

Remember me O Lord - Ageing and Dementia

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Location: St George's, Battery Point

Series: Being Human

Texts: Psalm 139, Romans 8:31-39, Matthew 25:31-46

In 1944 while imprisoned by the Nazi's for his part in a plot to assassinate Hitler, German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer penned this poem.

Who am I? They often tell me
I would step from my cell's confinement
calmly, cheerfully, firmly,
like a squire from his country-house.

Who am I? They often tell me
I would talk to my warders
freely and friendly and clearly,
as though it were mine to command.

Who am I? They also tell me
I would bear the days of misfortune
equably, smilingly, proudly,
like one accustomed to win.

Am I then really all that which other men tell of?
Or am I only what I know of myself,
restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,
struggling for breath, as though hands were compressing my throat,
yearning for colours, for flowers, for the voices of birds,
thirsting for words of kindness, for neighbourliness,
trembling with anger at despotism and petty humiliation,
tossing in expectation of great events,
powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance,
weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making,
faint, and ready to say farewell to it all?

Who am I? This or the other?
Am I one person today, and tomorrow another?
Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,
and before myself a contemptibly woebegone weakling?

Or is something within me still like a beaten army,
fleeing in disorder from a victory already achieved?

Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.
Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine.

Bonhoeffer reflects upon the face he presents to the world and at the same time his own internal struggles. Which one of these is the authentic him? The question, “Who am I?” is one we all grapple with. It’s the question driving this sermon series on *Being Human*. Almost every week someone contacts St George’s to ask about one of their ancestors who was baptised or married or buried here. Invariably people doing this family history work are retired. And I wonder whether what drives the family history research is that question, “who am I?” and a longing to ground the answer in something that endures beyond my lifetime.

We face the question, “Who am I?” in perhaps its most confronting form when we encounter dementia. Who will I be when I’ve forgotten who I think I am? This week I read about a survey which said that people are more scared of getting dementia in old age than they are of getting cancer.¹ People speak about the raw horror of facing dementia. They describe it as a “living death”. “Relatives of sufferers often describe it as the illness that slowly switches off the lights in the brain. Savagely and pitilessly, it strips away memory, language and personality, leaving only the shell of its victims behind.”² So writes one journalist. In his book *Dementia: Living in the Memories of God*, theologian John Swinton shares the story of two friends, Gordon and his wife Elaine. Gordon developed Alzheimer’s and eventually had to go to a home. When John was writing his book, Elaine emailed him 2 pieces of advice given to her by workers caring for her husband. The first was, “You should just divorce him.” The second was “Definitely time to take the blue pill!” You don’t need to know what the blue pill is to know what that was being said - that Gordon should be euthanized.³ Is that comment true, that dementia leaves only the shell of a person? On that account divorce would make sense for Elaine, especially if her freedom, autonomy and happiness were at stake. Is death better than life with dementia?

As you know, dementia is a pretty personal thing for me. In 2015 my Mum was diagnosed with dementia, although we’d seen the signs for some time. She spent most of the last year of her life starved of human touch with everyone she encountered wrapped in PPE. Dad was diagnosed with dementia last year. My parents had been missionaries all their working lives. Part of their spiritual practice was reading the Bible each day. They would underline texts, make notes in the margins till the Bible was chock full and then they would get a new one and start again. Dementia stripped away

¹ <https://theconversation.com/why-are-we-so-afraid-of-dementia-83175>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2008/feb/17/mentalhealth.health>

³ John Swinton, *Dementia: Living in the Memories of God*, SCM Press, 2017: 112-3

my Mum's ability to read, and then to speak. Dementia also poses a spiritual challenge for us. Her final Bible was a New Living Translation, and Psalm 88.12 puts the spiritual challenge well:

Can the darkness speak of your wonderful deeds?

Can anyone in the land of forgetfulness talk about your righteousness?

What happens to our spiritual life when we can no longer remember ourselves or God?

This morning I wanted to look at how both the Bible and the Church offer us terrific resources to respond to the experience of dementia, first in our understanding of the human person before God, and then in how we care for each other. We will in a sense just be fleshing out that wonderful final line from Bonhoeffer's poem: *Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine*. We're going to look at 2 points - Remembered by God, and A people who remember.

Remembered by God

Dementia is so confronting for us, because it challenges some of our deeply held cultural assumptions. We live in a hypercognitive society that prizes rational thought and coherent memory. You may remember the philosopher Descartes line, "I think therefore I am." But what happens when your ability to think is impaired? Similarly, autonomy and individual freedom are our most cherished values. Our economic system is built upon the basis of people being consistent consumers. Our social value comes from our ability to be a "productive" member of society, and our ability to keep up in a rapidly changing world.

Peter Kevern writes, "If the sort of human being that we recognise and value is somebody who thinks clearly, remembers accurately, consumes consistently and adapts speedily, then it is clear that a person with a diagnosis of dementia faces the prospect of a sort of social and cultural death, in addition to the [...] suffering from the condition itself."⁴ We invest heavily in finding drugs to combat dementia. But this does nothing about that social and cultural death experienced by the person with dementia. That is the fruit of what one academic memorably calls, a 'malignant social psychology'.

