



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, March 6, 2022
The First Sunday in Lent

Litany and Solemn Eucharist
11am

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*
on
Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-3
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Re-membering...

It is said that dogs do not have short-term memories, that they don't have the same concept of time as we humans do. It certainly is true of our Cairn Terrier, Bertie; when I come back home after being away for a few hours, I get the exact same welcome when I come back after a few minutes having forgotten something. For humans, whose lives are dominated by time as well as space, memory is crucially important. I guess that is why it is why dementia or Alzheimer's is so distressing, for memories not only fade, but they get jumbled and mixed up.

Remembering is not only what makes us human, it also forms bonds that create community; and communities use ritual and liturgy in order to connect with the remembrances of the past in a vivid and beautiful way. Our first lesson from the Book of Deuteronomy shows us that this kind of remembering linked with liturgical rites is ancient; the Hebrew tribes, once they had entered the promised Land, were not only encouraged to give thanks for all the good things they now had, they were to give thanks by remembering. In a kind of ancient creed, a formula was recited with the offering of the harvest basket: "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien..." This credal formula allowed generation after generation to enter into the story of their ancestors, even when time could have dulled those memories.

Many centuries later, Jesus participated in such a ritual, when he celebrated the Passover meal with his disciples. In that meal, he recalled those same memories that we heard in our first reading; the Exodus, with liberation from bondage and freedom in the Promised Land. And, in turn, the followers of Jesus have continued in that same tradition to remember the significant events that marked the life of Jesus Christ and, in particular, that most Holy of Weeks in his life that led to his death, burial, and Resurrection.

Richard Holloway suggests that Christian remembrance is not simply about memory but is an active engagement with the past and its effect on present realities; he suggests that Christians are, to use his term, *remembrancers*. In particular, when we are faced with death, and particularly the death of loved ones, we engage with the memory in that same kind of way that we remember in the liturgical action.

He says:

"We would be remembrancers even if we lived for ever, but it seems to be the presence of death that provokes the keenest remembrance. The living we can revisit, but the dead we can only remember. And we do: sometimes in little glimpses, like the

*credit flashbacks at the end of a film; sometimes in more elaborate sequences, in which we reconstitute as much about a person as we can. It is death that makes us look back in sorrow, makes us remembrancers. But it is also death that makes us look forward in dread.”*¹

This kind of remembering is what Jesus and his disciples were used to; after all, they were Jews – their lives were organised around ritual remembering – the re-telling of story and the re-enactment of the things that had shaped their history. For the Jewish community at the time of Jesus, acts of remembrance such as at the annual celebration of the Passover were more than just ritual observances; the remembering was an active part of being Jewish and this will help us understand the simple yet significant change that Jesus makes at his own last supper, when he asks his disciples to ‘do this in remembrance of me’.

And this may sound a little strange, but, when we remember, we also *re*-member – if you will, we put things back together again. It has been suggested that the re-membling of the Eucharist is the very way that the Church becomes the Body of Christ visibly; when one member of the church is joined to another.

Marty Haugen tells the story of the way that this is experienced in African culture, and how each community has people who know the stories of the community and how they are bound up in the lives of each member and their ancestors. He once shared a conversation he had had with a musician from Ghana. He said, ‘*A friend of mine, Sowah Mensah, is an ethnomusicologist from Ghana. He says that in Ghana everyone would seem to be a musician by our definition. Everyone sings (and dances) at public gatherings, and most everyone is adept at adding harmonies and improvising. I asked him if there weren't individuals who had special recognition as artists in the community. He said they were the people whom you went to when your life was in crisis--when your marriage was in trouble, when you were cut off from the community, when you felt lost and alone...Sowah said that the artist is the one who knows all the songs of the community--the songs of their history, the songs of their relationship and the songs of their vision. In his words, “The musician sings the song to you and ‘re-members’ you back into the community.”*’²

That is why music is so important in the Christian Liturgy and why, particularly as we enter into Lent and Holy Week, the music will take on an even greater role, because we are re-telling the stories that have formed us as Christians, and in so doing we are re-membling our community.

On Friday, as we remembered our dear brother, Father Bill Norgren, at his Funeral Mass, former Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold shared an extraordinary passage from an 18th century French Jesuit Priest, Jean Pierre de Caussade. It was so beautiful that I want to share it with you today, because it reminds me how our own stories are bound up in the story of Jesus Christ, which means that our celebration of Holy Week is far more than a set of pious memories, like faded photographs kept in a treasured album. He said, “*The Holy Spirit carries on the work of the Savior. While the Spirit assists the Church in the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Spirit writes his own Gospel in the hearts of the faithful. All the actions, all the moments of the Saints, make up the Gospel of the Holy Spirit. Their souls are the paper, their sufferings and action are the ink, the Holy Spirit with his own action for pen writes a living gospel, but it is not readable until the day of glory, when it is taken out of the printing press of this life and published.*”³

What a beautiful thought that each of us has a Living Gospel – our own stories bound up in the Gospel of Jesus Christ! As St. Paul said in our epistle reading today, “*The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart.*”

And that gives me an opportunity to remind all of you the custom of Catholics and Anglicans when they hear the Holy Gospel being read in Church. First, we always turn to face the Gospel wherever it is read – as Bishop Michael Curry often remarks, the Church re-orientates itself so that we *become* the Gospel – the followers of the Way. And when the actual Gospel reading is announced, many of us copy the Deacon or Priest by making three small crosses on our bodies – a cross on our foreheads (so that we will hear the Gospel and understand it) a cross on our lips (so that we will proclaim the Gospel) and a cross on our hearts (so that we will live the Gospel in our lives). “*The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart*” says St. Paul.

Jesus lived this kind of remembering in his own life and he passed it on to his followers. Take today's Gospel reading, for example. Jesus went into the Wilderness filled with the Holy Spirit. And, did you note that in each of the temptations in Luke's account, Jesus answers the Devil with a quotation from scripture? This was not tit for tat, Jesus was re-membering himself – binding himself to the tradition of his ancestors, and the story that had formed him as a child and a young man. His strength to resist temptation came from being immersed and formed by the tradition of his ancestors. He entered into Salvation History and, on the Cross, came the culmination of all Salvation History. Into that same tradition we now immerse ourselves in these weeks of Lent. we are on a journey, we will soon be celebrating again Holy Week. We shall recall the salvation history of our faith and, reaching deep into the storehouses of our own memories, we have the chance to bind our own Living Gospel to the Gospel of Jesus Christ our Lord.

¹ From *'Anger, Sex, Doubt, and Death'* pub. SPCK 1992

² From a paper given to a Conference of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America in 1998 – *'Worship and Music: Keeping the People's Song Alive.'*

³ From *'Abandonment to Divine Providence'* pub. Christian Classics 2010