

## Remembering

The second chapter of Luke presents us with a marvelous series of stories. As I think back these stories about the birth of Jesus seem to have always been a part of me. I can remember listening to them at home and in church when I was a little boy. And that's the aspect I'd like to focus on in these stories: the place of memory in the life of a religious person. This starts in verses 22-24 with a cultic act of remembering.

And when the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every male that opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord") and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons" (Luke 2:22-24).

In their deep and direct faith the parents of Jesus do for him what the law required. As a first born son he must be redeemed, that is presented to the Lord as his own, and received back, recalling the deliverance of the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt, when only the first born sons of those who had celebrated the first passover supper had been saved from death. In this act of remembering Jesus and his parents are caught up in that great event of Jewish history, of their history. Right then it is happening again within them, for Jesus is *the* first born Son, and what started

ages before pointed to this day. Balancing this ritual form of remembering is a much more private form. Towards the end of the chapter we see Mary who "stored up all these things in her heart." Here we have the picture of Mary turning over in her heart these things about her son, going back to them, trying to penetrate their deep meaning. We see a heart open to the great mysteries of God's love playing through these events of her life. Both types of remembering were a part of Mary's way of being open to the mystery that surrounded her.

When I let these stories get at me, I know I have to follow Mary in this, but I scarcely know how to do it. So much of my life is running from one thing to the next that there is little time to reflect on what has and is happening to me, to be still and try to see the deep meaning to things. Even when there is time I tend to run from it in panic because I do not know how to deal with it. This kind of frenzy is a large part of the neurosis that grips my living and yours. One of the ways this works itself out is in a forgetfulness of our own history. I am hiding from my painful past; or I am out of touch with my deep but elusive past. Because of that I live in a fog. I really don't remember or understand where I came from, I can't see where I am now, and I drift vaguely into the future.

C. S. Lewis can jar us, provoking us to live in a less forgetful way. In *Out of the Silent Planet*,<sup>1</sup> which is the first volume of his space trilogy, his hero, Dr. Ransom, has wound up on Mars and is having a conversation with Hyoi, who is a *hross*. They are talking about pleasure and man's need for it, indeed his selfishness in seeking it.

Ransom says:

"Is the begetting of young not a pleasure among the *hrossa*?"  
(*Hrossa* is the plural form of *hross*.)

"A very great one, *Hman*. (*Hman* is the *hross* word for man).

This is what we call love."

"If a thing is a pleasure, a *hman* wants it again. He might want the pleasure more often than the number of young that could be fed." It took Hyoui a long time to get the point.

"You mean," he said slowly, "that he might do it not only in one or two years of his life but again?"

"Yes."

"But why? Would he want his dinner all day or want to sleep after he had slept? I do not understand."

"But a dinner comes every day. This love, you say, comes only once while the *hross* lives?"

"But it takes his whole life. When he is young he has to look for his mate; and then he has to court her; then he begets young; then he rears them; then he remembers all this, and boils it inside him and makes it into poems and wisdom."

"But the pleasure he must be content only to remember?"

"I do not understand. A pleasure is full grown only when it is remembered. You are speaking, *Hman*, as if the pleasure were one thing and the memory another. It is all one thing . . . . When you and I met, the meeting was over very shortly, it was nothing. Now it is growing something as we remember it. But still we know very little about it. What it will be when I remember it as I lie down to die, what it makes in me all my days till then—that is the real meeting. The other is only the beginning of it. You say you have poets in your world. Do they not teach you this?"

This can get us going. His suggestion that we only gradually come to a true realization of what has happened to us, and that really it hasn't finished until we have spent our whole lives mulling it over and discovering what that has meant, how it has changed us down through the years, rings true with me. It brings me back to Luke's gospel and the stories I have known since I was a little boy. When you and I start to listen to these stories about Jesus and Mary in this new light, then we begin to see that these events were not over and done with right there. They keep changing and developing as Jesus and Mary turn them over in their hearts. This

means the exodus wasn't over and done with in 1200 B.C., or whenever it happened. It reverberates right down to the presentation of this first Son. Its real meaning keeps unfolding. No one in 500 B.C., then, could possibly understand the full significance of the exodus, simply because it was still unfolding. And when Jesus, as the gospels tell us, took up that same passover memorial and interpreted his death in terms of it, that unfolding reached a new stage. But the mystery is still unfolding in history as you and I and countless others are infolded into it. As you and I begin to remember this in the story, the Lord is drawing us into his huge mystery. We can sense something of how all of this is my history and yours. The first born Son draws us into his destiny, and his mother and her deep way of remembering is a model for us.

