Memory, shared narratives and the perils of exclusion

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We will remember them. At the going down of the sun and in the morning, on the TV and on the radio, in magazines and newspaper pullout supplements, in documentaries and at the cinema, at conferences and during weekend re-enactments, in schools and in churches, before war memorials and, of course, at the Cenotaph: we will remember them.

And we have been remembering them, for many months already. 'It's still ages 'til war is actually declared', a friend recently remarked to me, somewhat sheepishly, 'and already I'm fed up with Great War retrospectives. Heaven alone knows what I'll feel like in four years' time.'

The British do remembering. 'It's clear that many of us in Britain are in love with the past,' remarked Ian Hislop at the start of a recent BBC series. 'We relish "harking back".' This is incontestable. Behind biography (and, of course, cookery), history dominates the non-fiction shelves in bookstores. It's big for documentaries.[1] And, if done rightly on the screen, history is a veritable philosopher's stone, turning the base metal of ordinary source material into epic, panoramic, cinematic gold. We certainly do 'the past'.

But, as Hislop went on to observe, very often 'it's not so much history we're in love with as something rather less true, but just as powerful: "the olden days".' It's a category instantly recognised by anyone under the age of ten (its precise historical dates are from when your parents were young to about 10,000 BC) but it retains its power – the power of a 'heightened, idealised, imagined past' – well into adulthood. 'It's often what we want to believe happened,' Hislop noted, 'rather than what really happened.'

This is the cue for a long-running and acrimonious debate about history: what happened, what it means and, above all, how we teach it. The argument runs like this. Once upon a time, history was '1066 and all that'. History and history lessons were of the 'Our Island Story' variety in which brave Britons defended themselves against bullying Romans, Good Kings (the capitalisation is essential) beat Bad Kings in battle, 'Right but Repulsive' Roundheads fought 'Wrong but Wromantic' Cavaliers, and nations rose to the Top before they fell, except for Britain which somehow mysteriously – providentially – stayed there. Those who can remember such lessons are increasingly of pensionable age, though the idea lives on in Sellar and Yeatman's witty parody.

The problem with it, so the counter-argument ran, was not just that it was wrong (though it was) but that it was sinister, a manipulative fairytale intended to keep top dogs top by writing the great mass of humankind out of history. Real history, so it was argued, was history from the bottom, history of the forgotten millions, through whose struggles, rather than those of Thomas Carlyle's Great Men, society was slowly, hesitantly transformed for the better.

This might only ever have dug trenches in university history faculties were it not for Orwell's now oft-quoted observation that he who controls the past controls the future. The historical narrative according to which we choose to live today will shape Britain's tomorrow, and our present narrative is bequeathed to us in large measure from history lessons, books, films and documentaries. Thus education, hardly a politics-free zone at any time, gets particularly heated when it starts looking back. Witness

Michael Gove's passionate interest in history teaching and the development of a new history curriculum intended to recapture the full sweep of British history, without succumbing to 'sceptered isle' style of yesteryear.

Remembering is political. How we conceive and narrate our past – whether nationally, locally or personally – has a direct impact on the life of the polis, on how we live together today. The debate about teaching and learning history is not a storm in a teacup. It's a storm in a landscape. It matters.

Specifically, it matters whether we tend towards the narrative of shared memory and collective identity, or towards the narrative of struggle and conflict, of oppression and minorities. Those who favour the first insist that without common narrative we become divided, rootless, vulnerable. The best basis for mutual self-interest is a sense of belonging together. The best defence against hostile identities is being sure of your own.

Against this, those who favour a more analytical, more self-critical, and more conflictual history insist that the common narrative approach exists only at the cost of exclusion and readily devolves into the tyranny of the majority. The stories of those who do not fit – the social underclass, denominational minorities, people of different ethnic groups, women – are suppressed.

The frustrating fact in all this is that both parties are on to something. While there are undoubtedly eccentrics at both ends of the spectrum – those for whom the monarchy embodies national liberty and those for whom it embodies, what Polly Toynbee memorably called during the 2012 Jubilee, a 'spiritual tyranny' – there are plenty more who are less given to hyperbole and they need to listen to one another. And perhaps also listen to the Bible, for this was a live question for Israel, and for the early church, and one that negotiated with particular sophistication.

Remembering in Old Testament

There is an awful lot of remembering in the Bible. The command to remember is fundamental, not only to God's people but to God himself.

