

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## Loving A Crowd

*“A crowd flowed over London Bridge: so many!  
I had not thought death had undone so many.”*

T S Eliot’s lines are memorable, especially when we find ourselves looking down on a multitude of heads moving forwards; the view down Bridlesmith-gate on a warm morning is a good place for this. How do you feel when you see that? Perhaps five or six hundred faces; how many do we know? What do we see when one of them swims momentarily into closeness? It’s strange to think that each of them is charged with a whole life, with a cargo of happiness and pain, with hopes and terrors. Sometimes we see the lines of grief etched in them. Sometimes they look coarse or incapable of feeling (probably the clergy in mufti). One will have a face of heart-stopping beauty. Another will look as if a giant headache is not being helped by a nasty smell.

### Don’t Be Deceived

If my experience of closer contact teaches anything, it is that the man most likely to help you if you slip on the wet pavement is the one that looked like a gorilla with a grudge a moment ago. Crowds don’t bring out the best in us, and I suppose we tend to people them in our minds with the only strangers who become newsworthy: the criminals and monsters introduced to us in the media. If I were a lonely person, whose main contact with the world was the television, what else would I think about a thousand strangers filling a city street? But I think Jesus had a different attitude; and because of his own story, I find this an eloquent fact.

### The Crowds Of The Gospels

From the beginning, Jesus is shown to us *gathering crowds*. We know this didn’t seem a good idea to his family, who came to take charge of him, thinking he must be mad. This should alert us to his special attitude. He pointed to those about him, and said: *Here are my mother and my brothers*. I don’t even think his disciples felt like him: we hear of his indignation at their sending children away, and after today’s Gospel story, the disciples, having lost their intended day off, come to Jesus to say: *Send the crowds away – it’s a lonely place, and the day’s gone*. What do you think made Jesus so positive about the crowds, in contrast to others (and, frankly, to me)?

### A Great Heart

It seems an inescapable fact that Jesus had a capacity to love which simply grew crowd-sized at need. Now, you may say: there are plenty of people who like crowds: a good comedian, musician, politician is happier the bigger the crowd. I suppose you have to say the same about the Pope. But look closer at the Gospel story. It often tells us little about what fills the mind of Jesus, but today is different: *he saw a large crowd, and he took pity on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd*. He saw their need for a shepherd, and at once his heart opened towards them. Right: now look back down Bridlesmith-gate. There they all are, pressing forward to the traffic-lights and the Victoria Centre, getting through the day. The chap who sits on a sack with a black dog isn’t going anywhere, but mostly there is a sense of urgency about the street – lots of tightened lips, quickening steps. I think it could be a good place to pray, if there were a little place to stand. Simply to be there, and look at all those hurrying people, not as the opportunity to sell, or to rob, or to exploit (that’s going on all around them already); but to see them for who they are: the largely unsheltered people for whom Jesus came, and who touched his heart so surely. It doesn’t help to be sentimental. They would give you plenty to confirm your negative attitudes, if you got the chance to stop the race and talk to them. The crowds Jesus welcomed turned on him at the last. But they are the very people for whom he prayed, and died. *Fr Philip*