

Remember

Psalm 137:1-6; Luke 17:5-10

A few years ago George Bush Sr was Vice-President of the United States and was representing that country at the state funeral service in the Soviet Union for President Brezhnev. Brezhnev had been leader of the Soviet people from 1964 to 1982. An amazing thing happened at the funeral. Things were running to military precision, but a coldness and hollowness pervaded the ceremony. There were marching soldiers. There was an endless stream of Communist rhetoric. But no prayers, no comforting hymns, no mention of God.

The American Vice-President said that he happened to be in just the right spot to see Mrs Brezhnev. She walked up to the coffin, took one last look at her husband, and there, in the chilly, grey capital of that communist atheistic state, she traced the sign of the cross on her husband's chest.

George Bush said, "I was stunned. In that simple act, God had broken through the core of the Communist system."ⁱ

It's a sad picture of a suppressed faith remembered in a hard time. In the face of death, in her time of pain, Mrs Brezhnev could not keep her faith hidden. How many years in that arena of atheism where she had lived her public life, had that woman kept this deep secret. In the time of greatest exile, bereavement, her faith emerged, maybe even against her will, but she could do no other. Something was remembered.

We have something similar in our Old Testament reading this morning, a Psalm about remembering and the importance of memory. Before Boney M got their hands on it and turned it into a chart success in 1978, By the rivers of Babylon, this was a psalm of lament. The exiled Jewish people looked back to the memory of their ruined city and tried to remember what their faith was about. The people of Israel in the 6th BC had seen their homeland overrun by foreign armies; their leaders carried off into exile; their towns and villages flattened; their great city of Jerusalem with its Temple, the epicentre of their faith, razed to the ground. Carried off

into exile in Babylon, some found themselves by the rivers and streams, or maybe by the land well-irrigated by canals and waterways, so different from their homeland and so foreign to them. All their dreams, all their plans, all their intentions, all their heritage, all their culture – gone. They had hung up their harps on the branches of willow and poplar trees for they were of no use any more. There was no desire for singing or music, but their captors cruelly demanded it of them. “How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” the Jews lamented.

And then the, almost immediately, the realisation that it was at that time, precisely at that time, that they should be remembering, and should, even with cracked voices, be singing. For the future, different from what they had planned or intended, or hoped for, was still there, and in that future, God was still active. Their future was bigger than their past. They could still sing, through the bad days, and into the good, for as long as it took for faith to get real for them again.

Two weeks ago I attended an awareness-raising evening about dementia. We learned that there are many different forms of dementia, and that dementia affects people in different ways. The electrical connections in the brain begin to fizzle and disconnect. Memories become difficult to recall, along with words. Perceptions can become altered and time sometimes gradually, sometimes quickly, becomes scrambled. We were given a lovely image. Think of someone’s lived memories like a book case, with the most recent memories, what you had for breakfast, what you had listened to on radio or seen on TV on the top shelf. On lower shelves, maybe family and work. Further down on the book case of your life memories of your youth and significant events in your middle years. And then right at the bottom your childhood memories. When dementia comes, it can be like the book case being rocked. What are the first memories to fall off the shelves? The most recent ones, and gradually, as the book case of your life rocks more, other memories fall too, until it is the earliest memories that are left.

On the same day as that dementia awareness raising event I had taken a service in a nursing home where there were people with varying levels of awareness. One person I remember, not able to talk much, suddenly sparked to life when we started to sing, ‘We plough the fields and scatter’, and then, through the memory awoken by music, was able to talk about other things

they had sung years ago. It was emotional; it was magical. It was remembering. Another person, again not able to say much, joined in with the words of the Lord's Prayer. It was remembering. It was connecting to something deep down that meant something important and had somehow lodged in the brain, and was not forgotten, and could, when called, come out and be expressed.

Sitting here in this hall, where we have worshipped for over three months, some might feel in a bit of a time of exile. We miss the simple grandeur of our sanctuary, the gothic architecture and space, the stained glass windows, the music. Some doubted we would find it possible to worship in this strange land without all of those things here in the Hall, but we have. We've learned to worship God on seats, and God hasn't minded. We've learned that there are different endings to services, and God hasn't minded that either. We've learned that we can sit in different configurations of seating and not in serried ranks, and God has somehow managed to find our praise acceptable too. We have remembered how to praise God, even in a strange place, and we will take some of that memory back with us when we return to the sanctuary in a few weeks time. Maybe we have even learned that a static faith is not an adequate faith, and that remembering is not only about holding on to what is past, but laying down new memories in the present, with which we can populate the future. A static faith is not an adequate faith.

Speaking to a colleague last week, I mentioned I was going to be preaching on 'remembering', and not sure where the sermon might take me. He asked, "What is the opposite of remembering." "**Dis**membering", I said. To dismember is to take apart. To remember is to bring together.

If faith is to be adequate for life, it must not be static, it must be dynamic. Faith will sometimes need to be taken apart and examined. What works? What is fit for purpose? What is practical? What is relevant? What should we carry with us from the past? What should we let go? What should we fashion now? Sometimes, through a time of dislocation, we find a different way of doing something, or being something. Sometimes we rediscover what we have lost, or forgotten. Sometimes we encounter something that is new and totally different to anything we

have known before. A static faith is not an adequate faith. A static Christian is not an adequate Christian. A static Church is not an adequate Church.

In their grief and loss and exile, the Jews feared they would lose their faith, and be dismembered and cut off from God. What they found, in places where they did not expect, was the pieces of that same faith put back into their hands and hearts as they remembered who they were, Who God was, and how they related to each other. “Let my tongue cleave to my the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember You...”

Remembering. What are your memories of faith? What are the things you have by heart? Are the book shelves of your memory a little empty? Is it time to bring in some new volumes and expand your knowledge and your practice? Here, in this place, together with each other, with God, let’s make some new memories of faith to carry forward with us.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ George Wilmoth, Washington Post