

Memory is not the same as history

Scripture lessons: [Exodus 13:3-10](#); [I Corinthians 11:23-26](#)

Maybe it is because it comes as the year is winding down, but November seems to be particularly the month of remembrance in the English-speaking world. The Brits have just had Remembrance Sunday, when the dead of their 20th century wars are remembered. For Americans Thanksgiving Day is coming up. Originally it was an autumn festival, to pause and recall the blessings of God in the past year, and in the harvest in particular, but which only became a national holiday in 1863, when Lincoln proclaimed it so as thanksgiving for God's blessings on the Union cause in the Civil War. And as Protestants, we have Reformation Sunday, when we recall the actions of the Reformers - a sort of All Saints Day, but just for ourselves. It thus seems to me, with all this emphasis on remembering, that this is a good time to pause and consider the nature of memory and remembrance.

Back in 2005, I read an article which discussed the then recently opened Holocaust Memorial in Berlin. Peter Eisenman, the architect who designed it, was quoted as saying that it was not an historical monument, but a memorial - or more precisely, as he put it, 'memory is not the same as history', and he wished his memorial to deal with memory, not history. He left it to the reviewer - and I suppose to all those who visit the memorial - to sort out what the difference is. That is a challenge which also fed into my thinking today.

I suppose many of us - possibly until fairly recently all of us - would have said that the difference between memory and history is that the former is subjective and the latter objective. Memory belongs to the individual, and perhaps small communities of individuals like families, whereas history is something done by academics - continental Europeans would even say by 'scientists' - who collect and review all the memories and contemporary records, and then produce an objective account of what 'really' happened. Except that in the second half of the 20th century we become a lot less sure about the objectivity of what academics produce. We've had wave after wave of revisionist historians who question the objectivity of previous interpretations, who emphasise the not entirely new insight that history tends to be written by the victors, and who point out the personal, political and national agendas of the historians - largely white males - while at the same time proposing new histories - feminist history, black history, gay history. And we've had the deconstructionists, who argue that everything is a discourse, in effect that every narrative is equal and true for those who tell it, indeed that it is a collection of bits and pieces of other narratives, and that there are multiple truths. To some extent, memory - the memory of disempowered groups - has been bombarded to become history, so we have many competing histories, each with an 'objective' truth claim, or we seek to incorporate these insights into a new 'objective' truth that is somewhere in the middle of the conflicting claims.

To my mind, I'm afraid the outcome of all this is to convince me that there is no one, 'objective' history. History will always be written from a particular perspective, and thus is always subjective. But there is still, it seems to me, a distinction between memory and history: history is official, memory is (shall we say) personal. On the other hand, no matter how many histories there are, they are all in some sense 'official', speaking for one group or another. And in the course of becoming 'official' they lose their ambiguity. If we no longer tell the story of our forefathers, we instead tell the story of our foremothers, who become just as much plaster saints as the males once were. If we now tell the story of exploration and colonialism and the Christian missionary enterprise not as the story of bringing enlightenment and civilisation to dark continents, but as the story of exploitation and oppression, and rebellion and liberation, we tend not to include the local rulers who collaborated with the colonialists and the modern liberators who became dictators in their turn. And is it possible to tell the story of a World War II in which Germans suffered, in which German families, whatever their politics, can also be seen as victims of Nazi megalomania, and in which the Allies may have also committed atrocities - is it possible to tell that story without in turn excusing or denying German atrocities?

I'm not sure that in history it is - or ever will be. That is the nature of 'history' as an 'official' account - that of the victors, or of the losers who hope yet to turn the tables. The selection of events worthy of becoming 'history' will always be dictated by the ultimate purpose of the history as propaganda for a