The image of Mary turning things over in her heart points me toward my own history. She invites me to discover for myself that the deepest truth of events is only revealed gradually. Their effect is worked in us over a long period and their real meaning keeps unfolding. If I am to be in touch with them I have to keep remembering them; I have to keep turning them over in my heart. As I listen to Mary doing this in the story my mind starts to wander back over my own journey. I think of the time recently when I was with two friends and we were listening to the radio as it played the hit tunes from past years. The year 1962 came up and to their huge merriment I off-handedly remarked, "Oh, that was the year I finally decided that Camus was wrong after all." That brought me back to one of the turning points of my religious life. At that time I was struggling towards adult faith. The possibility that we were all alone in the universe was terrifyingly real, as was the deep hope that all I had been taught about God was true. That afternoon sitting in my

room is still so clear to me, when I realized I really did believe, and that I had to give my whole heart to this Father who loved us. But it is only now, as I remember that, as I have so often returned to it and my final resolution of it, that I can see the pivotal stance of that in my life. Indeed, it was only gradually that I came to see all those difficulties as the hidden but real graces they were. And yet that final resolution is not a dead thing. It is part of me. In a real sense it is me, and it is still unfolding. By remembering it and its continuing life in me I can start to see what is at the very heart of my life, and where and how God moves me.

Listening to this story another time I am reminded of a time in college when I stood at a railroad station waiting for a train to take me home, and in God's wisdom my whole world fell apart and was put back together, all in a moment. Then there is a flood of memories. I recall the gentleness of my father after I had ruined one of the family cars and I told him how sorry I was; and all he ever said was, "I knew you would be." Then there was that time in the seminary when I was given a copy of *Seeds of the Desert* by Rene Voillaume. His call to follow Jesus was so stark that I couldn't go with him, but it rang so true that I couldn't let it go either. It shattered my comfortable little world, only to become the book I lived on for eight years. Now I try to share it with my students. Or there was a friend's invitation to start reading John of the Cross. Gradually all these events start to form a pattern, the pattern of my life. As I recall them I start to see the journey of my own life unfolding through all of it, and I'm caught by the sheer grace of it. This kind of prayerful remembering allows you to see what you couldn't see at the time, namely these struggles, these decisions and risks, the people you met, these were not just accidents. Only later on, as you carefully recall your elusive past, can you start to see what

was really happening. As you see it you are free to accept it more fully and enter into it more completely. Just as Hyoui knew that he could only see the full import of his meeting with Ransom as he remembered it at his death, so I cannot yet see the full meaning of my baptism and ordination. Their real significance is still unfolding, and I won't be able to see them in their fullness until I look back and remember it all as I die. All of this is caught up in the still unfolding meaning of the exodus and resurrection, and in my remembering I see flashes of that.

Then there comes the time when you begin to see that your friends are doing the same thing. They, too, are constantly going back over the events of their lives as they more and more attempt to come to grips with their journeys and the way God has been working in them, weaving together their failures and sacrifices into a life of faith. When you start to share that you get a deeper insight into how unique each story is, but you also start to see the parallels. As you listen to your friends it starts to dawn on you, "But that was like the time . . .," or you think, "That's what that meant." You see your own life illumined in the experience of the others. Getting a deeper sense of the journeys your friends have been on helps you remember your own more accurately. In seeing their lives, and the mystery of it, and seeing how God was gracious there, and time again in one's own life, we learn to live in the present with deeper hope and trust. We have a deeper sense of God's presence in our lives and even when we can't understand what is happening we are more able to trust, as we recall how risk has been transformed into gift in the past. We are learning to live the way Mary did.

This remembering can be very awkward when it brings us back to our painful past. Then we have to learn to forgive

the past, not forgetting but remembering differently. Many people live with great scars. They feel they have been betrayed, harmed, perhaps irreparably, by family, their education, their religious formation, their nation. These events of their past have estranged them from others, from life itself; and they are deeply resentful of the things that were done to them. Sometimes they are also ashamed and angry with themselves that they let this happen. Very often the result is that they cannot let the past go. They do not forget it but bury it deeply within, where it smolders. They brood. The ancient wrongs keep destroying the present. This is killing, for it lets the evil of the past unfold into the present and continue to contaminate their lives.