Dependent Creatures

The person with dementia however reminds us of the fundamentally different account of being human that the Bible gives. First, against the fiction we tell ourselves that we are free and autonomous, the person with dementia reminds us that we are creatures, made by God. As creatures we are dependent upon God for life, both physical and spiritual and we're dependent upon others throughout our lives. Our radical dependency means that all we have is a gift. We are not the authors of our own stories. We don't get to make our lives up. We receive them as a gift. Grasping this truth frees us from the treadmill of running after freedom and self fulfilment and opens up ways of living that are humble, purposeful, patient, kind, gentle and grateful.⁵

⁴ <https://theconversation.com/why-are-we-so-afraid-of-dementia-83175>

⁵ Swinton, *Dementia*, 164

Embodied

Second, the person with dementia reminds us that we're embodied. We're of the dust of the earth, animated by the breath of God. Dementia is a disease of the brain. It's a feature of this world that groans under the conditions of the fall. But we're not brains on sticks. Our "souls" are not purely our brains. Rather the word soul is a way about speaking of the whole of our humanity before God. Because we're embodied creatures, our spiritual lives are embodied, they are impacted by what happens to the body. Yes, as we lose our ability to read and remember, that will affect our spiritual practices, but it doesn't mean we're abandoned by God. "Where can I go from your Spirit?" asks the Psalmist. That is true. God continues to be with us and sustain us by his Spirit, even as the body breaks down. Psalm 139 wonderfully speaks about the reality that we are made and held by God, even when we don't know and have forgotten ourselves.

For you created my inmost being;
 you knit me together in my mother's womb.
14 I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
 your works are wonderful,
 I know that full well.
15 My frame was not hidden from you
 when I was made in the secret place,
 when I was woven together in the depths of the earth.
16 Your eyes saw my unformed body;
 all the days ordained for me were written in your book
 before one of them came to be.

Persons in Relation

The third thing that those with dementia remind us is that we are made for community. We only know ourselves in relation to God. But we're also made for relationships with each other. "It is not good for the man to be alone," God says. Loneliness is one of the most challenging and dehumanising aspects of dementia. Sometimes people say, "I don't want to visit the person with dementia because I want to remember them as the person they used to be." There are several things wrong with this statement. Yes the dementia has affected the person, but they are still there! Second, is your visiting for you or for the other person? If you're only in a relationship for what you can get out of it, you are tending towards instrumentalising the other person, making them a means to your own comfort, rather than recognising them a person to be loved. The person with dementia reminds us that who we are is seen most profoundly in our relationships. We need others to see and recognise us to know ourselves.

Mortal

Finally the person with dementia reminds us that to be human is to be mortal. Mortality means decay is inevitable. We all face the certainty of our own death. But our humanity is not erased because of dementia or any other conditions we experience because of our mortality. We, along with the rest of

creation, long for redemption, the resurrection of our bodies, and all the more so as we grow old, the body fails, the mind dims and we forget. But we do so in the sure and certain hope from Romans 8, that nothing in all creation, neither height, nor depth, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor future, not the ravages of time on our mortal bodies, not dementia nor even death itself can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.⁶

It is into this situation of decay, forgetfulness, and death, that the words of Psalm 139 provide such comfort. We may forget. We may be uncertain or no longer remember who we are, but God knows us. He remembers us.

You have searched me, LORD,
and you know me.
2 You know when I sit and when I rise;
you perceive my thoughts from afar.
3 You discern my going out and my lying down;
you are familiar with all my ways.
4 Before a word is on my tongue
you, LORD, know it completely.
5 You hem me in behind and before,
and you lay your hand upon me.
6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
too lofty for me to attain.

God knows us better than we ever knew ourselves. Our memories are fickle and fading. They are never the whole picture of our past or who we are. But God remembers us as we actually are. To repeat Bonhoeffer's words,

Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.
Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine.

What's more, in Scriptures God's remembering is tied to his covenant promises. Psalm 25.6-7 reads,

Remember, LORD, your great mercy and love,
for they are from of old.
7 Do not remember the sins of my youth
and my rebellious ways;
according to your love remember me,
for you, LORD, are good.

God remembers us, *according to his love*, that is, his *hesed*, his covenantal faithful love, his redeeming love. When ancient Israel called on God to remember them according to the love of his covenantal promises, they were calling on him to act to redeem and rescue them. The God who acted to redeem his people in the past is the same God who will remember and act for his people in the future, and the God who was with them in the present. So when Israel was called to remember God's past

⁶ Romans 8:38-39

redemption, their present was transformed, because the same God who remembered their ancestors was with them in the present.

