

A time to feast and a time to fast

Are you a party animal?? I'm sure some will be.

Maybe you are more reserved and prefer to meet one to one and avoid exuberant gatherings.

We are who we are, and there will be out and out party types and the recluse who prefers solitude and most of us somewhere in between.

Whenever I think of personality types (and there are various ways of exploring that topic), one of the simplest and oldest ways of considering character is

The Sanguine  
The Melancholic  
The Choleric  
The Phlegmatic

It so happens that these four personality types fit the four characters of my all time favourite story book the Wind in the Willows.

- The Sanguine is the party animal and there is no party animal quite like Toad of Toad Hall.
- The Melancholic is our recluse and Mr Badger certainly prefers his own company.
- The Choleric – the leader, and Water Rat is certainly the organiser of the four.
- And finally the peaceful Phlegmatic is Mole, who seeks contentment, unless roused to fury.

Before you wonder if I'm going to preach on the Gospel or not, I'll jump straight to the conclusion and explain why my favourite story came to mind.

On the face of it, these four characters are very different from one another and yet they become the very best and closest of friends, accepting each other, caring for one another, speaking truth (painful though it may be to hear), and remaining loyal.

Which is what I believe the church should be. The place where we belong, experience closeness, live truthfully, show loyalty and love. The challenge is this; we are SO different to each other!! Because some love to feast and others are drawn towards fast.

Let me clarify those two terms which are being used as shorthand.

Feasting = partying, gathering together in celebration for any and every reason, exuberance, joy and frivolity.

Fasting = a quieter more reserved approach. Meeting one to one with others and there being substance and gravitas to being together.

You will be one, or the other, or somewhere in between.

What is your personal response to being invited to a wedding? Excitement – it's a party? Or do you take a deep breath?

Our Gospel concerns a wedding, and even the most reserved and reclusive soul will accept that it is a time to celebrate and have a party. However, weddings can go dreadfully wrong.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y01nuH4iLb8>

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Jesus and his family and disciples are at a wedding and it's just about to all go wrong. Celebrations usually lasted 7 days with a series of expected activities, but the host family are running out of wine.

This passage of scripture is difficult to grasp because at first reading it seems as if Jesus rebuffs Mary's request and makes this odd comment about His hour not yet coming but then solves the problem anyway.

If ever there was a passage where the phrase "lost in translation" was relevant it would be this one.

It's as if Mary has come to Jesus expecting him to help with the wine problem in a normal way (i.e. go and buy some more) but Jesus already has a plan and it's a plan that will reveal God's kingdom and point towards Jesus main purpose, although that time was not here yet.

A very free translation would be...

*Mother; what good are plans like that to me, what I will do is something else, for my time isn't here yet.*

What he does is astonishing.

He turns the ceremonial washing water into gallons of the finest wine. His provision is sooooo abundant, they would have been drinking this weeks after the wedding was over.

You don't have to be a stable genius like Mr Trump to join up the dots and see the picture Jesus is painting.

1. A Wedding Banquet is used to describe the final celebration when God and his people become one when His Kingdom is fully established.

2. Flowing Wine is frequently used throughout Old Testament prophecy to typify God's rule and reign and his Kingdom.

If ever there was to be a sign to reveal Jesus glory and usher in the hope of God's kingdom it would be flowing wine at a wedding.

But there is a third lesson for us, the church.

It was abundant provision to bring joy and gladness. The Rabbis had a saying, "without wine, there is no joy".

Jesus was not a serious minded killjoy, but someone who knew how to party. Of course he also knew (and frequently spent) time alone We have to have both aspects in our church character, feast and fast.

If we are too dour, we are unlikely to be attractive. In my reading I came across this lovely description. It was said of Alice Palmer by one of her scholars, "she made me feel as if I was bathed in sunshine". That's how I want people to feel coming to church. Warmer anyway!

I talked earlier of different personality types and how we are naturally drawn towards feast or fast. There are those that love nothing more than to be with people and those who prefer being solitary. The German Pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote this

*Let him who cannot be alone beware of community.*

*But the reverse is also true: Let him who is not in community beware of being alone.*

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There is merit in being self aware, so that we grow more fully. The answer does not lie in being so fully immersed in community (feasting) that we cannot be alone, or being alone (fasting) and not embracing community.

Last week, at the conclusion of my sermon I said I believe God wants to plant in us a love for His Kingdom. The very first Kingdom attributes drawn to our attention are "Abundance and Joy".

Yet we are uniquely different to one another, confined perhaps by personality and find joy in different ways. Some feast, others fast. How does "abundance" inform our life as a church so that we are a sign of God's Kingdom?

The first chapter in the Wind in the Willows sees the solitary Mole longing for something different. He scabbles out of his mole hole and eventually finds his way to the river. He meets someone very different to himself and in the company of the Water Rat experiences a fuller richer life.

I'm not sure Dietrich Bonhoeffer ever read Kenneth Grahams Wind in the Willows, but I think he would approve, at least that we can break out of the solitary life to find community, or like poor old Toad discover there was more to life than a wild party.

It will be the abundance of love and grace and acceptance, shown through the invitations we make, the welcome we give, the warmth of fellowship and worship that will make Holy Trinity a Sign of God's Kingdom.

Our challenge is to allow the Holy Spirit to push us out of our comfort zones into the other less natural sphere. To accept a party invitation when we would normally refuse, or to experience a quiet day that we would normally avoid.

In the coming days, be mindful of the feast or famine and should the opportunity occur – go the road you travel less and see if you experience abundance and joy.