

## **Introduction**

Today, and next week, I want to talk to you about a very biblical concept - the concept of remembrance. The fact that we are able to remember in the complex way that we do, is one of the factors that differentiates us from the rest of creation. Remembrance is a God-given ability with which we are able to recall, and to some extent relive, the past as we have experienced it. We all know the experience of being reminded of something by a song or a fragrance. These are often powerful experiences which transport us back in time to people and places that had significance in our past.

Not all memories are pleasant. Some are painful and we may spend our time trying not to think about them. During November the focus is on the the great suffering of so many, and the lives that were lost, during both the World Wars. These times of remembrance may be broadened to include the remembrance of our own loved ones who have died in circumstances other than war.

George Santayana once wrote, *“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”* This quotation is written on the memorials in the Nazi concentration camps as the rationale for preserving these places of horror as reminders of the past.

Hopefully those who know about the holocaust, will be aware of the fact that civilised (and in many cases Christian) people are capable of the most extreme acts of brutality against their fellow human beings. Hopefully this knowledge will act as a powerful warning in terms of their own values and behaviour.

This is particularly true of western society and its leaders, who have a great deal to say about the ills of Africa, and particularly Israel, while conveniently ignoring the fact that if they were judged with the same standards of judgement they seek to apply to others - they themselves would be found woefully wanting. One of the major reasons that this form of hypocrisy survives, and even becomes the dominant narrative, is because of a general lack of appreciation for history. Politicians and political commentators are not called to account for their hypocrisy largely because we have forgotten the past and the present exists without a context save for the immediate. So yesterday's terrorist becomes today's nobel peace laureate.

## **Why are people so disinterested in history?**

Given the present the pace of technological development most people are hanging on for dear life and trying to keep abreast of the ever-changing technological environment. The emphasis is on the future and what the future holds. Global warming, the next world economic crisis and the challenge of the millennium development goals, all draw our attention to the future.

While these issues are important, and the future should be part of our thinking and planning - I am concerned that much of this focus on the future has been at the expense of our appreciation of the past. Many people simply are not interested in history. This applies not only to world history but their own personal history as well. Test yourself. Do you know the first names of your great-grandparents? Can you give an account of the last four generations of your family? If you can, you are the exception.

In my own experience most Christians have a very poor grasp of Bible history and even less knowledge about church history. They do not know why we believe the things we do, or

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how the Church came to the formulation of a particular practice or doctrine. Even convictions for which faithful people gave their lives are often discarded without any appreciation of their history.

In the light of this we had better pray that George Santayana was wrong when he said, *“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”*

That is the problem as I see it. A general disregard for the value of history and an exclusive focus on the on the future as though we were the initiators and inventors of all wisdom and ability.

**So what does the Bible teach us about remembrance?**

For Christians the word remembrance is most often associated with the Lord’s Supper when Jesus concluded His statements about the bread and the wine with the words “Do this in remembrance of Me.” Yet this was not a new concept. The Jewish disciples were well schooled in the discipline of remembrance because of their study of the Hebrew Scriptures, as children and young men, growing up in the Jewish community of their time.

Why should we remember? We are to remember because we are imitators of God who remembers. This is an important part of what it means to be holy. We are to be imitators of God. We clothe the naked because God clothed the first human beings and covered their nakedness. (Gen 3:21) We visit the sick because God visited Abraham when he was in pain after his circumcision. (Gen 18:1) We visit the prisoners because God visited Joseph, Daniel and Peter while they were in prison. We feed the hungry because God fed the people in the wilderness with manna. (Exodus 16:4) We give water to the thirsty because God gave the people water from the rock on the wilderness.(Exodus 17:6) When we do these things we are imitators of God.

Jesus taught this - it was not a new teaching - He was emphasising a well know rabbinic teaching based on remembrance.

- 33 And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left.  
34 Then the King will say to those on his right, Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.  
35 For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me,  
36 I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.  
37 Then the righteous will answer him, saying, Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink?  
38 And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you?  
39 And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?  
40 And the King will answer them, Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.

Matthew 25:33-4

The apostle Paul picks up the same teaching when he says, “Be imitators of God as beloved children”. (Ephesians 5:1) And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit...” (I Thessalonians 1:6)

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Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ. (I Corinthians 11:1)

How do you imitate God? By remembering what He has done in history. His character is revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures not through a dry systematic formulation of His attributes but through the story of God's actions in historical events.

The Israelites not only told the stories of God's actions in history they sang about them. They became part of the liturgy for worship. There are many examples of this but for the sake of brevity I will only refer to three examples.

The song of Moses (Exodus 15:1-19)

The song of Miriam (Exodus 15:21)

Psalm 136

These acts of God in history we retold in every generation so that the account of the acts of God would be the basis of faith among the Jewish community. Unlike the Christian community that settled for a formulaic theology that was eventually systematised into statements of faith the Jewish community expressed their understanding of God through story.

Jesus ate the Passover meal with his disciples just before He was crucified. the Passover meal ends with a hymn known as the Great Hallel which includes Psalm 136. In other words before His greatest trial Jesus strengthened Himself and His disciples by recounting the faithful and mighty acts of God. Matthew's gospel simply says "And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives (Matthew 26:30). Matthew's Jewish readers would have known that the hymn of which Matthew spoke was Psalm 136. As you probably know already, the Anglican Communion service concludes with the refrain of this Psalm "Give thanks to the Lord for He is gracious, His mercy endures forever."

What was the first command that God gave to children of Israel after they left Egypt? The first thing that God does after He redeems His people from the slavery under Pharaoh is to make a Calendar by which they will be able to calculate the new moons, and the times for the festivals beginning with the Passover. *Then Moses said to the people, Remember this day in which you came out from Egypt, out of the house of slavery, for by a strong hand the LORD brought you out from this place. No leavened bread shall be eaten.*

**(Exodus 13:3)**

Why, you may ask, is God so concerned for the people to do this? The seasons and feasts of the Lord are aids to community memory. The great liberation from Egypt, and all that it taught the people about the faithfulness and character of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, would have been lost within a few generations had it not been for a calendar of remembrance.

We know God's character through His actions. We know what to expect - not just because someone said it, but because they experienced it as part of their history.

In the Bible, remembrance is always associated with something to do. Remembrance is not passive - its not reminiscing.

Next week we will examine the active remembrance that we see in the Bible.