what we want from him and our personal complexities (just as he knew with poor Judas) and he knows how he can help us if we will let him, and how we can be used by him in the service of his kingdom. He knows, and he calls, so that we can learn and be useful.

The twelve had time to be together with Jesus before he sent them out, and before he was no longer with them in the body. But there must have been times, especially for those who undertook long journeys for the gospel, when they felt very alone. And that can happen to us as well. I think of Elijah who complained "And I alone am left". We can feel that way, maybe in our families, where we remain the last witness to the gospel; maybe in our places of work, where no one else seems to care to even think about God; maybe in our parish, where we can seem a very meagre scattering of faith in a lot of indifference; or maybe in society, where what the people of faith, especially Christian faith, sometimes seem marginalized and put down for no reason.

But Elijah was called by name and for a purpose, just as the disciples were. And when he said he was the only one left, God told him he was wrong: he was one of seven thousand. They weren't all as visible and high-profile as he was, but they were there to support him and to serve God. Sometimes when I am tempted to look at our congregation, lovely in itself but so small compared to our parish, and despair, God tells me to look outward. There may not be so many of us, but we do not stand alone. In every village and town in Scotland there are Christian people, disciples called and serving. That is remarkable. That is amazing. We hear so much about the church diminishing and shrinking, but we are still there - everywhere. And if you want more encouragement, look worldwide where the church is growing and spreading and bringing more people into the circle of God's love faster than ever before.

We are not all perfect saints - but look at Peter who put his foot in his mouth all the time, look at poor Judas, who found he could not keep faith. But if you are a Christian, one of Christ's ones it is because Jesus has called you - you, by name and because he knows you from the crowd. You may not think highly of yourself or your ability to be useful in his service, but he knows who he has called, and he has called you with love. God give us the grace to learn and to serve as good disciples.

Amen