

Easter 6
14/5/2023

Mark the Evangelist

1 Peter 3:13-16
John 14:15-21

Being by remembering

In a sentence:

God gifts us with memory, that we might know we can be different

Faith and politics, yesterday and today

It is a widely-held 'truism' within Australian society that 'religion has no place in politics'.

This assertion seeks to exclude those faith convictions – notably Christian and Muslim – which might make some claim on society as a whole. (More private and internally 'spiritual' religion has already absorbed the 'no faith in public' requirement of modern liberal societies. This kind of spirituality is already committed to residing just in heads and hearts and not in the broader political sphere).

The rejection of faith convictions in the public sphere looks like the assertion of the public-private distinction which colours our thinking around religion. Our shared idea that politics is public and religion is private is part of the prohibition. But alongside this distinction between public and private realms is our sense of the distance between the present and the past. Faiths like Judaism, Christianity and Islam have deep historical roots. Indeed, they are rooted so far in the past that the question of their continuing relevance is greatly heightened. Are we today not 'modern'? Are we not people of the present rather than stuck in the past? And so there is no small sense in which the purported irrelevance of faith for modern politics is linked to the *distance* of faith's founding events from the present. The further back in time those foundational events are, the less relevant they seem to be for those today who have forgotten them. The historical distance of the crucifixion and resurrection seems to signify Jesus' modern irrelevance. The past is a private – privy, hidden – thing, and not for present, public exposure.

Put differently, the ejection of faith from politics presumes a politics which does not remember.

Forgetting and remembering

Our gospel text today addresses the question of the impending departure of Jesus and this as a crisis for the disciples. It's not immediately clear from the text how the crisis is experienced. Clearly, the disciples' lives have been tightly bound up with Jesus, and his looming departure would create the typical experience of loss and grief at an emotional level.

Yet Jesus speaks not of coping with grief but of 'reminding': 'Though I go', Jesus says, 'the Spirit, which the Father will send, will remind you of me'. This answer to the disciples' worry indicates that what's at stake here is not the grief around Jesus' departure but the possibility that everything will be forgotten – first Jesus and then the disciples themselves. I've said before, and it needs constantly to be recalled, that when Jesus identifies himself as 'the Way, the Truth and the Life', the word for truth has the curiously negative sense of 'not-forgotten': Jesus is 'the Way, the Not-Forgotten, the Life'.

The promised gift of the Spirit, then, is no mere ‘There, there, it’ll all be OK’. The Spirit is given because forgetting is bad; remembering matters for true human being – for the continued presence of the humanity of Jesus. It is this remembering which creates the church.

And yet, the point here is not that only the church is a remembering community. This would be to leave us with the modern problem that the church seems – even to itself – to be a people trapped in thoughts about yesterday, and so politically irrelevant. The gift of the Spirit at the departure of Jesus marks the claim that human communities *in general* (and not merely religious communities) must remember in order to become their true selves. This centrality of memory to identity is the engine of countless ‘amnesia’ plots in films and TV series, with their driving ‘Who am I?’ question resounding in the head of the protagonist. Remembering creates our identity by telling us what we have done and what has been done to us.

Perhaps this is not overly controversial. Yet, even when we remember, we are prone to want to remember only the best and none of the worst. In contrast to this, remembering Jesus involves recalling not only the good stuff but the bad, not only the resurrection but the cross, not only what Jesus said that we liked but also when we suddenly found ourselves the target of his polemic. It is not for nothing that tokens of a broken body and spilt blood are at the centre of what we do at Jesus’ behest, ‘for the remembrance of me’. These gory elements are there lest we forget that the light casts shadows.

So, too, with remembering in any community: the memory is usually pretty selective because it is painful to be reminded of things we have managed to forget.

A nation called to remember

Australian society is presently in the grip of a call to memory: Remember that the Australia we now know was founded as a colony. Remember that colonisation was very often a violent process and, even where it wasn’t, recognise that it was and continues to be radically disruptive of whole peoples. Remember, Australia, and know how we have come to be what we think we are.

The ‘Uluru Statement from the Heart’ and the corresponding proposal of a First Nations Voice to Parliament are two forms the call to memory has taken among us. Without recognition of the importance of memory for identity, these can make no convincing social or political sense. And so, we must understand the place of memory, and the importance of institutions like the Voice which have precisely the purpose of reminding and bringing a fuller identity.

Remembering can be painful. If the promised Spirit reminds those first disciples and even us today of ‘Jesus’, it reminds not only of the words of peace on the lips of the risen one but also of the desolation of the cross. If the resurrection reveals something about the powers at play in the heart of God, the cross reveals something about the powers in the heart of humanity. Heaven is not the memory only of the good things. The church remembers the crucifixion and the synagogue remembers the exile, and both remember the divine judgement read into these experiences. But to forget such things would not simply be to cease being Christian or Jewish; it would be to cease to be human.

The remembering which could be enabled by the Uluru Statement’s proposal of the Parliamentary Voice, with other history-telling processes, will similarly not be easy or comfortable. It will not be easy because we don’t know what has been forgotten and so what might be recovered. It won’t be comfortable because we cannot see the cost of remembering before we begin. It won’t be simple because, sometimes, we will get the memory or the consequences we draw from it wrong. Memory can be wrong or

deceived, but this makes it no less important. Errors should be named, but still we must seek to remember rightly, to know ourselves: to know our inherited way of being human. We are what we have done and what has been done to us. These experiences are voices which speak to us and by which we speak, even if we don't remember them. To remember is to know why we are like we are, and so to see that we could have been different. To see that we might have been different is to realise that we could still be different. Memory like this makes change possible. And we could do with a few changes.

Jesus' promised gift of the Holy Spirit to his disciples is a promised gift of memory. What is remembered through this Spirit is the human experience of Jesus as a revelation of the rich possibilities of human life. To remember this is to see such richness as a possibility, even for us forgetful people of today.

The call to memory in the 'Uluru Statement from the Heart' is no less a gift: reconciliation requires truth, and truth is Not-Forgetting. And so we must heed the call in the Statement and commit to the Voice and to similar institutions for remembering.

This is how we are to become what God creates us to be. It is the one Christ toward whom the Father draws all peoples. And so the humble spirit which calls through the Statement is the Holy, Creating Spirit of God, drawing us down one path which will bring the whole groaning world a little closer to God's coming reconciliation of all things.
