

## Only the Lonely

Is a wedding really a *wedding* without booze?

That's a question a good percentage of guests, I imagine, ask themselves when they receive an invitation to a 'dry wedding'. Increasingly popular, alcohol-free nuptials are motivated not usually by money-saving or teetotalism, nor indeed by religious conviction; couples who choose it say they are hoping for a more reflective, authentic experience where the vows take centre stage, not the vodka.

Not so, however, in Cana of Galilee where Jesus famously ferments enough vino to sink several Rugby clubs. Why? Well, two reasons; first it was a simple case of helping out some family friends on the brink of social suicide – to run out of wine at a Middle Eastern wedding would have brought shame upon the family and a premature end to what should traditionally be three to seven days of celebrations. More significantly, and the reason it's here in the gospel right at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry; this miraculous act is nothing less than a sign or declaration of cosmic significance. Jewish tradition had long associated an abundance of wine with the joy of the promised Kingdom, a time when God himself would install a new world order; a reign of peace. So, this extravagant miracle is actually Jesus' way of saying that long-awaited kingdom is here.

Also, that kingdom comes with one almighty challenge. By deliberately using ceremonial jars used for the Jewish rites of purification, Jesus is saying that the old ways of doing religion are also about to be transformed.

It's a story I've preached on many times, but as I sat down this week to think about it, the one question that struck me was, in the midst of this happiest of occasions, was Jesus lonely?

Weddings can be lonely places, especially for those of us who crave such a relationship or whose past relationships have been lost or damaged.

Tradition holds, of course, that Jesus was a single man; something which incidentally would have been suspicious and unusual for a 30-something male in that culture. And it's possible that he was happily single, but I imagine there were moments when he craved a certain kind of intimacy.

It's an aspect of Jesus that's explored in a book by Nikos Kazantzakis (try saying that after a few sherries); a book which Martin Scorsese turned into a film in 1988 - 'The last temptation of Christ'.

You might remember just how controversial that film was, mainly because of a scene where Jesus, from the cross, contemplates what life might have been had he pursued a different path. And, in a dream sequence, we see Jesus have a sexual relationship with Mary Magdalene and go on to have children and to live a full and long life.

I believe we need to re-discover something of that humanity of Jesus; over the centuries he's been airbrushed into this asexual, otherworldly un-human being. And, yet, he was every bit as human as you or me.

And to be human, of course, is to be lonely. Later, we'd see something of that in Gethsemane where his friends failed him, then devastatingly upon the cross when it felt like his own God had failed him.

To be lonely is to be human. Loneliness, however, is not to be confused with solitude; solitude is usually something we choose, something that can energise us. Loneliness, on the other hand, is a profound sense of absence even when surrounded by friends; in a crowd, in a church, in a marriage.

Experts believe that loneliness in the West is the greatest epidemic of modern times. And there are no doubt many reasons for that, not least the breakdown of family and social networks. Studies show that loneliness is detrimental to our mental and physical health. Mother Theresa called loneliness 'a terrible poverty'.

It's estimated that over 9 million people in the UK – almost a fifth of the population – say they are always or often lonely, but almost two thirds of us feel uncomfortable admitting to it.

And loneliness can drive us to unhealthy places where we try to anaesthetise it with shopping or food, or drink, or prescription drugs, or pornography, or sex, or...

The deepest loneliness is a loneliness of soul; it's so much more than the need for company, it's a hunger to know and be known, to understand and be understood, to be accepted, to be loved. Loneliness isn't the absence of quantity from our lives, it's the absence of quality.

And it's there, actually, for a very good reason.

In the Genesis poem of creation God says, 'It is not good for man (or woman) to be alone'.

It seems we are born lonely, programmed to reach beyond our selves towards another.

This original loneliness, for want of a better word, is there to force us beyond our independence towards an interdependence with others. Ultimately, I'd say this inherent loneliness is designed to move us towards the Divine Other; towards God himself. Loneliness is, in other words, a homing beacon, it's there to draw us home, lead us back to the one we were made for.

Loneliness for God is something that some of us will identify with. Maybe it feels like we've spent our whole lives trying to feel that presence, but all we've known is absence. If that's so, you're not alone. Many, including Mother Theresa herself, have lived with absolutely no sense of God's company. And, yet, daily they choose to believe and follow even when they feel nothing. These are my heroes. It takes a whole lot more faith to give to something that feels like it doesn't give back.

Someone once said that if we cannot find God in the next person we meet, we will never find God. This, I believe, is what empowered Mother Theresa to do what she did. In encountering others, especially the poor and the sick and the lonely, she discovered glimpses of her God.

So much of Jesus' life and ministry was about reaching out to the lonely; to those who felt homeless, scapegoated, marginalised, forgotten. And for many their first experience of belonging, of feeling God's company, was found in this acceptance.

And that continues to be our calling as his followers. It's central to the imagery of Paul's letters to the Corinthians, an extract of which was read earlier. We are part of one another and we are depleted, impoverished without the other.

Loneliness puts us in touch with our souls. So, don't run from it, don't try to fill it with activity and stuff. Listen to your loneliness; what is it teaching you about who you are and what you really need. It is the path that can lead us into a deeper compassion and empathy.

The ancient Persian poet Hafiz once wrote, 'Don't surrender your loneliness so quickly. Let it cut more deep. Let it ferment and season you, as few human or even divine ingredients can. Something missing in my heart tonight has made my eyes so soft, my voice so tender, my need of God absolutely clear'.

As one wise Catholic priest puts it, it's our loneliness which 'makes us poets and mystics, artists, philosophers, musicians, healers, saints'.

You may not aspire to be any of those, so I would add that it's our loneliness that can make us more authentically human; ironically, it's our loneliness that can make us whole.

So, let's assume that we're all lonely. Let's pray not to escape our loneliness, but to let it deepen our empathy and compassion. Let's pray that we have the courage to acknowledge our loneliness to others and allow ourselves to be a little more vulnerable so we can be a little more known. Let's pray for eyes to see the loneliness in others even when it comes dressed in bravado. Let's commit ourselves to invest more selflessly in our love for God and in the lives of others, which in itself is the antidote to our own loneliness.