We know this at an even deeper level on this side of the cross. Jesus says, “surely I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Swinton writes, “In the Eucharist we can hear Jesus’ words, ‘Do this in remembrance of me’ not simply as a retrospective glance back to the cross, but as an acknowledgement of the power and transforming impact of that memory in the present. It is a re-membling within which the church is constituted as a body, held together in, by and through the memories of Jesus. Even though we weren’t physically part of that history, we can share in these memories and be transformed by God’s actions in the present.”⁷ As we remember Christ, so we participate in God’s memory, and we are caught up in his redeeming love. That brings us to point 2, a people who remember.

A people who remember

We are held by the God who remembers us. And we are a people who are constituted by remembering Christ. One of the reasons that I became an Anglican was because I fell in love with the Anglican liturgy while studying theology. I grew up in a church culture where the daily quiet time, private bible reading and prayer, was the model and heart of Christian spirituality. I believed in this practice (I still do!) but I was, and still am, not very good at it! What I encountered in Anglican prayer book services was a spirituality that was richly Biblical, but also corporate, and embodied. As I’ve thought about dementia, and other disabilities that we may encounter, I’ve become more aware of how both the corporate and bodily aspects of Christian faith are important. Our faith is corporate because we carry one another. It means our spiritual lives don’t solely rest upon our shoulders.

Second, our corporate worship engages our bodies. How do we memorise things? Basically by repeating them over and over. As we confess our sins, hear God’s word of forgiveness, say the creed, pray the Lord’s prayer, share in Holy Communion, week in week out, so the story of the Gospel becomes something we remember, even down to a precognitive, bodily level. What we do with our bodies shapes our souls - our life before God, not just what we do with our minds. Embodied practices become powerful means of spiritual formation. It’s why I encourage people to kneel in confession and at communion - because your bodily posture helps you to come before God in humility.

Singing is another powerful corporate spiritual practice. We declare the praises of him who called us out of darkness and into his wonderful light. So often singing is one of those ways which opens up people with dementia who otherwise might be withdrawn and silent. Similarly saying the Lord’s prayer draws upon the deep memory of the body. These practices not only trigger memory of previous encounters with God in worship, so they become encounters in the present. While the cognitive memory may fade, the warmth of the encounter remains.

⁷ Swinton, *Dementia*, 217

As we remember Christ, so we also remember his body. And this is the wonderful opportunity dementia presents for us to be the body of Christ. Last week I spoke about accompaniment that starts with taking off our sandals before the sacred ground of the other. This is true for the person with dementia. In them we encounter someone who bears the image of God, in all their frailty. We can respond to them by saying “Here I am”. To remember our brothers and sisters, is to pay attention to them and then to offer our presence. So often we can feel helpless to know what to do when we encounter someone with dementia, or really with any disability that makes difficult so much of what we take for granted. Against loneliness, we can offer the gift of our presence, simply to be with another. And in that presence, even if they are not able to speak, the Holy Spirit is at work on a very deep level. (I learned that one from Andrea when visiting people in hospital).

My mum was a great example of this. As a child my mum often dragged me along with her when she visited different elderly folk from church and other friends. It makes me think of Jesus’ words from our Gospel reading. “I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was sick and you cared for me, I was in prison and you visited me.”⁸ The experience of ageing and dementia is one where we can often become a stranger to ourselves and others. Sickness in various forms is a pretty constant feature of life as you age. We can become a prisoner trapped in the house, the nursing home, the body, the mind. Each of these circumstances become for us a moment when we can serve and encounter Christ himself in the person in need.

As I say all this, it makes me reflect on what I do as your pastor, and also of course in my own care of my Dad. But I want to offer this as a challenge for us together as the body of Christ. Are we paying attention to those in need? Who can we welcome? Who can we visit? Who can we give the gift of our presence? And for those who don’t know where to start, why not approach one of the others at church who does and see if you can tag along.

I want to return to Jesus’ words, “Do this in remembrance of me”. Holy Communion is where our acts of remembrance meet God’s remembering of us. Dementia is scary because it means we forget the story of our lives. Family and friends remember and retell those stories and so hold who we are. But in remembering Christ, our story is caught up in God’s story. We find who we truly are as we find our place in his story. And so when we come together to remember Christ at his table, that act of corporate remember also holds the story of who we truly are, even when we forget. As we remember Christ, so we also proclaim that before and after we remember we are held by the God who remembers us.

Let me finish with this hymn by James Montgomery.

⁸ Matthew 25.35-36

According to thy gracious word
In meek humility
This will I do my dying Lord
I will remember thee

Thy body broken for my sake
My bread from heaven shall be
Thy cup of blessing I will take
And thus remember thee

Can I Gethsemane forget
Or there thy conflict see
Thine agony and bloody sweat
And not remember thee

When to the cross I turn mine eyes
And rest on Calvary
O Lamb of God my sacrifice
I must remember thee

Remember thee and all thy pains
And all thy love to me
Yea while a breath a pulse remains
Will I remember thee

And when these failing lips grow dumb
And mind and memory flee
When thou shalt in thy kingdom come
Then Lord remember me.