

Memory: A Theological Reflection

St James' Church: Parish Connections, April 2013

Memory is a vital part of what makes us human.

Several years ago, my mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. Visiting her in hospital brought me face-to-face, not only with her memory loss, but also with the more extreme situation of the other residents. My mother usually managed to recognise me - though once, when I asked if she knew who I was, she said, 'I'm not sure, but I know you're a dear friend.' 'That's good enough for me,' I said, giving her a hug. 'I'm also your daughter, but don't worry about that.'

Several of the residents had virtually no memory left, never recognising family or friends. It meant, in effect, the loss of their relationships, a kind of living death, as one distraught husband put it, whose wife hadn't connected to him in years.

The issue in this article is not to discuss the plight of people who suffer memory loss related to age or brain dysfunction. Rather, it's about the memory loss that all of us experience from time to time. Not the ordinary everyday losing of keys or mobile phones or forgetting appointments. But the more serious memory loss which occurs when we don't want to remember, when we fail to remember. Individuals can do that and so can groups of people - whole societies. Our memories can be very short indeed, with sometimes disastrous consequences.

The Spanish-American writer, George Santayana, who died in 1952, famously said: 'Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it'. History is one of those areas we forget at our peril. We can never forget our personal histories, our family histories, the history of our country without loss to our identity.

The situation of those who do forget, for physical reasons over which they have no control, is regarded rightly as tragic. The situation of those who choose to forget is something else. Our psychological capacity to remember the past - to hold it in memory - even when it's distasteful and painful to do so, is a sign of maturity as persons, as families, as a nation. Anything less makes us superficial, skimming across the surface of our lives; never entering the depths.

On a spiritual level, too, we can be forgetful. Often spiritual direction is about reminding people of what they know perfectly well, but in some sense 'forget'; perhaps they grasp at an intellectual level, but don't know how to let it filter down into their hearts and lives. That too is a form of forgetfulness, spiritual forgetfulness – a variation on sloth, one of the seven deadly sins.

The desert fathers and mothers used to remind their disciples of a simple Bible text, such as 'God is love', and tell them to come back in a year when they'd learned it. Spiritually speaking, learning is often no more than remembering, over and over again, what our sluggish spiritual 'brains' keep forgetting.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus assures his disciples in the Farewell Discourse that, 'the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and *remind* you of all that I have said to you' (Jn 14:26). The Holy Spirit, in other words, plays a key role in the *remembering* of the believing community. Remembering Jesus, and his words, is a core part of what it means to be Christian.

In one of his eucharistic hymns, 'Come, thou everlasting Spirit', Charles Wesley describes the Spirit as 'Remembrancer divine'. Drawing on John's Gospel, Wesley sees the Spirit as the One who

enables us to remember, who leads us from sluggish forgetfulness to fruitful and life-giving memory. The Spirit calls to mind, recalls to memory on our behalf. That is a core part of the Spirit's teaching, making Christ present to our memories in his absence.

The great act of 'remembering', for Christians, is the Eucharist, where memory plays an expanded role. Like the Passover in the story of the exodus in the Old Testament, the Eucharist is the core event on which remembrance hangs. To remember Jesus' Last Supper, to recall his atoning death and life-giving resurrection, is not just a feat of memory in the ordinary sense: summoning up a vague impression of the past. The eucharistic remembering (called 'anamnesis') draws the past into the present, so that the past events of salvation history become real for us in the here-and-now.

But it's not just important *that* we remember. Equally important is *how* we remember. Memory does not give us access to the 'raw facts' of our own past (or anyone else's). When we remember we interpret. Even the facts we remember are shaped by interpretation: the things that are memorable are in some way important to our identity, whether good or bad. We play an interpretative role, mostly unconscious, in our remembering.

For Christians, that interpretive role needs to be centred on Christ. It's not our own self-aggrandisement nor our own self-hatred that is the interpretative principle of our remembering, but the intersection of Jesus' life and death with ours.

So, when we recall past grievances or wrong-doings, we interpret them now in the light of God's forgiving love, God's call to forgiveness, and Christ's atoning death. We remember our moments of desolation in terms of our hope in Christ; our times of unbelief in terms of his faith and faithfulness; our experiences of rejection and alienation in terms of his love.

We are all capable of losing our memory. Christian faith is, in part, a 'call to remembrance' — a summons to anamnesis, memory: to recall and re-tell our small lives, our histories, in relation to God's vibrant, life-giving story, from the beginnings of creation to the final fulfilment of the kingdom. Memory makes us fully human, true; but it also makes us Christian.

Fortunately, for those of us with memory loss of one kind or another, God's memory, through the work of the Holy Spirit, holds us always in being.

Revd Prof Dorothy A. Lee
Dean of Trinity College Theological School
& Frank Woods Professor of New Testament
Trinity College
MCD University of Divinity
Melbourne