Remembering the Future; Hoping for a New Past (2/2)

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Remembering the Future; Hoping for a New Past
(2 out of 2)

This morning we were speaking of memory. Memory is so important, and so connected with who we are, that when we lose our memory it seems as if most of our own identity is gone. Memory is so much a part of who we are that, as Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset pointed out, to speak about anything human one has to tell a story. The same is true of nations. Memory is what makes a people a people – memory of times of oppression and times of liberation, memory of heroic deeds, memory of great tragedies, memory of fallen heroes, memory of distant ancestors, memory of common dreams. This is why in Scripture we repeatedly find the words, "Remember, oh Israel." In order to be a people, Israel has to remember. In order to be the people of God, Israel has to remember the mighty acts of God on its behalf – the calling of Abraham and Sarah, the opening of the Red Sea, the giving of the Law, the return from exile in Babylon.

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The same is true of the church. As the people of God, the identity of the church is in its memory – in its memory, above all, of the gift of God in Jesus Christ. In very early times, the Gospels were called "the memoirs of the apostles," because they encapsulated and transmitted the memory of the Church regarding Jesus and his teachings. Also, those of us who call ourselves Christians are part of a tradition whose highest form of worship revolves around a meal following the invitation of Jesus, that we should do this in his memory, in *re-membrance* of him. *Re-membrance, re-minding*, means bringing back to the mind. The same is true of the Greek

word that early Christians used to refer to this commandment of Jesus, that his disciples should eat this bread and drink this cup in anamnesis of him – in *ana-mnesis* in bringing to the mind. In Latin, the verb to re-member is *re-cordare* – to bring back to the heart.

For those of you who were not here this morning, allow me to take two or three minutes to recap the essence of what was said then. Our starting point was the words of the White Queen in the famous book, *Through the Looking Glass*, to the effect that "It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards." What these strange words mean is that *re-membrance* is not only about the past, but also about the future.

It is difficult for us moderns to envision that. When we ask why something happens, the expected answer is that it happened "because" – by which we mean that an earlier event brought it about. This is important, because without such an understanding the physical sciences would be impossible, and humankind would never have achieved the technological developments that we so much enjoy and so much dread.

But, is this really a full explanation of why things happen, or is there another way of looking at things? In other words, can we think of events not only as being pushed from the past, but also pulled from the future? This seems to be the view of the Bible, where events not only happen "because," but also "so that." Ultimately, according to the biblical view, things happen because God has a purpose. There certainly is evil in the world. But, as one of my professors used to say

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repeatedly, “Dios escribe derecho en las torcidas líneas humanas” – which could loosely be translated as “even amidst crooked human lines, God writes a straight paragraph.” If this is true, a full answer to a “Why” question must not be only “because,” but also “so that.” It must deal not only with the past that pushes, but also with the future that pulls.

I know this sounds strange. Reason tells us that things happen only “because,” and that there is no way we can prove a “so that.” And yet, no matter what abstract reason tells us, in fact we live out of a “so that.” You came here so that you could hear what I had to say, or perhaps so that you could meet some friends. But no matter the reason, you came not only because of what had happened before, but also out of what you expected or hoped would happen. And even when scientists who believe they are very objective in their research study a phenomenon in order to find its sources, they are certainly looking for its “because;” but they are doing this with a purpose, with a “so that.”

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For those of you who like to connect such things with traditional philosophical thought, this is what philosophers mean when they speak of “efficient causes” and of “final” or “teleological causes.” When medieval theologians said that God is the “final cause” of all things, they did not mean, as we would imagine today, that if you go back far enough in the chain of causes you will find God at the source of all things. They believed this, but they expressed it by saying that God is the “first efficient cause” of all things. When they said that God is the “final cause” of all things, what they meant is that God is at the end of all things, at the future to which all things

are moving.

So, when we say that it is a poor memory that works only in one direction we are pointing out that we need to remember not only the efficient causes that brought us to this point, but also the final causes, the purposes that pulled us to where we are.

If we then turn to matters of faith, we may say that in *re-membrance*, Christians are invited to bring back to mind not only what the Lord did, but also what he will do; not only who we were and who we are, but also who we are to be.

In the early centuries of Christianity, this *remembrance* centered on a common meal, following the mandate of Jesus, “Do this in remembrance of me.” This remembrance was a joyful event. Unfortunately, through a series of circumstances that would take too long to explain, after those early centuries, and for some sixteen centuries thereafter, this remembrance was focused on the past, and within that past, on the crucifixion. As I was taught as a child, communion is a time to remember Christ, yes, but that remembrance centered on two points: First, the painful, horrible sacrifice on the cross; and, second, my own overwhelming sinfulness, that required such a sacrifice.