Our hearts need to be freed; these devastatingly painful memories need to be healed. This would be a liberation for which we desperately long. But how? In these stories Mary gives us a hint. Living within this story, I can't help but think that Simeon's prophecy that, "A sword will pierce through your own soul," stayed with Mary; and her confusion over the losing and finding of Jesus in the Temple was a premonition for her. In my own confusion and dismay I try to open my heart to her heart beneath the cross. How did she open herself to the mystery of God's love even in the shattering events of her life? I don't know. But I know from her that I, too, have to learn this kind of simplicity that leads to real wisdom. Somehow the figure of Jacob comes to mind.

Jacob was a crafty, sometimes ruthless, sometimes cowardly man who thought he knew exactly what he wanted out of life: a beloved wife, sons, land, posterity. But as you work into the story you start to sense that God is working something even deeper in Jacob's life, something that transcends the human vision, and certainly the goodness of Jacob himself. The invitation given again and again to Jacob

is to trust in God so much that he would hand over the control in his life, especially in the areas of his chief concerns, to God. This is precisely what he is reluctant to do. Time and again his fears and insecurities, his cunning and deception, push him to seize control. He tricks his brother. He fools his father and lies to him. He is always calculating, scheming to get what he wants, desperately hanging on to what he has already gotten. He fights with his brother and father; he tangles with his uncle; his wives and sons are caught up in it. He even wrestles with God. That seems to be the underlying theme. Jacob does love and trust his God; but he also wants to control his own life. He is afraid to let God really take over. So he fights him. This has to remind us of ourselves; we, too, wrestle with our God.

Looking at the same story, but from the perspective of what God is doing allows us to see it quite differently. God takes the mixed up events, even the sins, and writes them into his story. Jacob lies to his father and fools him and in that way receives the blessing intended for his brother. But the blessing is given and it abides. Because of that he has to leave home. That leads him to where he is tricked by his uncle Laban. That in turn is taken up by God and written into the story. The rivalry between Leah and Rachel leads to Jacob's fathering twelve sons, and they become the twelve tribes of Israel. Even the treachery of the sons against Joseph leads, in God's wisdom, to their salvation. Still much, if not all of this, is beyond Jacob's vision. When his sons come back from Egypt asking for Benjamin, Joseph's full brother and the old man's joy, as he thinks, the only remaining son of his beloved Rachel, he doesn't want to let him go. He doesn't want to lose him. He cannot see that not only will he not lose him, but he will get Joseph back as well. God has to force him out of his grip.



When Jacob finally comes to Egypt there is a great scene as he meets his long lost Joseph.

Joseph had his chariot made ready and went up to meet his father Israel (Jacob) in Goshen. As soon as he appeared he threw his arms around his neck and for a long time wept on his shoulder. Israel said to Joseph, "Now I can die, now that I have seen you again, and seen you still alive" (Genesis 46:29-30).

Letting these words seep into me I begin to wonder if there hasn't finally been a great change in Jacob. Seeing Joseph and all of his sons, he finally seems to see how God has been faithful all along. He can finally catch something of the careful way God has always been with him. Here at the end of his life he can look back on it and be reconciled to it. He can stop fighting.

After Jacob dies and is laid to rest with his forefathers, Joseph's brothers come to him.

His brothers came themselves and fell down before him. "We present ourselves before you," they said, "as your slaves." But Joseph answered them, "Do not be afraid; is it for me to put myself in God's place? The evil you planned to do me has by God's design been turned to good, that he might bring about, as indeed he has, the deliverance of a numerous people. So you need not be afraid; I myself will provide for you and your descendants." In this way he reassured them with words that touched their hearts (Genesis 50:18-20).

Joseph is so simple that he can see the deep things of God. He doesn't forget what has happened—even how his brothers betrayed him—but he can forgive the past and in that he is free to see this deeper truth. As we open our hearts to Mary and this Joseph, son of Jacob, we are being invited to live in the same deep way: forgiving the past, not forgetting, but remembering differently. It was Mary's sense of being loved that let her do this, and it seems that this

was also present in Joseph's life. This seems to have dawned on Jacob when he finally saw his lost son, freeing him to stop fighting. As we inhabit these stories we too begin to sense that it is the One who loved them who also loves us and who invites us to open our hearts to forgive the past as they did.

<sup>1</sup>C.S. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*. N.Y.: Macmillan. The section I will quote comes from pp. 72-73.