

A Heart of Remembrance



30 August 2020

(Remembrance ... as a way of inspiring people to new possibilities grounded in God's grace)

Do You Remember?

God tells us over and over to remember what He has done for us, but we rarely take time to reflect and remember what God is doing or has done in our lives already. We need to recall God's faithfulness and learn to use our spiritual rear-view mirror to look back — and our spiritual windshield to look forward to all God is going to do in the future (Deuteronomy 4:9).

The Exodus readings tell of the greatest act of deliverance in Israel's history: God's rescue of His people from the waters of death as they crossed the sea in safety. For us Christians, it is a symbol of our own redemption in the waters of baptism. The song celebrating God's victory over the sea is probably one of the oldest pieces of Hebrew poetry, sung by Jews for over three thousand years and we join them as we sing of God's continuing redemptive action in our own lives



Day of Birth and Graduation



How often do we find ourselves looking back on specific days in our life?

Maybe it was your wedding day, or the day your children were born. Anniversaries or the first flight on the plane? Any other memories?



Life-changing days.

Exodus 13 tells the story of one of those days. A life-changing day for Israel, when God brings them to freedom after 430 years enslaved to a cruel empire. St Ignatius of Loyola reminds us that when we are in desolation, we need to remember the days of consolations.

Remembrance, and in particular God's way of remembering is a significant theme that has often been overlooked. Our memories of the past can often be destructive but Scripture outlines a pattern of remembrance that acknowledges the past in a way that is inspirational and life-giving for both the present and future. Almost every time the Bible is speaking about remembrance, it talks about remembering God's goodness and faithfulness. For Israel, the day of their salvation from Egypt is the pinnacle of God's faithfulness. Moses tells them, *"Remember this day on which you came out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, because the LORD brought you out from there by strength of hand; no leavened bread shall be eaten."* (Exodus 13:3)

Selective memory

As we think of 'remembrance', we may soon realize that we (like everyone else) bring a load of baggage to it. Memory is notoriously selective: we choose what to remember and how to remember it. Memory of the past often became a way of navigating an uncertain future. When the New Testament portrays the birth of Jesus the Messiah as the dawn of a new future, it was natural to connect that with the memory of God's covenantal interventions in the past – and so Mary and Zechariah both recognize this joyous event as a sign that God has remembered past promises (Luke 1:54-72).

At the end of the gospel, the thief hanging on the cross beside Jesus, said, *"Jesus, remember me when you come into Your Kingdom"* (Luke 23:42). A request that is met with the same loving generosity that runs like a golden thread through the fabric not only of the life of Jesus but of the Hebrew prophets before Him.

Of course, focusing on and remembering the past can easily become an exercise in negativity – an excuse for asking who is to blame for past mistakes, or even an occasion for blaming ourselves in ways that ultimately are psychologically and spiritually destructive. Neither the prophets nor Jesus dodged the reality of past mistakes, whether on a national or a personal level. But they also understood that the past was just that, and no amount of agonizing over it was going to change what had taken place. **Repentance** and **forgiveness** can certainly be appropriate, but the constant theme of the Bible is that remembering the past is not about dwelling on human shortcomings, but about **divine grace** and the possibility of new life.



‘Do This in Remembrance of Me’

For us Catholics, this pattern of remembrance as a means of acknowledging the past in a way that is inspirational for the present and life-giving for the future comes to a clear focus in the one central sacramental narrative of the faith, namely the **institution of the Lord’s Supper**. Why else would anyone wish to follow Jesus’ instruction to share bread and wine in this way without intuitively recalling the occasion in His lifetime that was the origin of the practice? The Bible never ignores past mistakes, but it never dwells on them and the overriding message is not one of regret for what we can never change, but of challenge to face up to the possibilities of what, with God’s help, we can yet become.

Choose today to remember God’s goodness and faithfulness in our life. Slow down, and stop a moment.

- What do we have at hand?
- How does it reveal God’s goodness and faithfulness to us?

A Divine Pattern to Follow

These remembrances invariably focus on the theme of God’s loving kindness and undeserved (and unsought for) generosity and grace. Remembrance is an invitation to a better future, through growing out of a realistic appraisal of the past. Ezekiel could openly acknowledge the dereliction into which his people had fallen while also offering a new spirit-filled future (Ezekiel 37:1-14). Jeremiah likewise acknowledged the brokenness of past misdeeds while holding out the prospect of a reimagined relationship between God and His people (Jeremiah 31:31-34). Similarly, Jesus, when faced with a woman caught in the act of adultery, made little reference to what had happened in the past and instead pointed her to the possibilities of a new life (John 8). And when Paul wanted to encourage his readers in Corinth to have a proper appreciation of their own identity in Christ, he moved very swiftly from a recognition of the inescapable fact that in social and civic terms they were people of little consequence to the assurance that, in God’s eyes, they were all of great value (1 Corinthians 1:26-29). In doing so, these and other biblical characters were following what they understood to be a divine pattern of remembrance.





Let us meditate

Psalm 77:11-15

"I will remember the deeds of the LORD: I will remember Your wonders of old. I will meditate on all Your work, and muse on Your mighty deeds. Your way, O God, is holy. What God is so great as our God? You are the God who works wonders; You have displayed Your might among the peoples. With Your strong arm You redeemed Your people, the descendants of Jacob and Joseph."

They return to bondage because they choose to forget the day of their freedom. In our Catholic Tradition we remember Feast days and Solemnities, we celebrate these days throughout the Liturgical Calendar Year. Precisely, we recall their lives, both of suffering and triumph. Many good events can overcome the psychological effects of a bad one - a good reminder that we all need to engage in more acts of kindness toward others and ourselves to balance out the world.

Aspiring to a better future

One of the ironies of today's world is that while our culture is ostensibly more permissive and laid back, in many respects it is also more judgmental than previous generations might have been. Political correctness, celebrity culture and social media have all played their part in this, which means that we know a lot more than our grandparents would have done, not only about national and international affairs but also of the personal lives and opinions of individuals. Forgiveness tends to be in short supply: we find it harder to move on from the past, because it is not so easy to escape its presence. Information about all of us is easy to find through online search engines, and it tends to be there for a long time even if it is no longer relevant, or even current. We should never forget the past, whether as individuals or nations, but neither should we dwell there because the good news of the gospel is that we don't need to, and life can actually be different. The past is often messy, whether our own personal past or the more expansive corporate pasts of our diverse cultures in which we are all implicated whether we like it or not. We instinctively aspire to something better. That 'something better' is what stands at the heart of the gospel: an invitation not to ignore the past (still less, to pretend that it never happened), but to share a vision of what might yet be as we **remember the faithfulness of God** and claim for ourselves a new future characterised by the divine attributes of justice, love and mercy (Micah 6.6-8), mediated to us through the death and resurrection of Christ celebrated in praise and worship. The nation of Israel often fail to remember God's goodness and faithfulness in their story. Because of this, they frequently find themselves back in the house of slavery instead of living free in the house of God.



Why do people wear poppies?

The reason poppies are used to remember those who have given their lives in battle is because they are the flowers which grew on the battlefields after World War One ended. This is described in the famous World War One poem 'In Flanders Fields.' Ever since then, they have come to be a symbol of remembering not just those who gave their lives in World War One, but all those who have died on behalf of their country.

In Flanders Fields

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

(John McCrae, 1872-1918)



John McCrae was born on November 30, 1872. A Canadian doctor and teacher who served in World War I, he is best known for his memorial poem "In Flanders Fields." He died on January 28, 1918.



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