But this was not what the early church remembered as it gathered to break bread. On the contrary, it remembered first of all the resurrection of Jesus—which was the main reason why

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believers gathered to break bread on the first day of the week, the day of resurrection. They certainly remembered the cross and its sacrifice, which they had commemorated two days earlier, on Friday, with penance and fasting. Many of them, being of Jewish origin, also kept the Sabbath on the seventh day of the week. But then, as they gathered on the first day of the week, they remembered that the cross, and death, and the Evil One, and the present order, and the Empire, did not have the last word. Jesus had broken out of the realm of death and of oppression, and in so doing he had conquered them both for himself and for those who through baptism were grafted into his body and through communion were nourished as part of that body.

(Allow me to make a parenthesis here to point out that in the Western, Latin-speaking church, the emphasis tended to fall more and more on the cross and on payment for sins, while in the Eastern, Greek-speaking church the emphasis lay more on the victory of Christ over the powers of evil that hold sway over humankind. An interesting sign of this is what in our Western tradition we call the Holy Sepulcher. In the east, it is called the Anastasis, the place of the resurrection. Obviously, the place of burial has to be the same as the place of resurrection. But while we in the West tend to speak of it as the place of burial Eastern Christians have long referred to it as the Anastasis, the place of resurrection.)

Closing the parenthesis, and returning to early Christian worship, it is important to note that when the early Christians gathered on the first day of the week to remember and celebrate the

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resurrection of Jesus, they also remembered another event long past, for according to one of the stories of creation in Genesis it was also on the first day of the week that creation was begun. The two were connected, in that what had begun on that first Easter was the new creation, a renewal of the first. The first day of the week God began the first creation. And now, once again on the first day of the week, with the resurrection of Jesus, God began the new creation.

But there is more, in their gatherings on the first day of the week those early Christians did not remember only these two past events. They also remembered the future to which both of these pointed towards. They often referred to the day in which they gathered to break bread as the "eighth day" of the week, pointing out that the first day is also the eighth.

To understand the significance of this "eighth day" it is helpful to remember the cyclical and endless nature of the calendar. No matter how constructed, all calendars are cyclical. They count the passing of time by counting cycles. In the Hebrew and Near-Eastern calendar, the basic unit was a week of seven days. Seven was the perfect number. It was the number of days in one of the creation stories in Genesis. A week therefore had seven days. After the great Feast of Passover, there was Pentecost, which came after a week of weeks – 7 x 7 = 49. A week of years, that is, seven years, marked the time when the land was to be allowed to rest. After a week of weeks of years came the 50th year, the great year of Jubilee. And then the cycle would begin again. Thus, the week with its seven days became a sign of the apparently never-ending

cycles of life. Every week, after the celebration of the seventh day, one would wake up the next morning to find that it was once again the first day of the week, and to remember that it all seemed to be a series of cycles with no apparent end.

However, even while living in this endless cycles of weeks and years, there was the hope that one glorious morning, upon waking from sleep on the night of the seventh day, one would discover that it was no longer the first day, that the endless cycle had come to an end, that it was no longer the first day of another week, but the eighth day, a new beginning, the end of all those endless cycles. The eighth day of the week is eternity, when the apparently endless cycle of weeks, and of weeks of weeks, and of weeks of years, and of weeks of weeks of years, comes to an end; where the apparently inescapable power of the present order is broken. The resurrection of Jesus is not only his victory over sin and death, but also the beginning of that eighth day, which believers can now begin to experience by faith.

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(In passing, it may be interesting to note that among the many different shapes of ancient Christian baptistries is the octagon. Some baptistries were shaped like a coffin, symbolizing dying and rising again with Christ; some were pear-shaped, symbolizing the new birth from the womb of God; some were round, symbolizing eternity; and some were octagonal, symbolizing that by baptism one was entering into the eighth day of creation. In many cases, no matter what the shape of the font itself, the actual shape of the building or of the room was octagonal.)

However, even after our baptism, Christians still live within the endless cycle of weeks, and in a world where evil apparently reigns. Christians are still captive within economic and social structures that deny life and freedom and justice. We are part of the old creation, and with it, as Paul says, we groan in pain as we await the final day of this old creation. Throughout history there have been Christians who have sought to escape from this old creation in different ways. Some fled to live as hermits in the desert, only to discover that their demons followed them into the solitude of the desert. Some have tried to create holier communities, churches of people who will have nothing to do with the existing order, only to discover that they still live in the "world" that they so despise. We are part of the old creation, and there is no way we can escape it. But we are also part of the new creation. We have the first fruits of that creation. We celebrate because we know that the end of all things is in Jesus Christ, who is both the Alpha and the Omega, both the Beginning whom we have met and the End whom we await.

