

Thanks For The Memory

Luke 22:14-23

Sacrament of Holy Communion

2nd October 2011

A large dog, carrying a wallet in its mouth, walks into the meat department of a local supermarket one day. He puts the wallet down and sits in front of the counter. “What is it, boy?” the butcher asks, jokingly. “Want to buy some meat? Ha! Ha!” “Woof!” barks the dog. “Hmmm,” says the butcher. “What kind? Liver, bacon, steak ... ?” “Woof!” interrupts the dog. “And how much steak? Half a pound, a pound ... ?” “Woof!” signals the dog. The astonished butcher suddenly realises that the dog has been sent on an errand, so he wraps the meat up and finds the money in the dog’s wallet.

As the dog leaves, the butcher, eager to find out more about this amazing animal, decides to follow. The dog enters an apartment house not too far away, climbs to the third floor and begins scratching at one of the doors. Suddenly the door opens and an angry man appears, shouting and yelling at the dog.

“Stop!” yells the butcher, “You can’t do that to him. He’s the most intelligent animal I have ever seen!”

“Oh, yes, he may be intelligent,” exclaims the man. “But what a memory! That’s the third time this week he’s forgotten his key!”

Well, it’s not just dogs that need a good memory. Humans do too. And not only so we don’t forget our keys. The ability to remember is fundamental to our whole experience of life – as we well know from the tragic prevalence of Alzheimer’s and other forms of dementia in our society today. Without memory, we have no concept of time. No way of knowing the difference between past, present and future. Without memory, we have no sense of identity. No idea of who we are. Without memory, we have no sense of community. No way of knowing the people around us in our families, neighbourhoods and social groups. We have no feeling of belonging.

In a book due to be published this week, entitled, *My Life Deleted*, Scott Bolzan, a former NFL player and successful aviation businessman, tells of his struggles with retrograde amnesia over the past few years. In 2008, while working in his office in Phoenix, Arizona, he made a trip to the bathroom that caused him a worse injury than anything he ever experienced in the rough and tumble of his football career. As he went through the door, he slipped on wet cleaning oil and hit the back of his head on the floor as he fell.

As a result, Bolzan no longer has any memory of who he was, that he had played for the Boston Patriots and the Cleveland Browns. Worse still, he could not work out who the lovely woman was with the worried look, sitting at the end of his bed, day after day. Nor did he recognise his two teenage children. Nothing in his home

seemed familiar and those activities he had done so naturally beforehand became a major trial. He couldn’t remember how to start his car though he did recognise the signs and traffic lights along the way. He had no trouble forming new memories but everything in the 46 years of his life prior to the accident was gone. “My well of darkness seemed bottomless,” he writes. “Deep down, I knew I wasn’t the same person. I feared I never would be normal again.”¹

A story like this – and by the way you can hear more of this story in an interview with Scott Bolzan and his wife coming up on ABC’s *Good Morning America* this week – a story like this make us all the more aware of how precious memory is. It’s so integral to all our relationships. It’s what bonds us together with our families and our friends. Those times when we draw on our shared memories enrich so much of our lives together. So many of our conversations with loved ones begin with the words, “Do you remember when ... Do you remember when we first started dating and you were so shy? ... Do you remember when little John was a baby, wasn’t he so cute? ... Do you remember that camping trip we took all these years ago? ... Do you remember that storm when the big tree came down outside the house? ... Do you remember when Amanda was married, what a great day that was?” Memory is so essential to our whole experience of life. It is so fundamental that we take it very much for granted. We just can’t imagine what it would be like without it.

Memory is also a very important aspect of the growth of our faith tradition, especially in the ancient times of the Old Testament. When we look at our printed Bibles today, it is hard to believe that there was a time when none of this was written down. It all belonged to an oral tradition. It was memorised by people who had prodigious memories, the likes of which we cannot imagine today, and passed from one generation to another, from father to son, from father to son, for hundreds and hundreds of years. In fact, it was only 600 years before the time of Jesus that the first of the Old Testament scriptures came into existence and was written down, albeit painstakingly, on papyrus and parchment. And only because it was feared by the Jewish community at the time of the Babylonian Exile that this body of sacred memory might otherwise be lost for future generations.

