

I was told this week that a key to writing a good novel.  
Or making a great film.  
Is to create a character that your audience can connect with. <ppt>

So I wonder who you most naturally connect with in this story.

Mark 2:18-22, reading from The Message: Reading

So I wonder who you most naturally connect with.

If you're more likely to see yourself as the partygoer?  
Or as the the party protestor?

I suspect most of us would want to side with the party-goer. I mean, this is a feast. There's cake. And wine. Grapejuice (sparkling) if you've got the RBV, the revised baptist version. A toast. To partygoers.

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And what's quite sad about this story is how far the party protestors have gone overboard.

In the Old Testament, the people of God were instructed to fast once a year. That was on the Day of Atonement.

But by the time of this story in the New Testament, the Pharisees had turned once per year into two days per week.

They're applying there 2 days/week to Jesus. It's the recurring theme in this chapter of Mark. Jesus is taking some heat, hearing some protest.

In the story before, in Mark 2:13-17, it's a protest, about who Jesus hangs out with. verse 16 "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

In the story before that, at the start of Mark chapter 2, it's a protest about Jesus theology looking a bit liberal, a bit Messianic: verse 7 "Why would he say such a thing? He must think he is God! Only God can forgive sins.

And now this story: verse 18; ""Why do the followers of John and the Pharisees take on the discipline of fasting, but your followers don't?"

A protest about the personal behaviour of his followers. We're more spiritual than you Jesus. Haven't you noticed. Your followers don't fast as much as we do.

As I read, I wondered what the RBV, <ppt>revised baptists would put. I wondered if Baptists have marks of devotion that we use to judge other followers of Jesus?

I spoke yesterday to a camp for Salvation Army youth leaders. I'm sure they have a RSV - revised salvationist set of behaviours.

I've never been asked to speak to a camp for Pentecostal youth leaders. I'm sure it's because I don't meet the RPV - the revised Pentecostal set of behaviours.

But what are ours? What does Opawa use to judge other Christians?

According to a survey by this book "UnChristian"; research into perceptions of young adults; 9 out of 10 people they surveyed found Christians judgemental - to be quick to find faults in others.

The overwhelming perception, particularly among young adults - that Christians have actually become, not party goers, but party protestors.

Here's what one person surveyed said: Quote: Christians like to hear themselves talk. They are arrogant about their beliefs, but they never bother figuring out what other people actually think. They don't seem to be very compassionate." (182)

So the book finishes with some practical suggestions:

Listen more, talk less

Practise putting ourselves in the shoes of other people

Stop using labels like "lost" "pagan" "nonbelievers"

Stop pretending we have all the answers

Start being friends for no other motive than genuine interest in people.

So the irony. That while most of us come to this text wanting to connect with the partygoers. In reality, our culture finds us to be judgemental, like the party protestors.

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Jesus responds to the protestors, with this image of a wedding. verse 19:20 "When you're celebrating a wedding, you don't skimp on the cake and wine. You feast. As long as the bride and groom are with you, you have a good time. This is Kingdom Come!"

I'd love to ask Jesus how long he'd been working on his reply. Did it just come to him? Spur of the moment, divine inspiration.

Or had he seen a wedding that very weekend?

The typical Jewish wedding looks like this. You might recognise it Gaye and Kevin, the art image I used when I spoke at your wedding here at Opawa.

The friends and family gather. The white bird, the Holy Spirit, blessing love and faithfulness.

The typical Jewish wedding takes place at night. Now there were no streetlights back in the day. So they used to use torches. Which makes for quite a spectacular entrance: bridegroom and his friends and his family coming through the night holding torches.

So as soon as anyone saw the moving torches they'd start to yell through the streets, "The bridegroom is coming."

All the townspeople would come out of their houses. They'd cheer the groom on.

The bride goes out to meet the groom. The two, accompanied by their wedding party, returned together to the groom's home for the marriage ceremony. As in the art image. Following the public ceremony, there's the party.

The party usually lasted seven days. Might have some link with the goodness of God's creation in Genesis 1. During the seven days the bride and the groom stayed alone with each other in their new house. Sort of like our honeymoon. Probably also both enjoying God's good creation. On the

7th day the newlyweds would then come out of the house and join the last day of feasting with all the guests.

So had Jesus just seen a wedding? Just been seeing the torches in the night and hearing the shouts of joy. The bridegrooms coming. Seen the excitement among the grooms friends. Been enjoying the 7 days of feasting. Was it being part of wedding, being himself a partygoer, that inspired his reply?

Or was Jesus a reader of the Old Testament. Was he aware that God as bridegroom is a recurring theme for the Jewish people.