God is a God of covenant, and covenant is a form of self-binding that is made real in history. Following the flood, God establishes a covenant with Noah, his descendants and, importantly, 'with every living creature that is with you'. This he promises to remember, and never again to let the waters 'become a flood [that will] destroy all life' (Genesis 9.10). Abraham is engaged in a similar way. It is God's remembering his covenant with Abraham that stands alongside the groaning of the Israelites as the source of the Exodus (Exodus 2.24). When the escape plan goes wrong, it is again to the memory of Abraham (and Isaac and Jacob) that Moses appeals when he pleads with God to overlook the wickedness of his people (Deuteronomy 9.27). Later on, at the dedication of the Temple, Solomon speaks of his father in the same way, as he entreats God to 'remember the great love promised to David your servant' (2 Chronicles 6.42). God reveals himself as God in his remembrance of things, and promises, past.

But there is a flip side to this. For if God is entreated to remember his promises to and rescue of his people, that people only exists through his action. Israel may 'struggle with God', but without him they would not exist. Put another way, failure to remember God is failure to be Israel. It is to loosen the joints of their body politic, to untether the nation not only from its origins and history, but from its purpose and identity. Israel exists by remembering what God has done and who God is. This is the narrative of shared memory and collective identity *par excellence*.

Thus, the people of Israel are called to remember their slavery in Egypt and their rescue from Egypt; 'what the LORD your God did to Pharaoh' (Deuteronomy 7.18) and 'how the LORD your God led you all the way in the wilderness' (Deuteronomy 8.2); the commandments he gave them and 'the Sabbath day by keeping it holy' (Exodus 20.8) It is by remembering all this that Israel remains Israel.

Of course, they fail in this, spectacularly and consistently. They do manage to remember the food they had eaten in Egypt – a suspiciously healthy diet for slave workers but, then, the memory does play tricks in the wilderness. But they too readily forgot what it was truly like there and how God rescued them. For Israel, to forget God is to forgo identity, purpose and common life. It is a form of death.

Remembering in New Testament

The act of remembrance is central to life of the young church in two striking ways.

The first is in how remembrance of Israel's history situates and explains who Jesus is. If there is an original Christian sin, it surely lies here. From the end of the first century and certainly by the time of Marcion of Sinope in the mid-second century, Christians sought to divorce Christ from Israel, digging him out of the narrative flow in which he lived and taught and died and was resurrected him. Here were the first incisions of the anti-Judaism that so grimly scars Christian history.

From the Magnificat on, when Mary places her charge firmly within the mainstream of God's promises 'to be merciful ... to Abraham and his descendants forever' (Luke 1.54–55); through Jesus' description of his teaching vis-à-vis the law, 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them' (Matthew 5.17);[2] all the way to the manner in which he explains the events of the first Easter to Cleopas and his friend by opening up the Scriptures to them: all of this grounds the new things that God does in Christ in the things he did of old. Remembering for the early church was similar to remembering for Israel.

Similar but not identical: for the second and arguably foundational act of remembrance in the New Testament, the Eucharist, points to the sharp turn the narrative takes in Christ. Christian understanding of the Eucharist is sadly occluded by the vigorous and one-time violent disagreements between denominations about how we should understand this act. But shining through those clouds is the very fact of remembering itself: 'do this in remembrance of me' (Luke 22.19; 1 Corinthians 11.24).

NOTES

1. As I write, the BBC have series on the Wild West, the Georgians, the Crusades, the Empire, the Vikings, and the lost cities of the ancient world, to name only the most high profile.

2. Matthew places these words front stage in the Sermon on the Mount.

3. Perhaps the earliest surviving Christian document outside the New Testament.

This remembrance of Christ in the Eucharist veers the narrative away in a new (and surprising) direction, where God's promises, his covenant, his remembrance of Abraham, of Moses, of David find new meaning and significant in his actions in Christ. In all fairness, and for the sake of the historical accuracy we began with, it is important to point out that by the time of Christ there was no single comprehensive narrative to veer away from. Narrative ends were already badly frayed by the pressure of (yet another) foreign occupation. Nevertheless, this does not materially affect this second act of remembrance. To remember Christ in the Eucharist is to take the long-standing (and essential) remembrance of God and to turn it into something new.

