

2017 Sermon Series: Our Divided Nation

St Mary's Kidlington,
7th Sunday after Trinity, July 30th 2017
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The wisdom of the crowd? Christianity and the Individual

Ecclesiastes 4: 1-12; Ps. 67; Luke 18: 35-19: 10

At a PCC meeting earlier in the year, it was suggested that we might have more opportunities to consider the overlap between politics and faith—and reflect in particular on recent political events and trends. There are political issues that trouble us; that we have opinions about; that we pray about; and it is important to have opportunities to set them in the wider context of Christian teaching and wisdom. A sermon series is one way of getting the conversation started and offering food for thought.

We discussed this as a staff team, and came up with the heading: 'our divided nation'. I offered to give the first sermon in the series today, and selected the readings accordingly. (It just so happened that I ended up avoiding some particularly difficult parables in Matthew's gospel...).

The theme of my sermon is 'populism'. More specifically, I'd like to think about what Christian teaching has to say about the wisdom of the crowd, and the voice of the individual. It has become commonplace to speak of 'populist movements' and 'the rise of populism'—in the wake of Brexit; the election of Donald Trump; and also in reference to the rise of left-wing political movements like momentum. Populism is not easy to define, but it has certain characteristics: populist movements are generally critical of 'the establishment' or 'the elite' (sometimes called 'the liberal elite'). And populists are usually happy to say they represent 'the people'; often disregarding alternative or dissenting voices.

I'd like to begin by taking you to a scene in a seminar room in a theological college. A group of earnest ordinands from a wide range of traditions met to talk about 'political theology'. (I was one of them). We were all asked: "what does the phrase 'the politics of Jesus' mean to you?". As each of us reported back how we interpreted the question, it became clear that 'the politics of Jesus' usually meant 'my own political views, justified by a few references to Scripture'. We heard heartfelt accounts of Jesus the Conservative, the Democrat, the Socialist, the Feminist. To attach any one political label to the person of Jesus of Nazareth proved too difficult a task.

But in all our debating, we seemed to agree upon one thing: individualism was not supported by 'the politics of Jesus'. Individualism—each person looking out for themselves—promotes isolation, competition, greed and self-interest; hardly part of a Christian worldview.

Going back to populism, and the interplay between 'the individual' and 'the crowd', this suggests that there is much wisdom to be found in a crowd. Our reading from Ecclesiastes would seem to support this view. Now if you're familiar with Ecclesiastes, you'll know that the author does not often speak positively. 'Vanity of vanities' is one of

the book's key phrases. But I chose this particular passage because, in the midst of great pessimism about human life, we are given something positive to reflect on: support for 'the many' against the idea of solitary, isolated individuals. Those who are 'all alone' amass wealth without contentment; they go through life with nobody to help them, or defend them, or provide the warmth of human companionship. 'Two are better than one' and 'a threefold cord is not quickly broken' (4:12).

Read pessimistically, this might simply be a charge to 'stick together' as a guard against the oppressions and evils of human life. But read against the wider biblical witness, I think it is making a deeper point. The Judeo-Christian view of human life is one of mutual flourishing—with one another, in relationship with God, and the whole of creation. There is no place for individualism. Take the second creation account in Genesis, when God says to the first human being: 'it is not good for you to be alone' (Gen. 2:18). Or take St Paul's image of the Church as the 'body' of Christ, with each individual part working together for the good of the whole (1 Cor. 12: 12-end).

This image of the 'body' provides a useful way of unpacking the role of the individual within the crowd. It is not that each individual part has the same role to play. There is great diversity; but a common purpose. And here is where we need to be careful in denouncing the voice of the individual. Because it is one thing to attack individualism; it is quite another to say that individual voices do not matter. Individualism may have no place in a Christian worldview; but individuals certainly do.

To see this tension playing out, let's turn to the gospel reading. Here we find two examples of individual voices within a crowd. In both cases, the crowd prevents the individual from either speaking or seeing. And in both cases, Jesus picks out the individual, and in their encounter with him, they are transformed.