group. But memory is a different matter. It is always personal, and as such it always retains its ambiguity. At the level of biography, we have a foremother like Emma Goldman, who could take on the male revolutionaries in any theoretical debate and best them - think of her famous attributed rebuke to Lenin, 'If I can't dance, it's not my revolution!' - but who for all her analytical skills and feminist acumen still fell hopelessly and insanely, some might say idiotically, in love with men. At the level of document it is the ambiguity of the diary of a World War I Tommy in the trenches of Belgium - one of the heroes Remembrance Sunday is about - who writes of his anger with the stupid politicians and officers who are slaughtering his comrades in a war he regards as criminal - a hero who detests the uselessness of the sacrifice - or letters from a German soldier on the Eastern front who questions whether it will be the cold and hunger that kills him first, or the hated Russians - and doesn't write at all of the atrocities his unit is involved in - a perpetrator who is also a victim. It is the slave narrative that tells of the narrator's experience of the horrors of the 'middle passage' - but also tells how he and his companions were captured and sold to the white slavers by other Africans. Or particularly poignantly, I think of the instalment of the BBC series 'Who Do You Think You Are', which televised the search for her heritage by the BBC broadcaster Moira Stewart, of Caribbean black ancestry. Her parents had been among the first black medical students in England in the 1920s - her mother in fact the first black woman medical student, although she sacrificed her studies to help put her husband through medical school. Ms. Stewart began with the question of how her parents should have gotten in that position. Once back in the Caribbean she discovered that her great-grandfather had become a schoolmaster immediately after the emancipation of slaves a century and a half before, enabling her grandfather to become a local trader and businessman. But how was it that her great-grandfather, born a slave, had come to be able to read and write and do mathematics? Then came the startling revelation from cousins back in the Caribbean: her great-grandfather had been the bastard son of the plantation owner. But according to family tradition, this was not a rape: according to the family memories, his mother deliberately entered into this relation with the master, knowing that it was highly likely - if nothing else, out of guilt - that he would have his half-caste child educated to serve as an overseer, or in the plantation administration. There was a risk involved, of course, for both her and the child, particularly if the planter's wife became aware of the situation - but it was a risk she deemed worth taking for her child's sake. And this was evidently not an isolated phenomenon; six years ago I read an article on the sixteen black men who became governors, senators or congressmen during the American Reconstruction period, after the Civil War, before blacks were once again deprived of the vote in 1876 - men who were now again a centre of interest, as they are being studied as predecessors to Barak Obama. It turns out that no less than six of them came from similar backgrounds, educated because they were half-caste, illegitimate sons of the plantation owner from an affair with a slave woman.

That is the ambiguity of memory: it's messy, it does not fit with anyone's official history. In this case, it does not fit into black history or feminist history, where blacks and women are invariably victims or rebels, nor into the white history where 'miscegenation' (as it was then called) was unthinkable, or at least unmentionable. And what do you do with the woman's actions, morally? If it is not victimization, is it selfishness or a betrayal of her people? In the end, the only judgement we can make seems to be to be that of Job: covering the upper lip (Job 40:4). What can we say?

It is with this sort of ambiguity in mind that I want to take the next step, to consider the specifically Christian - or Judeo-Christian - aspects of memory, of remembering, starting from our texts for this morning. Curiously, not only do Judaism and Christianity both have communal meals at the heart of their ritual and life, but in both cases these meals are tied up with an act of remembrance. The Jewish community is enjoined to 'Remember this day, the day on which you have come out of Egypt, and how the Lord has brought you out...'; with regard to their communion celebration, Christians are told that the Lord himself instructed them to 'do this in remembrance of me'. And I don't think this emphasis on memory at the most sacred ritual moments in both can be an accident.

The first thing that we must realise is that both of these acts of religious memory are rooted in precisely the sort of ambiguity we discovered in memory in general. We who are doing the remembering are not the heroes of official history. The root of the story of Exodus is that the Hebrews were slaves

in Egypt. They were not a glorious nation who had earned God's approbation - nor, with their constant bitching and groaning and misbehaviour even during the Exodus, did they give God much reason to approve of them even after they left the house of their bondage. Moses himself says this clearly to them: 'It was not because you were more numerous than any other nation that the Lord cared for you and chose you, for you were the smallest of all nations...' (Deut. 7:7). Their liberation was an act of undeserved favour, an act of grace. It is not the glories of the Davidic kingdom - so well recounted in the official history of Kings and Chronicles - that they are told to remember: it is their undeserved rescue from slavery in Exodus. (Perhaps we might venture to say that where the ideology of Israel today goes wrong is that the Davidic kingdom is the focus of its remembering, rather than the Exodus...?)