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At the very end of the *City of God*, after speaking of what he calls the six ages of human history, and having shown that Rome has fallen because no city —no social order, no political structure, no economic system— built on love of self can survive. (A lesson that one may wish or political and economic leaders would understand.) Augustine looks to the future:

> The seventh age will be our Sabbath, which will have no sunset, which will come on the Lord's Day, the eighth day, the eternal day, consecrated by the resurrection of Christ, and which prefigures the eternal rest not only of the spirit, but also of the body. There we shall rest and see; see and love; love and praise. Behold the essence of the endless day![1]

[1] *De civitate Dei*. 22.30.5.

Significantly, the earliest prayer over the eucharistic bread that has survived has this eschatological dimension of remembering the future: "As this bread was scattered over the hills, and being gathered became one, so may your church be gathered from the ends of the earth into your Kingdom."[2] Communion is not only a remembrance of the past. It is also a remembrance of the future. It is a sort of pre-enactment, a *re-membering* of eschatological hope. And this bringing to mind is not just a mental exercise whereby we focus our minds on the resurrection and the victory of Jesus. It is also and above all an occasion in which the Spirit makes the Reign of God present to us and among us. It is not just our minds that remember that future. It is the Spirit —the first fruits of our inheritance— who brings the future to us.

This dimension of communion was lost during the Middle Ages, and generally also during the time of the Reformation, when debates centered on the question of how Jesus was present in the bread. Paul had said in First Corinthians that any who eat and drink unworthily eat judgment upon themselves, because they did not discern the body of Christ. The exact meaning of these words became a subject of bitter controversies that appeared at various times, but came to a head at the time of the Protestant Reformation. What is meant by "discerning the body"? It is a matter of believing that somehow the bread becomes the body of Christ? Is it a matter of believing that the bread is both bread and body? Or should one think of the bread as a symbol or a reminder of the body of Jesus, broken for his followers? Those who held to one of these positions excommunicated all others, and in consequence the meal that Jesus commended to his followers, which should be a sign of unity, a sign of the future creation for which all

[2] *Didache*, 9.4.

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Christians hope, became a sign of Christian intransigence, division, and even mutual hatred. Once again, the old creation is still there!

As to the passage from Paul about "discerning the body of Christ," it is important to remember that Paul frequently refers to the church as the body of Christ. Just before the passage in Corinthians where these words appear, Paul has been chastising the Corinthians because when they celebrate Communion those who have resources eat and drink as much as they can, while others simply go without. According to Paul, this is not reality the Lord's Supper. It is not the Lord's Supper because that supper, as its name of "Communion" clearly shows, is a celebration of the entire church as the body of Christ. If within that celebration distinctions are made between those who have those who have not, this is not the Lord's Supper, and those eating and drinking have not discerned the body of Christ – that is, the presence of Christ in the community around them, rich as well as poor.

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Even in the midst of the contentious debates of the 16th century, there were, however, glimpses of hope or of a different view of things. An example is in Calvin's understanding of communion that is often called "virtualism." Calvin did not escape the doctrinal bellicosity of the times, and soon Calvinists and Lutherans were excommunicating one another. But in the fourth book of his Institutes he did offer a significant insight into the meaning and the scope of this meal that Jesus had commended to his disciples. As Calvin puts it,

> . . . greatly mistaken are those who conceive no presence of flesh in the Supper unless it lies in the bread. For they leave nothing to the secret working of the Spirit,

> which unites Christ himself to us. To them Christ does not seem present unless he comes down to us. As though, if he should lift us to himself, we would not just as much enjoy his presence!
>
> This ought not to seem either incredible or out of accord with reason. For as Christ's whole Kingdom is spiritual, whatever he does with his church must not be subjected to the reason of this world.[3]

In other words, Christ is present in communion, but this is not because somehow he comes down from heaven in order to be in the bread and wine, but rather because the Holy Spirit takes us as a body to him, in what is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet. The reason why this is called "virtualism" is that the presence of Christ among us – or rather our presence with him – takes place by the power or "virtue" of the Holy Spirit.

