

The land where all things are forgotten

My mother is good at remembering the things of my childhood I would prefer to forget. She has ensured that my children have a full picture of my infant failings. Like my ill-considered question to Auntie Barbara and Uncle Raymond as I felt the end of our visit was approaching; they always gave us a generous parting gift, never coins, always a large note. So it just seemed natural to follow up our scoffing of the last piece of Victoria sponge by asking 'can I have my money now please?' It was not a comfortable return journey in the car that day.

The passage of time and greying of hairs means that I don't mind telling you that story now - I can laugh at it with you. But there are many other things I would not to tell you. I'd rather they were forgotten. Thankfully the Almighty has a selective memory – that's where we began Lent, with the God who chooses not to remember: 'I will remember their sins no more.' But there is a price to be paid for things being forgotten, for forgottenness is a void, empty space, something rubbed out, leaves of the tree of memory withered and blown away.

Shall thy wondrous works be known in the dark : and thy righteousness in the land where all things are forgotten?

The land where all things are forgotten is darkness, the end to which the Psalmist – realist that he was – saw that we were all moving. The modern scientist predicts the same for the whole universe in a few billion years: heat death, the descent of everything into a uniform and faint twilight where everything is levelled out into one uniform universe of nothingness, where there is no one or no thing left to remember anything. The land where all things are forgotten.

And, as we age, we all become more forgetful as though we are all drifting towards that end. For some, increasing numbers because of our ageing population, that forgetfulness is more acute and is diagnosed as Alzheimers or some other form of dementia. Perhaps they are a sign to the rest of us of the destiny of all of us, the leaves of memory progressively withering, dying, being blown away in the autumn of our lives. Is that not the end of us all? And what is happening to our loved ones? Are they still with us? Some carers suggest that there is a time when to all intents and purposes their loved one has gone, is no more. Is the capacity to remember essential to our very beings; can we reach the state when so many of our leaves have gone that we have gone too into that dark land where all is forgotten?

'Some things are best forgotten' we say. As God chooses to remember our sins no longer so do we show similar acts of merciful forgetfulness to others. Remembering can become a weapon against someone; the act of remembering demonstrating the failure to forgive, that long ago action of our husband or wife that we always bring up as a weapon to beat them with when we have run out of other arguments. So it is good to choose to forget sometimes; it is merciful and loving. But if we keep having to forget is there a danger that in the end we rub out not just small parts of people from our memory and consciousness but the essence of them; perhaps there comes a time when either we must either live in condemnation of them or we have forgotten them. Perhaps that's the divine dilemma – to condemn us or to forget us - or perhaps in the end it comes to the same thing: we are condemned to the land where all things are forgotten. Is that what Hell is? And is that potentially the destiny of all of us?

The bare tree

The coming

And God held in his hand
A small globe. Look he said.
The son looked. Far off,
As through water, he saw
A scorched land of fierce
Colour. The light burned
There; crusted buildings
Cast their shadows: a bright
Serpent, A river
Uncoiled itself, radiant
With slime.

On a bare
Hill a bare tree saddened
The sky. Many people
Held out their thin arms
To it, as though waiting
For a vanished April
To return to its crossed
Boughs. The son watched
Them. Let me go there, he said.

R S Thomas

St Irenaeus was amongst the Church fathers who enunciated the principle that what Christ did not assume in his mortal flesh cannot be redeemed or healed or saved. For us to be saved he had to become one like us, one of us, with the same flesh and blood. He had to share our human experience and frailty. Irenaeus saw this symbolised in what he called Recapitulation; that the things that went wrong in the Old Testament and old dispensation were revisited in the new. So, for instance, Christ is the second Adam, Mary the new Eve, and the tree that led to death becomes the tree on which Christ is crucified to bring us to life. So man is redeemed, woman is redeemed, even the tree is redeemed: all that went astray is recapitulated and becomes the instrument of salvation.

‘Let me go there, he said.’ Jesus chooses to enter into all the brokenness of human experience and redeem it, heal it, save it.

Shortly before and shortly after Christmas two beloved former members of this church family passed on to what I am now going to call the land where all is remembered. They were both well into their nineties; Gordon as frail as anything but his mind as sharp as ever (in my last visit we discussed one of the Brain Cox’s programmes on cosmology). Betty sadly has lived with several years of progressive - or should I say regressive – dementia. They were an absolutely devoted couple and so it was a touch heartbreaking that there came a time when she couldn’t remember their home or life together in Fen Road but only her childhood home – for which she craved. But she always recognised Gordon, I’m glad to say. She even, I’m pretty sure, recognised me – and our last act together was to pray and I’m quite sure her soul and body stilled at that moment when she was otherwise in some discomfort. But if she had lived longer I am sure she would have forgotten who I was and then forgotten who Gordon was and somewhere along the way even forgotten who God was as her autumn took away all the foliage of her memory and recognition. Reduced to a bare tree.

It was a bare tree that Jesus assumed, that he bore, that he gave his life to and on; a tree stripped of

life, April having given way to October. And there Jesus entered into the land where all things are forgotten. 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' He can no longer see God and God no longer remembers him.

But in the midst of it, St Luke tells us, a man who would otherwise have soon been forgotten, a man who had done things in his life he perhaps would rather have been forgotten, a man turns to the person being executed alongside him and says 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.'

The night before he died, Jesus's last instruction to his followers was to do something to remember him by. And so we do. Week by week we break the bread, we pour out the cup, in remembrance of him. We keep his memory alive by what we do here and so do millions around the world. We remember him. I confess that I used to think it one of my most irksome tasks to do this in memory of him in nursing homes where most of the congregation were barely aware of what was going on, where many were living with dementia and might be in distress wailing or in some other way not quite being the model worshipper of my dreams. But it is amazing you know that when I get to the words of consecration now how extraordinary it feels to me and what a privilege, and what a right and sacred place to do it – remembering Jesus for and with people who can barely remember their own name. And yet you come to that point of the great 'Amen' and then attention that has wandered everywhere and voices that have so far joined in nothing can be heard together praying from memory 'Our Father who art in Heaven' and then I give them something to eat and drink and only the most far gone of memories does not know what to do then: eat, drink in remembrance of me.

We remember Jesus but the promise to the penitent thief is that at the end Jesus will remember him. I sometimes think that that is what Heaven is, to be remembered by God, for to be remembered by God is life, it is to be re-membered, put back together, rebuilt, renewed, with all parts functioning as they should. Re-membering is resurrection. It is God's will for us, his end for us, but it is not automatic: there is a land, I fear there has to be a land, where all is forgotten, but there is a land where all that should be is remembered, the land that Jesus calls Paradise.