Whatever it is that Christ does for us in his life and death - in other words, whatever it is that is symbolised in the communion meal - and I will not get into the theology of that at this point - that is equally an undeserved act of grace. In words that are reminiscent of Moses' address to the Israelites, in the same letter where he passes on to us the earliest record of the communion injunction, Paul reminds the Corinthians, 'My brothers, think what sort of people you are, whom God has called. Few of you are men of wisdom, by any human standard, few are powerful or highly born.' (I Cor. 1:26-7) In other words, few of you are the sort of heroes of the faith we remember on Reformation Day... Yet you were called, and God acted decisively for you in Christ, to forgive you, empower you, bind you together as his people.

The other thing we must realise is that not only is our 'remembering' not a celebration of history, in the sense of celebrating the unambiguous, official view of things, but it is not much of a celebration at all, in the sense of a Fourth of July or Bastille Day. When we are told to 'remember' we are not being told to keep in mind some facts about history, some past events, to feel good about them, to be proud of them; rather, we are being told to have them inform our actions at a very fundamental level. The bottom line for a Jewish community which remembers their liberation from slavery is that they must never forget that they were slaves, outsiders, and that they therefore must act justly to that 'holy trinity' of the Old Testament, the widow, the orphan and the stranger within their gates, the outsiders in their own society, and to do so simply because they were once strangers themselves in Egypt. Remembering the burden of their labour, and their hunger, they are to provide their slaves with the same sabbath rest they now enjoy, and provide the destitute among them with the chance to glean the corners of their fields for left-over grain. The whole ethical structure of the Torah arises out of this sense of remembering - remembering who they were, remembering God's grace to them, and thus showing that same sort of grace to others now. The remembrance is not something that takes place in the space of the Passover meal - it is to become a way of life.

Within the past few decades there has been a similar revisionism applied to the Christian Supper too. There have been a handful of revisionist theologians who have asked the question - perhaps so obvious that no one ever thought to ask it before - of what the 'this' is that we are to do in remembrance of Christ whenever we eat and drink. Is it the specific ritual act of breaking a piece of bread, and praying over a cup? We're so used to that, that we can hardly imagine how the words could mean anything different. But we must realise that as we know it, this is all based on the idea of transubstantiation - even in the Protestant circles which have subsequently rejected that doctrine - in other words, on the idea of the identity, literally or metaphorically, of the bread and body, and wine and blood. But back at the start, at the first last supper, at the first gatherings after the crucifixion and resurrection experience, before there was any theology that developed around the words - even the Pauline theology of Corinthians - the reference could just as well have been to coming together in fellowship, in harmony, in equality before God, a forgiven people, reconciled with God and with one another. In other words, whenever you break bread with one another, whenever you share a cup with one another, whenever you sit around a table with one another, do so in that spirit of fellowship, be that sort of community. Being that sort of community is what it means for us to remember the reconciling work of Christ. We are not merely to remember a series of facts, but to live out an attitude, certainly toward other Christians, likely toward all who potentially could hear the same call we have.

To remember and celebrate history is in a sense to separate ourselves from others, identify with a particular national, ethnic or religious community. At a lower level, that may or may not be a bad thing,

depending on how exclusive that attitude is. It cannot be a bad thing to remember and give thanks for the attainments of those who have gone before us - so long as we are also prepared to remember their shortcomings. It may not be wrong to recall their sufferings - so long as that is not at the expense of forgetting or denying the sufferings of others - and it may not be wrong to give thanks for blessings we, as specific communities, have received, so long as we do not claim God's grace solely for ourselves. But such remembering of history can become a bad thing if it is used to cut our community off from others, to affirm ourselves as somehow special in God's eyes, or in the world. But remembering in our Jewish and Christian sense is to affirm our connection with all mankind - to affirm our shared human weakness and God's grace to us precisely in that state. Our remembering calls us to respect for others who are now outsiders, strangers within our gates, even as we were once strangers, and it calls us to reconciliation and community, even as we once needed reconciliation with God and one another. Indeed, memory is not the same as history.