Whatever the case may be, the point is that communion, this meal in *remembrance* of Jesus, is a joyful celebration in which the reality of sin and of the cross are overcome by the even greater reality of redemption, of the resurrection and final victory of Jesus. Communion, this remembrance that includes remembering the future, should not be a somber event, as it became with the passing of time. It is, as some modern rituals say, "the joyful feast of the people of God." This is why, even at the time when communion was shrouded in the most funereal terms, people spoke of "celebrating" communion. It is also the reason why, strictly speaking, the Sundays in Lent are not part of the 40 days of penance of length. (For instance, this year Lent began on 6th of March, and Easter will be on April 21. This would make a total of 46 days. But, since Sundays are days of celebration of the resurrection and return of Jesus, the six Sundays in Lent are not counted, thus bringing the days of Lent back to 40.)

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[3] *Inst.* 4.17.31,32. In LCC 21.1403-4.

In the early church, this eschatological dimension —*this remembrance of the future*— was the reason why it was customary for Christians not to kneel in prayer on Sundays —a custom that the council of Nicea turned into law. The other six days of the week, the time when we remember that we still live in the old creation, we are to kneel in humility, much as a supplicant approaches a king. But on this first day of the week, on this eighth day of the week, we are to approach the heavenly throne as a prince approaches the king, or as a child approaches a parent. For those early Christians, who were nobody in the eyes of society, whom the Empire considered dispensable, this first day of the week was a reminder, a remembrance, that in truth they were children of the Emperor most High, that they were a royal priesthood, the first-fruits of God's promised future.

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And, even though we often forget it, baptism too involves an eschatological reality, a remembrance of the future. We are all familiar with the imagery that connects baptism with the death and resurrection of Jesus, and speaks of our dying with Christ and being raised with him. It is to this that Paul refers in Galatians, where he says that he is crucified with Christ. Contrary to what we often think, with these words Paul does not mean that he has achieved a level of faith that is far beyond other Christians. If you read the entire passage, you will note that he says both that he is dead and that he still lives. He is not speaking of some higher level of Christian faith, attainable only after an arduous climb. He is speaking about what is the reality of every Christian. This is made clear in Colossians, where Paul says: "So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. . .

For *you have died*, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory" (Col 3.1-4).

Early Christians saw baptism not only as a washing away of sin, but also as being grafted into the body of Christ —into that body which will rise on the eighth day just as its Head rose on the first. This was the reason why they insisted that baptism is valid throughout life. This is why when Luther found himself sorely tested by the Devil, he would declare, "I am baptized!" In other words, I do not belong to you. By my baptism I now belong to the risen Lord, and by the same baptism I shall rise again as he did.

Precisely because it is valid through life, baptism has an eschatological dimension. We are baptized into the Lord, and as such we have moved into the new creation. By our baptism, we look forward to a new heaven and a new earth, to a new city —that is, to a new order— where, as the prophets announced and the poets sang, "they will sit each under their own fig tree and under their own olive tree, and no one will make them afraid." By our baptism, even though we still live in the endless cycle of days, weeks, and years, we are able to live also in the eternal eighth day.

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This is why in the services of many churches we often invite the congregation to remember their baptism. Unfortunately, this admonition can be understood in a very pedestrian way, as a call to think back to our baptism. But the fact is that many of us cannot really remember the day we

were baptized. (I was not baptized until I was six or seven, because my father had a Quaker streak in him, and it took him a while to be convinced that baptism was important. But even so, I remember more the excitement about all the friends and relatives coming to visit than I remember my baptism itself.)

In any case, what we mean when we say “Remember your baptism” is not to look back and try to remember the time and circumstances of our baptism. What we mean is rather, “Remember that you are baptized.” Remember that, even on this particular day of the week, you are to look forward to the eighth day. It is a *re-membering* of an event whose promise will come to full fruition in the future. Again, “remember the future.” And, since I have spoken of the promised future as an “event,” it is important to point out that, just as in the Old Testament we are told that the Exodus was a socio-economic and political event, we must also understand that the very words that we use for the expected future, a “Kingdom” and a “City,” show that it too must be seen as a socio-economic and political event.

So, in brief, both communion and baptism are about remembering. Both are grounded in past events. But both are announcements of the future for which we hope.

But “hope” is a very ambiguous word. If I say, “I hope you are right,” what I really mean is that I doubt it. If I say “I hope it doesn’t rain on our picnic,” what I really mean is that I have a desire for it to be so, but I don’t expect to be able to do much about it. If I say, “I hope to finish this

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task by tonight," what I really mean is that I will try to make it so. In some ways, each of these is present in Christian hope. Sometimes our hope is that God is right, even though it might seem otherwise to us —as if saying to God, "I hope you are right." Sometimes our hope is simply leaving things in God's hands because there is not much we can do —as in planning a picnic. Sometimes our hope is that we will be able to do what God wishes us to do —as in a task to be finished before nightfall.

