

Gathered for the Word of God

Readings: Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10
 Luke 4: 14-21

There's something about being in a crowd that can affect us; that influences our thinking and actions. Sometimes we can get emotionally swept away by the crowd. Who's been in a situation where more and more people begin to stand and applaud and, although you do not really want to stand and applaud, you end up doing it anyway? The pulling power of being in a crowd is interesting isn't it?

A series of experiments about crowd psychology were done where groups of people were asked to walk randomly around a large hall. Within the group, a select few received more detailed information about where to walk. Participants were not allowed to communicate with one another but had to stay within arms length of another person.¹

The findings showed that in all cases, the ‘informed individuals’ were followed by others in the crowd, forming a self-organising, and snake-like structure. But what’s interesting about this research is that the participants ended up making a consensus

¹ Randall Parker, “5% can influence movement direction of crowds”, 14 February 2008, <http://www.futurepundit.com/archives/005005.html>, accessed 20 January 2010.

decision despite the fact that they weren't allowed to talk or gesture to one another. In most cases the participants didn't realise they were being led by others.²

This influence can also be seen in the financial market. It is well known that usually rational investors are sometimes prone to depart from their normal logic and follow the mass hysteria. The reason is that investors' behaviour may change according to the dictates of the crowd.³

² Ibid.

³ Harry P. Schlanger, "Investors' crowd behavior in financial markets: How "herd instincts" overtakes the mind of investors and speculators", 5 March 2009, http://investment.suite101.com/article.ctm.crowd_behavior_in_financial_markets, accessed 20 January 2010.

As I understand it every investor has a conflicting two-way pull on investment decisions, resulting in two possible courses of action:

Adhere to one's own personal and professional approach to investment, or
Succumb to the lure of the crowd mentality.⁴

To understand the “herd instinct,” it is helpful to consider the nature of crowd membership, a phenomenon first analysed by the French social psychologist, Gustave Le Bon (1841 – 1931). Le Bon suggested that, on the one hand, each person has a self-assertive tendency, or ability to behave in a self-

⁴ Ibid.

determined, individualistic way. On the other hand, each individual also has a willingness to belong with others, to belong to the crowd causing one to behave differently from the way one would otherwise behave in isolation.⁵

These areas demonstrate the powerful effect of the gathering of people. More importantly they demonstrate what people can achieve together in collective agreement; whether directly or indirectly.

Our reading from Nehemiah describes a scene where God's people are gathered to hear the priest Ezra read the Law. "All the people

⁵ Ibid.

gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses which the Lord had given to Israel. Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding...and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law” (Neh. 8:1-3).

Our story is set at a time after Judah’s exile in Babylon and during the reign of Persian kings in the 5th century B.C.E. Although it is not certain whether Ezra began his work back in Jerusalem before, after or during the time of Nehemiah, it is commonly accepted by

biblical scholars that both served in capacities that attempted to rebuild and reform the civil and religious life of Jews, as a people, in their home land.

After nearly seventy years of exile in a foreign land and culture, those returning to Jerusalem were not the same people who initially left. Many had no clear understanding of and commitment to the covenant with the Lord their God as their ancestors once had. Even those who had returned home much earlier had married non-Jews and there was a general disregard for things such as sacrifice, worship, purity and special Jewish customs.

To rebuild the city of Jerusalem and the religious life of the people required solidarity and cohesiveness among the people. To a certain degree this was achieved in the completion of rebuilding the city wall in a rapid fifty-two days (Neh. 6:15).

But changing people's lifestyle was much harder. Nehemiah and Ezra were of the mind that the renewal of the people's life meant the renewal of their faith – a collective faith. Any religious reform; especially one which demanded that the people practice the unique requirements of their covenant law at home, would have been impossible if a large part of the people had different faiths and practices in

their homes. They needed the people to be of one mind, heart, soul and strength in their covenant relationship with their God.

In this story, we see the willingness of people to be part of the gathering – a gathering wanting to hear the law of Moses as a way of rediscovering and developing their faith together. It was an inclusive gathering represented by men, women, and children or those old enough to understand. In support of Ezra were a chosen few serving in a priestly role who “helped the people to understand the law” (Neh. 8:7). The collective response of the people was such that Nehemiah tells us: “the people answered, ‘Amen, Amen,’ lifting

up their hands. Then they bowed their heads worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground” (Neh. 8:6). The people wept when they heard the words of the law (v. 9).

The word of God or the covenant relationship presented in the reading of the law became the heart and soul of the people in reforging them as people of God. Gathering together, hearing together and responding together enabled the revival of their faith together. It’s been thought that these reforms were perhaps the beginning of Judaism which has developed into the forms it represents today. Ezra is sometimes called the “father of Judaism.”⁶

⁶ Lawrence Boadt, “Reading the Old Testament”, (1984), 458.

But the heart of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah is about the opportunity for God's people to reconcile and rebuild together their covenant relationship with Lord their God.

That too was the heart of Jesus' ministry. Similar to what we heard in Nehemiah, Luke tells us that Jesus was in the gathering of God's people in a synagogue where he read aloud the word of God as written in the book of the prophet Isaiah (Is. 61:1-2a). "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to

let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" (Lk. 4:18-19).

For Luke, the Isaiah verses on Jesus' lips proclaimed the fulfilment of Scripture and the hopes of Israel through Jesus' ministry as the Son of God.⁷ It also stated the social concern that guided Jesus' work. Although Jesus addressed those in the synagogue, his concern was for all people to have the opportunity to rediscover in meaningful ways their relationship with God. In his ministry Jesus moved among the poor, the outcast, the sick and the blind who would not normally be

⁷ R. Alan Culpepper, "Luke" in *The New Interpreter's Bible Vol. 9*, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, (1995), 3-49, 106.

included in the religious gatherings of his society.

Initially, those in the synagogue spoke well of Jesus and were amazed at how he spoke (Lk. 4:22). But by the end of his time with them they were filled with rage and drove him out of town (Lk. 4:28-29). Here we see the herd mentality that runs one way when things are good, and then the other way when their confidence is affected.

We're not sure how people really understood what Jesus said about himself and his work. We're not sure if people thought and felt the same way about him. The people of Jesus'

home town read the Scriptures as promises of God's exclusive covenant with them, a covenant that involved promises of deliverance from their oppressors.⁸ Jesus came announcing deliverance, but not a national deliverance; instead a promise of liberation for all the poor and oppressed regardless of nationality, gender or race. When the radical inclusiveness of Jesus' announcement became clear to those gathered in the synagogue at Nazareth, their commitment to their own community boundaries took precedence over the opportunity and joy of God's salvation working through all peoples.

⁸ Ibid, 108.

I think our readings challenge us to think about how we as a church, as a community of Christians, might respond to God's work of helping people to build or rebuild their relationship or their life of faith with God. Maybe you're here by your own choice or because of habit or because you value the fellowship of worship with other Christians. Maybe in this gathering your presence and contribution to worship impacts upon others as theirs does upon you. All this is done in response to what God is doing for you; for us.

We may be few in number, but we have the potential to make a difference and influence in

our city of Dunedin. People may also have differing opinions about God, Christianity and the Church, but it doesn't mean we have no part to play. We do! We need to keep providing the opportunities for people to experience something of God in the gathering of the people of God. The gathering of God's people is a powerful witness. So invite and bring some people to church next week. Amen.