

# Sermon on Sunday 21 July 2024

## by Rev. Alan Stewart

*Readings: Psalm 46 & Mark 6. 30-34*

### **Crowds**

Have you ever asked yourself what it might be like to be famous?

After my now legendary appearance on *Celebrity Antiques Road Trip* a few months back, I prepared myself, as you do, for newfound fame by printing cards, practicing my autograph and hiring a manager. Alas, and surprisingly perhaps, fickle fame never quite came knocking.

Who needs it anyway? Fame is a two-edged sword. It can have an upside, of course; it can bring fortune and adulation. It can open doors; can be used to influence for good. But it also, as we know, has a downside.

Noel Gallagher, songwriter of the legendary Mancunian rock band Oasis, once famously said, "I absolutely loved being famous. It was alright up until the point when it wasn't".

Fame robs us of anonymity. It can change us and change those around us. It can make us paranoid, make us more vulnerable to criticism, especially in those echo chambers of social media.

Jesus was someone who knew a bit about fame. Like a modern-day celebrity, crowds followed Jesus everywhere he went. And

today we hear of an incident when Jesus didn't even get time to eat, such was the demand of the crowds. And exhausted, he says to his friends, 'Come away with me awhile to a quiet place and get some rest'. So, they get into a boat and sail across the lake to a supposedly solitary place, a refuge from the crowds, only to find those same damn crowds had hotfooted it along the shore and are waiting. Now, if that was me, I'd be furious. But Jesus has compassion on how lost they are and, again at huge personal cost, reaches out.

We aren't followed by crowds of people everywhere we go, thank goodness. There are times in life, however, when *different* crowds follow us around. Sometimes, in times of grief or sadness for example, we are surrounded by what feels like a crowd of sorrows. Other times it might be a crowd of worry, a crowd of stress, a crowd of regret, a crowd of exhaustion etc., etc.

And, like any crowd, it's possible to feel both lonely and lost within it. Often we can feel suffocated and overwhelmed by the needs and the pressures of these crowds.

Sometimes it can actually feel like God gets crowded out, lost in the swell and the noise. And that noise can be deafening. I wonder what your particular crowds say to you?

Do they catastrophize? - 'What if... something terrible happens?'

Or criticize? - 'Who do you think you are?'

Or perhaps they demoralize? - 'You'll never change.' 'You'll always feel like this.'

Occasionally, I feel swamped by a fleeting crowd of despair. There's no particular reason why, usually. Often, it's just an accumulation of things that pile up and suddenly everything feels too much.

To you and to me, Jesus would say again, 'Come away with me awhile to a quiet place and get some rest'.

Rest; rest from overthinking; from perfectionism, from regret, from exhaustion, from shame. What kind of rest do you need?

Where are your quiet places? I've got a bench overlooking the lakes in Panshanger where I go to recalibrate.

'Come away with me awhile to a quiet place and rest.'

When we quieten ourselves sometimes and let go of the distractions that often keep the crowds at bay, that's when the crowds sometimes show up even noisier than before. And that's OK, actually. We sometimes have to listen to what the crowds are telling us. And often they speak through our bodies. In the words of Bessel van der Kolk, 'The body keeps the score'. Stress, anxiety, whatever hides out in our bodies, behind the eyes, in the throat, in the chest etc.

A great way to quieten those crowds is with breath-work. Imagine the next breath is travelling to that part of the body which is storing the bad stuff, and just imagine each breath is bringing a softness, a kindness, a compassion.

Another great practice is to breathe in for the count of four, hold for the count of four, breathe out for the count of four and hold for the count of four. Do that a good twenty times or so and your whole system will change. A new energy and stillness fill you and somehow those crowds just slip into the background.

Pray with the breath, breathing in peace and perspective, breathing out stress and anxiety. Take your prayers for a walk, sometimes just putting one foot after the next is the most helpful prayer.

Meditate with some scripture. Ask God for the words you need. Aged 19, I remember sitting on the number 19 bus back to Battersea and, for reasons I won't go into, it genuinely felt like my world was caving in. I always at that time carried around a little Bible and as I sat there, crowded with fear, I closed my eyes and in my mind's eye, like an old-fashioned typewriter, I saw letters that spelt out Psalm 46 which we heard earlier. 'God is my refuge and my strength, a very present help in times of trouble. Though everything caves in around me, I will not fear.'

And those words lifted me right out of those crowds, and I felt I was standing on the shoulders of hope. And, ever since, I go back to those words when the crowds press in. So, ask God for the words you need to hold onto.

Each of you, perhaps, will be able to add to those tips on crowd control. Chat about that after the service.

The last and most important thing I want to say is that Christ, as then, is still within every crowd we find ourselves in, reaching out

with his compassion; asking us to have that same compassion for others, yes, but also for ourselves. 'Go easy with yourself,' he's saying, 'be kind'.

So, despite how alone it can feel within these crowds, we are never alone, and that's a promise. Always, always Christ is right there, with us, within us, within every crowd.

