

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Wednesday, October 22, 2025
The Eve of Saint James of Jerusalem

Solemn Funeral Mass in Thanksgiving for the Life
of Judith Eckerman Hancock
11:00 am

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Canon Carl Turner

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"We sing to remember who and whose we are."

*Homily preached at the Funeral Mass in thanksgiving for the life of Judith Eckerman Hancock,
October 18, 1934 - October 10, 2025*

It is said that dog's do not have short-term memories; that they don't have the same concept of time as we humans do. It was certainly true of our dog, Bertie, who died only a few months ago. When I used to come back to the Rectory after being away for a few hours, I got the exact same welcome as when I came back after being away just 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 dementia or Alzheimer's is so distressing, for memories not only fade, they get jumbled up and, eventually, beyond retrieval.

There is a poem about growing old by Philip Larkin. He titled it, rather provocatively, 'The Old Fools.' This stanza I find very poignant.

*Perhaps being old is having lighted rooms Inside your head, and people in them, acting.
People you know, yet can't quite name. Each looms Like a deep loss restored...That is where they
live:
Not here and now, but where all happened once.*

Some of you will remember a dear parishioner who died in 2019 – Jo Brans – an incredibly gifted author. As I got to know her, her memory was getting more and more jumbled and she was becoming frail because of dementia. Some years earlier, she had quoted that poem and poignantly stated that there seemed to be more and more 'lighted rooms' in her own head. She borrowed some words of Robert Browning and made them her own: "Grow old along with me. The best is yet to be, and that will be remembering."

Grow old along with me. The best is yet to be, and that will be remembering.

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. And music is, in a very real sense, an aid to remembering. How often have I visited a care of the elderly home, or thought back to the time I played some old tunes for my mum and dad as they were dying, to see the most remarkable reaction! That is what we are doing today, my friends – we are using liturgy and music as a ritual for remembering. In fact, it should be lost on us that Jesus uses that word at

the institution of the Eucharist: *Do this in remembrance of me*. Another way of looking at that word is to say that it is actually two words – re-member – that is, a putting back together of what has been before and giving it new meaning. Re-membering.

Grow old along with me. The best is yet to be, and that will be remembering.

Bishop 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 might use a better term for this kind of remembrance, making them actively *remembrancers*. 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. ^[1]

Debbie and Lisa – you have cared for your mum so faithfully for such a long time. You talked about all that she gave you; all the love that she gave you, and you gave it all back. You watched her own memory fail, but you never gave up on her. Right until the end, you have been there for her, even when she struggled to piece the memories together. As her Alzheimer's took over, many of us found it hard to have conversations with her like we used to, because she even failed to recognize who we were and, being Judy Hancock of course, she was also adamant that she was right even when, according to her we had not something muddled!

The loss that we feel today is a loss that, for the family, is a loss that you have been experiencing in advance of this day. In a very real way, some of you said goodbye to Judy some time ago.

Today, to coin Holloway's expression, we are the remembrancers for Judy. We have heard the stories of her life; and how she, and her beloved Gerre, touched the lives of so many people – encouraged so many young people to make music. We have looked back on her extraordinary life and music ministry in particular.

I chose the Old Testament lesson not to test the reading ability of the lector, but because the bible shows how important music is to remembering. The naming of all those original musicians for the Temple cult, from thousands of years ago, and yet who are still remembered in church, is very deliberate and very specific; even the skills they already had and the skills they had to learn. I love the way that Chenaniah was chosen to lead the music "because he understood it!" They were real people with real names, real skills, real families and, more importantly, they allowed the memories of the history of the tribes to be celebrated again and again through the gift of music; through the gift of song. They were remembrancers for Israel.

Remember when the Hebrew people went through the Red Sea during the Exodus? And Pharaoh and his chariots were after them; and they were afraid; but the chariot wheels got stuck in the mud and the people escaped on dry ground and then the water came in and killed all the Egyptians? What is the first thing that Miriam, the sister of Moses does? She takes a timbrel in her hand and makes up a song about it! Music and memory help us to be remembrancers.

Marty Haugen says this:

We sing to remember who and whose we are. The leader of prayer, the one who reads, and especially the one who sings, must know more than the notes. She must know the stories of our faith as well as the stories of her own community, and she must know how they are brought together in worship.

We sing to remember who and whose we are...

The one who sings must know more than the notes...

What better way of celebrating Judy’s life-long passion, skill, and dedication not just in this place with its amazing choir school, but in other churches and schools and places over many, many years. Judy made music and encouraged others to do the same because she knew it would help her and others to remember who and whose they were. She knew more than the notes; she lived out our Gospel reading through her music-making: She was salt of the earth; she was a light in the world; and her light shone brightly before so many people, and glorified God the Father whose praise she now offers with Gerre in the glory of heaven where things are, at last, re-membered.

Let us pray.

A prayer by David Adams:

*Light of the world, enter into the depths of our lives. Come into the dark and hidden places.
Walk in the storehouse of our memories. Hear the hidden secrets of the past.
Plumb the very depth of our being. Be present through the silent hours,
and bring us safely to your glorious light. Amen*

References

- 1 From ‘Anger, Sex, Doubt, and Death’ pub. SPCK 1992
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