Narratives of inclusion

All this should make it abundantly clear that the narrative of 'shared memory and collective identity' is central to the entire biblical story. But it invites the attendant question, the challenge that stands before all such narratives. Why doesn't this narrative simply become one of exclusion? Isn't Israel's shared memory and collective identity bought at the price of alienating others? Both testaments offer answers to this.

Old Testament Israel certainly does have a cohesive and arguably comprehensive shared narrative, but it is grounded in the nation's (remarkable) 'immigrant' identity. God's call to Abraham to 'leave your country, your people and your father's household,' marks him with the identity of the stranger, something that Abraham acknowledges when arranging for Sarah's funeral (Genesis 23.4). The writer of the letter to the Hebrews discusses at length how it was Abraham's willingness to forsake his land and culture and to travel as an alien amongst strangers that defined him made and made him an example of how to live by faith.

Israel is then born as a nation of refugees, from their time in Egypt and through to the settlement of Canaan. Of the former time, Jonathan Sacks has remarked, that this was the period in which the Israelites learned 'from the inside ... what it feels like to be an outsider, an alien, a stranger.' Of the latter, even once the nation was settled, it is repeatedly reminded of its origins. 'You yourselves know how it feels to be aliens, because you were aliens in Egypt ... Do not ill-treat or oppress a foreigner, for you were foreigners in Egypt ... you shall declare before the LORD your God: "My father was a wandering Aramean" ... We are aliens and strangers in your sight, as were all our ancestors' (Exodus 23.9; 22.21; Deuteronomy 26.5; 1 Chronicles 29.15).

This is the counterbalance to the (potential for) exclusion inherent in the collective narrative. Given this insistent emphasis on their intrinsically 'alien' status, it is not entirely surprising that the Hebrew Bible commands the Israelites to love the stranger in no fewer than 36 places. On the verge of Canaan and nationhood, Israel is told, in stark and deflating terms, that 'the land must not be sold permanently because the land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants.'

Yes, Israel has a shared narrative and collective identity. Yes, the act of remembering is fundamental to who they are. Yes, to betray that memory was to betray their identity and purpose. But that shared narrative and collective identity was one of alienation; that act of remembering one in which they recalled their neediness and rescue (and, latterly, disobedience); their identity was one of aliens and strangers; and their purpose was precisely to include and heal, not exclude and deny.

A similar point may be made of the New Testament. The early church is called to remembering precisely the same narrative of alienation, rescue and repeated, constant loving help that formed Israel. The different direction on which it is taken serves to underline all these points. What Christians remember in the Eucharist is an act of triumph but it is a triumph of love rather than the kinds of triumph the Romans celebrated after victorious campaigns; an act of sacrifice, of inclusion so wide it tears Christ apart.

In one respect, this heralds the end of Israel's exile: God decisively meets his people, all people, in the cross. As Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus, Gentile Christians 'are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of his household' (Ephesians 2.19). In another, however, that simply makes them feel all the more like strangers *on earth*. 1 Peter makes it clear that, whilst no longer being strangers to God, Christian believers remain strangers in the world, a claim that recurs throughout the epistle: 'Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To God's elect, exiles, scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia ... live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear ... as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires' (1 Peter 1.1,17; 2.11).

This was a theme central to the post-apostolic Church's understanding of itself. In the introduction to his so-called first letter to the Corinthians,[3] Clement of Rome begins (literally translated), 'From the Church of God which is transiently sojourning in Rome', and in doing so uses a technical term that denotes temporary rather than permanent residence. In a similar fashion, the anonymous writer of the slightly later Letter to Diognetus declares: 'Though [Christians] are residents at home in their own countries, their behaviour there is more like that of transients; they take their full part as citizens, but they also submit to anything and everything as if they were aliens.' This is, again, a cohesive narrative and identity, but one based on being an outsider in receipt of hospitality and grace.

Conclusion

This, then, is how the biblical story manages to combine the two ideas of remembering with which we set out. The shared story is fundamental. Denying that is not to be 'radically inclusive'; it is to be radically divisive. But *what* we are remembering is no less fundamental. The narrative of unity, of coherence, of victory, of (the wrong kind) triumph is, indeed, exclusive and potentially oppressive. But a memory of vulnerability, of shared need, of (the right kind of) triumph can allow us to develop an identity and celebrate a past that humanises us in the fullest way possible.