

ESSAY

Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem: A First-Person Contemplation of Crowd Behavior

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Contagion Theory, Convergence Theory, and Emergent Norm Theory applied to Mark 11:1-11

I was there last week when Jesus of Nazareth rode into town on that colt he had borrowed – you know, when everyone was on the streets hailing him as a king sent from God. Nothing much happens in this town, so whenever a crowd starts forming, you want to be there, because you know something unusual is going to happen. The normal routine of civic events here is so dry and predictable that when something starts happening with lots of people and without planning, you can feel the excitement grow. You don't really know everyone who's there, but you don't really care, because you're not going to get to know them anyway. You don't even know who is really into it and who is just hanging around, or just passing by. That's what makes that kind of action so different and intriguing – it's so complex, and outside of everyday life.

And this time everyone seemed to be really happy. You can usually tell right away when a crowd is basically afraid or angry or mournful, or whatever the dominant emotion is, and I felt immediately that this was some kind of celebration. Some kind I say, because it was still a pretty ambiguous situation. Nobody knew exactly what was going to happen, or how, or when. They were just happy, talking excitedly, and milling around. There was all this mutual stimulation and circular reaction, and it seemed to develop a unanimous and intense feeling among everyone there. I could feel it long before I found out what the fuss was all about, and what, I mean who, the object of their attention was. Expressive crowds are like that, you know. It's as if there's some kind of hypnotic effect, or something contagious that affects everyone and turns normal people irrational. People forget who they actually are and just start feeding off of each other.

On the other hand, I'm sure not everyone there was thinking the same thing, or even acting the same way. I know I wasn't. I thought it was all fascinating fun, but I wasn't exactly swept away in my thinking, even though I was caught up in the excitement. I was just amused.

Then again, maybe everyone else was thinking alike, and I was the only one who didn't identify totally with what was going on. I was a little taken back by how much adulation they gave this man from Galilee. I mean, even some pretty important people were laying their coats down on the ground so that the colt would walk over them, and everyone knows that is only done for royalty. I had never seen any of those people express such passion for him before, certainly not in public. It was kind of surreal, slightly suspicious, but certainly spectacular.

Maybe they were all already devoted to him privately, but didn't know that about each other, and suddenly being in a crowd together gave them the chance to express what each of them really felt all along, but were too afraid to show. Maybe the whole thing was just a convergence of pre-existing but private sentiments, in which case it was not so much a contagion caught as a common belief or commitment discovered and expressed. I can see why people would be more likely to shout "Hosanna" at Jesus while in the safety of large numbers doing the same, when they probably wouldn't do so just passing him on the street by themselves. You can get away with doing things in crowds that you can't do on your own, because no one is likely to hold you directly accountable for your actions.

Come to think of it, I'm quite sure that not everyone else there had the same opinion. But those who worshipped Jesus sure made theirs known, and I guess those who disagreed just kept silent, thinking they were in the minority. Silence in those situations looks like agreement, especially when the silent ones do nothing to alter the collective definition of the situation, or even more so when they go along with the crowd in passive ways like I did. It's as if what begins as an ambiguous situation gets defined in a certain way, and then certain behaviors become appropriate and other behaviors become inappropriate. A little girl handed me a palm branch just before Jesus passed by where I was standing, and yes, I waved it too. It was obviously the thing to do, and it was exciting, and I didn't want to draw attention to myself by looking out of place.

Looking back on it now, it's not hard to see how and why the whole thing happened. We Jews are dominated by the Romans, and we're humiliated and angered by it. We're all watching and waiting for the messiah that will enable us as a people to become what God has promised we will. Many had been saying that this Jesus of Nazareth was the one, and when he rode into town on that colt just like the prophet said our coming king would, he certainly looked the part. I'll tell you, they were ready to crown him right there, and probably could have, because none of the authorities could have stopped them.

Me? I'm still not sure what to make of it all. I know the crowd made me want to believe, and maybe I sort of did in the moment. Those who were beside me in the crowd probably

thought I believed, just like I assumed they did. But I really didn't know enough about the man to trust even what I myself said and did while part of that crowd. It sounds like he was a pretty strange fellow, and I would probably have been more inclined to like him if he would have been a little more like me, a little more normal. I couldn't make it out that day, but I've heard that many of the same people were in the crowd later on last week that called for his crucifixion. Did they really change their minds that fast, or were they in fact acting in a manner inconsistent with their own beliefs on one of the two occasions? If so, which occasion? It was so easy to worship him or revile him depending on what others were doing.

I suppose the only way that I could have been really sure about what I thought of him would have been to get to know him myself. That way I wouldn't have had to depend on others, especially those who seemed to change their minds so quickly and easily, or just go along with the crowd. I guess the only way to rise above the social dynamics of a crowd is to focus on the merits of its object, instead of on the feeling of being part of it. If the man really was who he said he was, I need to find that out for myself. Of course, if he really is alive again, as some are now claiming, that would go a long way in answering my questions.

The really scary thing is that they said he could tell if you believed in him or not, regardless of how you acted in crowds. But how could he have known me when we had never met, never had a conversation, and I never knew him personally? Yes I know, the answer to that is much the same as the answer to how he could come back to life after death. I need to check that out first.