That in Isaiah 62:4-5: Your name [O Israel] will no longer be "Deserted and Childless," but "Happily Married.". You will please the LORD; your country will be his bride.

Or Hosea 2: 16 I promise that from that day on, you will call me your husband instead of your master; verse 19 I will accept you as my wife forever, and instead of a bride price I will give you justice, fairness, love, kindness, 20and faithfulness. Then you will truly know who I am.

Had Jesus been reading these verses in which God is the bridegroom wanting to have Israel as a bride.

Which would mean that Jesus is taking something old, applying it in a fresh way to his life. He's linking himself with the Old Testament, he's declaring himself God.

He's calling his followers to a new relationship: not master, but lover. He's replacing a bride price, him giving intimacy and justice, fairness and kindness, loyalty.

A fascinating image of discipleship and relationship between God and human people.

As I read this story, I'm wondering where does Jesus get his answer from. Being party-goer, part of a wedding? Or reading the Old Testament - Isaiah and Hosea?

Or as God, is he somewhere aware of how this image of the wedding feast will be developed in Christian thinking.

Like in the book of Revelation, where heaven on earth, God's relationship with humans, is finalised by using this picture of a wedding feast.

Revelation 19:7-9

7 The wedding day of the Lamb is here, and his bride is ready.

8She will be given a wedding dress, made of pure and shining linen. This linen stands for the good things God's people have done."

9Then the angel told me, "Put this in writing. God will bless everyone who is invited to the wedding feast of the Lamb." The angel also said, "These things that God has said are true."

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This image of a wedding, used to describe the relationship God wants with us.

It tells us something about God. God wants parties. Wants a celebration. Wants to enjoy with us relationships not of mastery but of intimacy, of justice and kindness, and faithfulness.

Sometimes when I take communion I imagine the wedding feast.

Screw up my eyes and I imagine the food, the music, the clothes, the conversation, the toasts to God.

Then I open my eyes and realise where I am. Opawa: Oh, the RBV; revised Baptist version. But I like to hope. To image God's wedding feast.

This wedding tells us something about ourselves. That being a Christian is being a friend of the bridegroom. It's an image of salvation. We're being saved for a party.

You only get there by invitation. And once you hear this story, you're been invited.

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Which does then set a certain standard doesn't it. There are ways for wedding guests, the friends of bridegroom to behave.

To respond to the gifts of intimacy and justice, fairness and kindness, loyalty.

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Which then makes sense of the next few verses: verse 21-22.

"No one cuts up a fine silk scarf to patch old work clothes; you want fabrics that match. And you don't put your wine in cracked bottles."

the Greek word is *pakos agnathon*: It's a cloth which has not been processed.

It's what we called 'preshrunk. Hasn't had the oil removed, hasn't been bleached or washed.

So if you stitch on a pre-shrunk *pakos agnathon* to an already shrunk, already bleached, already well washed garment. It will rip. Likely to make an even bigger hole.

And the leather is *askos*: It's the soft, pliable leather. Which over time becomes brittle. As leather does when it's doing it's job and is well used.

Make wine, allowing the grapes to fermentation in vat. You then drain off the skins. You place the liquid in jars or skins or storage.

So if you put new wine in an old, brittle wineskin, it will break.

Its a graphic image of destruction.

The party protestors are old and brittle. If they're not careful, they're likely to be part of a ripping that will make an even bigger hole.

Now of course, there's a subtley in what Jesus is saying. He's not saying the old is useless. How can he be, when he himself has been reading the Old Testament and his drawing on Hosea and Isaiah imagery of the bridegroom.

All he's saying is that he's come preaching the Kingdom of God. It's fresh. And new. And it demands new forms. New wineskins. New fabulous fine silk.

New invitations. As Paul reminded us last week. Those who feel unworthy.

New behaviours. Party goers who know how to celebrate the values of the bridegroom: enter into relationships of intimacy and justice, fairness and kindness, loyalty.

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So what does this mean for us today. Since this is a wedding text, I'd like to propose some wedding toasts. Since you have should have communion glasses, I'd like to join me.

Four wedding toasts as our response to this text.

to the old

to the Old Testament

to our history as a church

to those who parented us, disciplined us, mentored us, disciplined us

to the old

to the present

God will forgive us of our party protesting, judgemental, Revised Baptist attitudes,

God will help us behave as friends of the bridegroom

to appreciate the old, welcome the new

to the future,

to the new wineskins

to Aaron and Jenny, Rob and Liz last week,

to all parents, to all who long to bring up kids in the strange world of the 21st century,

to the future of new wine at Opawa, that it would always find new wineskins

to the future

to the bridegroom

Jesus Christ, who invites us all to his party,