

We are called to be ONE

Still one of my all-time favourite children's stories Kenneth Graham's *Wind in the Willows* is full of tales of the riverbank. For those not in the know, there are four main riverbank characters Toad, Badger, Ratty and Mole.

Toad is the green, pompous amphibian; impulsive, he speaks without thinking. He is adventurous, spontaneous, fun seeking, often obnoxious and quite insensitive. He is the big 'I am', the idealist.

Ratty is the brown, practical 'riverbanker'; the realist, the person who sees it as it really is, the one who fixes it if it is broke, the one who sees the wood for the trees.

Badger is the black and white, wise old man of the riverbank. He is contemplative, sensitive, very intelligent, careful and deliberate. He thinks, he philosophies, he plans, he strategises, he evaluates.

Mole is the black, unassertive outsider, the naïve, quiet friend who likes the simple things in life. He is easily pleased, easily influenced and quite charming.

The book is full of their adventures but ends with the taking back of Toad Hall. Toad had gone on the road to find adventure, only to find himself in prison and then to come back to find his beloved Toad Hall taken over by the wicked weasels. Ratty, Mole and Badger offer to help him take his home back. They hatch a plan, using a secret passage, the existence of which was unbeknown to Toad but not to Badger, to get into the house and surprise the unsuspecting weasels and drive them out.

“ ‘We shall creep out quietly into the butler's pantry – ‘ cried the Mole. ‘With our pistols and swords and sticks – ‘ shouted the Rat. ‘And rush in upon them’ said the Badger. ‘And whack'em, and whack'em and whack'em’ cried the Toad in ecstasy, running round and round the room and jumping over the chairs.

‘We four,’ said Badger, ‘with our sticks, once we're inside the dining hall, why we shall clear the floor of all the lot of them in five minutes. I'd have done the whole thing by myself, only I didn't want to deprive you fellows of the fun!’

“Well might tables and chairs be upset, and glass and china be sent crashing to the floor, in the panic of that terrible moment when the four Heroes strode wrathfully into the room! The Mighty Badger, his whiskers bristling, his great cudgel whistling through the air; Mole, black and grim, brandishing his stick and shouting his awful wary-cry, ‘A Mole! A Mole!’ Rat, desperate and determined, his belt bulging with weapons of every age and every variety; Toad, frenzied with excitement and injured pride, swollen to twice his ordinary size, leaping into the air and emitting Toad-whoops that chilled them to the marrow!” (*Wind in The Willows*, Kenneth Graham)

It was a well-planned, well-directed, well-engineered and well-executed strategy that recaptured Toad Hall. I could just imagine, at the beginning of the epic battle scene in Toad Hall, hearing the famous war cry of Alexander Dumas' *Three Musketeers*: “All for one and one for all”. Toad, Badger, Ratty and Mole succeeded because they planned and fought as one and vowed to stand together in their common fight. That would be the war

cry of the riverbank characters, intent on going into battle against those awful weasels who had usurped their authority and taken over Toad Hall. In fact the whole *Wind in the Willows* story is about four friends, brought together by chance, experiencing adventure, living and supporting each other as they enjoy what each offers to their friendship group.

In today's Gospel we are called to become one. We wander in on a very intimate yet powerful prayer, known as the priestly prayer, between Jesus and His Father. Jesus is saying goodbye to his friends before he is arrested and he prays on behalf of his followers; not only those in the room with him, people who have followed, learned from and ate with him; but about us too. I feel a bit guilty when I read this because we are eavesdropping on a private prayer. Yet at the same time I feel immensely honoured because this is a prayer about you and me. How does it make you feel when a friend says to you: 'Come on, let me pray for you.' Even more so when it is Jesus!

Jesus prays "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."

He prays about our love and oneness in Christ. He prays, "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. Three times he asks his Father that we all become one as he and the Father are one. He rejects boundaries and differences that divide us, within and between ourselves, our families, our churches, our countries. You do not need me to remind you the barriers and differences set up between male and female, rich and poor, gay and straight, black and white, Christian and Muslim; educated and uneducated, young and old, employed and unemployed, able and not so able. Boundaries and differences are not about issues but real people, with names, joys, concerns, tears, needs and dreams just like us. I think back to these four characters, black, black and white, brown and green, furry and slimy, educated and uneducated, practical and impractical, worldly wise and naïve, young and old, living in the base of a tree, underground, in the riverbank, in a grand hall.

Jesus does not pray for us to tolerate or be nice to each other. He does not pray that our differences be eliminated. He prays for our oneness, as he and the Father are one, so that through it we can reveal God's presence to our world. In God's kingdom, $1 + 1 = 1!$ Oneness is not about numbers but about quality. Jesus and the Father are one as they love and give themselves to each other. Oneness is a quality of life – God's life.

It is all about oneness, not being the same. Ruth Bell once wrote, "If two people agree on everything, one of them is unnecessary" She went on to say, "If two people agree on everything, they double their chances of being wrong." Ruth Bell was not referring to the diversity in the Christian church; she was referring to marriage. But we can apply it here. Stephen Neill in his book *'On the Ministry'* says: 'All genuinely personal experiences are individual and unique. Each has his or her own irreplaceable contribution to the life of the

whole. Each has an instrument to play, a gift to offer to the harmony of whole orchestra.' If the orchestra does not play as one, the music sounds a mess, the performance a failure. If the four characters from the riverbank had not played the same tune, their mission would have flopped.

Our non-acceptance of others' uniqueness may be about jealousy or inferiority. You have probably heard the free verse: 'I hate the guys that criticise and minimise the other guys whose enterprise has made them rise above the guys that criticise and minimise.' It may be something else. In our global village we have to relate to people who are different. Just as an orchestra needs every instrument so our life is enriched through genuine fellowship with each other. The crux is love; it is the only thing that can ever overcome division. We can answer Jesus' prayer every time we choose how to love, who to love, where to love. As Christians, we come from very different places, but then we are as one. If you belong to Christ and I belong to Christ, we belong to and need each other and we can share in his multi-coloured, multi-dimensional grace. William Barclay writes: 'Christianity produces people who are friends with each other because they are friends with God' (commentary to Galatians and Ephesians).

The Street Bible puts our Gospel like this: (Jesus prays), 'I've got one big ask – keep them together, united, one huge team living the way you and I relate. But doing it down here. Keep them plugged into us, so that it'll be obvious that it was you who sent me.' In God's kingdom, $1+1 = 1$. So, with our furry (and slimy) friends, and to our amazing God we shout: 'all for one and one for all'.

Peter Smith

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