In the first case, the crowd attempts to silence the cries of the blind man begging by the roadside. But he persists, and Jesus stops to listen. He doesn't impose his own way of thinking; he simply asks: 'what do you want me to do for you?' (18: 41). Jesus is content to listen to this one individual, over and above the cries of the crowd. And unlike many politicians, he really does listen, and provides.

There is powerful lesson to be learned from this encounter. Crowds are prone to silence individual voices. But when individuals cannot be heard, they become disillusioned and disenfranchised. This may lead to political apathy, and an unwillingness to engage in political issues. And when those in power cannot hear the voices of those they serve, or refuse to listen, the seeds of populism are sown. Populist movements thrive when individual voices are not being heard. But the irony is that populist movements also attempt to silence individual voices of dissent—labelling them 'enemies of the people'. More than ever, then, do we need to hear the voices of individuals.

In the second encounter in the gospel reading, Zacchaeus is prevented from seeing clearly 'on account of the crowd' (19: 3); so he climbs the tree to get a better view; to get a different perspective. Zacchaeus the tax collector had been amassing wealth at the expense of others—rather like the solitary individual in Ecclesiastes—but after his encounter with Jesus, who seeks him out above the crowd, he discovers a better way.

We learn from this encounter that crowds can prevent people from seeing clearly. This notion of ‘seeing’ can be read on many levels—not just as literally seeing, but having the deep understanding necessary to form reasonable and informed viewpoints. Perhaps that’s a useful lesson to apply to the world of ‘alternative facts’ and ‘fake news’. It is almost impossible for individuals to see things clearly when there is such a crowd of information available, and when doubts are constantly planted in our minds about its credibility and truthfulness.

And so notwithstanding all the dangers of individualism, we learn from our readings that individual voices and stories really do matter, and must not be silenced ‘on account of the crowd’. This is a discovery I have also made in my working life, first as an academic philosopher, and now in parish ministry. The interplay between ‘crowds’ and ‘individuals’ is a key part of academic life. Think of the contrast between a lecture audience and a one-to-one tutorial (although towards the end of term it would be an exaggeration to call my lecture audience a ‘crowd’). But for me it was always the individual learning encounters that were most transformative—whether in tutorials, office hour conversations, or simply debating ideas with a friend or colleague.

And in my current role, my days are shaped by individual encounters—a couple planning a wedding; a bereaved family; new parents celebrating the birth of their first child. I have been called on to be present at the key moments of an individual’s life—birth, marriage, death and everything in between. For all the ways in which church leaders might seem ‘out of touch’ in contemporary society, we are trained listeners, and we know how important individual voices and individual stories are. I often wish that the Church of England would realise what a gift it has to offer to society in its ability to provide individuals with opportunities to be listened to; rather than fretting over ‘the crowd’ in terms of targets for numerical growth.

And by listening to individuals, we might even discover that populism is less of a threat than it seems. We might learn that there is no ‘united voice’ behind ‘the People’. We might prefer to use the language of our psalm, which speaks of ‘the peoples’ rather than ‘the people’. It describes a diversity of ‘peoples’ blessed by the same God. Populism is opposed to a plurality of different voices and opinions. But deeper listening will undoubtedly uncover the diverse and plural opinions that hide behind any crowd or any political movement, thereby stopping populism in its tracks.

Returning to that scene in the seminar room, when each of us began to discuss ‘the politics of Jesus’, I came to appreciate the idea that Christianity is compatible with a plurality of political viewpoints. I valued the idea that, in our many differences, we could unite behind a common faith. That’s not to say that Christianity can justify any political ideology; but that Jesus modelled something that no political party so far has ever achieved—breaking down social barriers, listening to individuals from all walks of life: the rich and poor; the educated and uneducated; men, women and children; insiders and outsiders. This was so far from anything the politics of his day could cope with that it eventually cost him his life.

This alternative to the politics of the day was what Jesus called: ‘the kingdom of heaven’. And we come closer to revealing that kingdom when we realise that, for all the wisdom a crowd can offer, we must never sideline the individual voices that lie behind it. Thy kingdom come, on earth, as it is in heaven. Amen.