Now, no-one understood better than Jesus the importance of memory within a religious tradition. From his upbringing within the Jewish synagogue in Nazareth – and possibly from time spent as a young man in the strict monastic-like community of the Essene sect from whence

many believe the Dead Sea Scrolls emanated – from these roots he deeply appreciated the fact that it is by memory people experience the great and powerful spiritual resources of their faith.

This would perhaps explain why, when he was about to leave the disciples at that Last Supper, he invited them to remember him whenever they took bread and wine. And not only to remember him as a historical figure or to pay a passing nod to his memory as a great leader or teacher or healer. No, when he said, “Do this in remembrance of me,”² he was not thinking of how this would glorify himself or honour his memory in times to come. He was not thinking of his legacy as many in public life do today. No, he was more concerned in a selfless way for what it would do for those who followed him long afterwards. Jesus knew, by means of a dynamic memory, by continually bringing himself – and the events of his life, his crucifixion and his resurrection – to mind, that a great and mighty power would flow into the lives of his followers in all future times, and in all places near and far.

I wonder if you have ever reflected on how greatly your life can be strengthened and enriched by bringing to mind the events and stories of the Gospels. It may seem like an odd thing to do when you have so many urgent and pressing concerns to which you have to attend. But it can have dramatic results especially in the midst of your daily round, in those times when you are feeling down or perhaps when you are up against hard choices or faced with testing challenges. When you think of Jesus and recall the events of life, it can have a wonderful and transforming effect.

Maybe there are times when you think that, since your personal gifts are limited, there is nothing important you can contribute to the growth of the church here in St. Paul’s or the building of the Kingdom of God in the world today. If so, bring to mind the Feeding of the Five Thousand and how Jesus used the little boy’s offering of five loaves and two fish to accomplish a great miracle.³ And believe, like him, that even as you offer your meagre gifts, they will be used to advance Christ’s cause in ways you can never imagine.

Maybe there are times when you doubt God really cares for you personally. If so, bring to mind the time when a sick woman touched the hem of the Master’s cloak.⁴ Believe, like her, that he will help you and you will find the power of his loving care flowing into your life, re-energising your whole being.

Then, at those points in your life when you feel overwhelmed by a multitude of anxieties, recall the time when the disciples were worried out of their minds on Lake Galilee in the midst of a storm.⁵ Believe, like them, that Jesus can calm the storms in your life and restore the peace that passes all understanding.

No matter where you are in life, what you are

doing, how busy or otherwise preoccupied you are, take time to recall the wonderful stories of the Gospels. But most of all just take time to think about Jesus. To bring him to mind. To experience his presence around you.

The famous 20th century theologian, Nels Ferré, grew up in the far north of Sweden in a very devout Lutheran family and left his homeland as a young man to study in the United States. The day of departure from the tight-knit community was a heart-wrenching one for everyone. The family of eight had their last meal together, finishing with prayer, before walking together to the railway station. The farewells were terribly emotional and then the conductor blew his whistle for the train to leave the platform. As the train began to move, the young man’s mother ran alongside and shouted, “Nels, Nels, remember Jesus. Remember Jesus.” Years later, Nels Ferré, the brilliant thinker with the ability to analyse the deepest complexities of philosophy and theology, remarked that, in these two words, his mother told him the most important thing he ever learned about the Christian Faith. Remember Jesus.⁶

As we come to the Lord’s Table today, this is the one simple thing that we are called to do. Not to work out the complexities of the theology of the sacraments. No to be preoccupied with the mechanics of how the sacraments work. No, all we are called to do is this: Remember Jesus. As we do this one simple thing, we will discover the dynamic power of a good memory of Jesus, a power that can flow into our lives here and now, and especially uplift and strengthen us in the midst of our daily lives in times that lie ahead.

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¹ Scott Bolzan with Joan Bolzan and Caitlin Rother, *My Life Deleted: A Memoir*, HarperOne, 2011

² Luke 22:19

³ John 6:1 ff

⁴ Luke 8:43 ff

⁵ Luke 8:22 ff

⁶ Gerald R. Mullekin, “Too Precious to Forget” quoted in “The Danger Of Straying From Home” Maxie Dunnam, www.eSermons.com