There is a dimension of Christian hope that goes beyond all these. That dimension is hope as a *re-membrance* of the future —as bringing the future to mind. In this dimension, there is nothing questionable about hope. What we hope for in the future —the future which we remember— is as certain as the past we also remember. Just as in a way the past cannot be changed, so can this future not be changed. This is the future to which we belong by virtue of our baptism. This is the future we celebrate in communion.

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It is this future, and our certain hope in it, that allows our faith and our memory not to be a poor memory and a poor faith that works only in one direction.

If it is true that things happen not only because the past pushes them, but also because the future pulls them, it follows that we are being pulled into God's future just as a billiard ball is pulled into the pocket. We may not know what cue stick will have to hit us, with what spin or at what angle. But we know that we shall in the end be drawn into that ultimate pocket we call the

Reign of God.

This means that, no matter what so many hymns say, we are not to bring about the Reign of God, nor even to build it. We are called to serve the Reign of God. We must serve it as it is present among us now, for in a way we have already entered the eighth day of creation. And we must serve it as those who expect it to come in its fullness. We are called to remember the future, to see that future already acting among us, and to live as those who even in the midst of history already know its end. We are called to interpret our present, not only in terms of our past, but also in terms of God's future.

Some years ago Catherine and I were invited by a seminary to give a series of lectures on preaching on the Book of Revelation. The title we gave those lectures was "The Butler Did It: Preaching the Mystery When You Know the End." That title was the result of our reflecting on the manner in which Catherine's father used to read mystery stories. When he opened such a book, the first thing he would do was to read the last chapter, to find out "who done it," and then he would read the rest from the beginning, to find out how the author got to that last chapter. Quite naturally, we made fun of him. But upon further reflection, it is quite probable that the author knew who did it before writing even the first line of the book, and that the entire book was written with that end in mind. When we read the book from beginning to end, we had to wade through a number of events and details, of plots and subplots, that might or not be important for the entire story. We had no way of knowing what really led to the end and

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what was mere distraction. But, because he had read and remembered the end, Catherine's father knew. He was able to evaluate data and events in ways that we could not, but that were closer to the author's final goal than any guess we could make by reading the book from beginning to end. He read the entire story remembering its future end. When Catherine and I read on page 50 that the phone rang, we "knew" that it rang because a neighbor called. But Catherine's father knew that it rang because the butler did it!

This illustrates where we stand today. Like that author of a mystery story, God has written the end even before the very beginning. We are gathered as Christians not just because of past events, but also because of a future we remember and we serve. We are here because the past actions of God have given us a clue and a promise as to God's final goal. We are gathered not just as people who remember a past, but also as people who remember a future. We are gathered as people who by virtue of the first day of creation, and by virtue of that first day of the week when Jesus rose again from the dead, call ourselves people of the eighth day, people of the Reign of God.

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This makes a great difference as to how we interpret events around us. Think for instance of the changing demographics in both church and society, and how this is affecting both church and society. If we look at these issues only from the perspective of the past, we shall be tempted to nostalgia, and we shall probably be brought kicking and screaming against a future we dread. But if we look at it from the perspective of God's future, we may rejoice in all this, seeing in it an

opportunity to have a glimpse, a foretaste, of that glorious vision of John at Patmos: "I looked, and behold a multitude that no one could count, from every people, and language, and tribe and nation." And we shall be able to join them, waiving palms of victory and singing hymns to God and to the Lamb!

But there is more. As people of the eighth day, we not only remember the future; we also expect a new past. The past we now remember is not always a glorious past. It is not always a liberating past. It is a past of sin, and shame; a past that enslaves us, and of which we cannot free ourselves. It is a given, and that is it.

But, is it? The future for which we hope, the future we remember, is also a future in which all things will be made new. This is the full meaning of grace, redemption, and sanctification. Not only are we to remember the future. Because of that future we also have the promise of a new past. And therefore we not only remember the future, but also expect a new past!

Paradoxical as it may seem, ours is a faith that remembers the future and expects the past! It would indeed be a poor memory and a poor faith that only works in one direction. Remember the future! Expect a new past! Expect, as Augustine would say, the eighth day, for "there we shall rest and see, see and love, love and praise. Behold the essence of the endless day!"

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