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Remembering Rightly (John 21. 15-19)

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I find Anzac Day difficult – and this year’s 100th anniversary extravaganza particularly difficult. I feel overwhelmed by the senselessness and appalling waste of the First World War – the desperate tragedy of millions of young lives slaughtered seemingly blindly and for no serious reason, epitomised for me in the poetry of Wilfred Owen, the film *Gallipoli* and in stories told by my grandparents of blighted lives – mothers and fathers, sweethearts and shell-shocked returned soldiers. My grandparents lived as far as from the Western front as rural Western Australia, yet even here, the war ‘raged’. These are wounds and sorrows that cry out for acknowledgement and remembrance. And yet, at the same time, I find myself uneasy, unsure about our commemoration of this tragedy– about the rhetoric, the way grief and memory are increasingly packaged as entertainment, and co-opted by political power.

And I wonder, what does it mean to remember something like this? How can we remember – rightly, honestly, even, could it be possible, redemptively?

The word ‘remember’ is important. It’s not just about retaining memories, slices of history, ‘lest we forget’. It’s to do with making whole, integrating – to remember rather than dis-member. Remembering is intrinsically connected to healing and the restoration of identity. In the aftermath of war or trauma, remembrance is a response that seeks somehow to integrate a terrible rupture, a wound. It keeps the living connected to the dead – think of all those memorials in every town and village, with their heart-breaking rolls of names; it tries to hold and make sense of what seems senseless – telling stories, creating narratives. It seeks to redeem the suffering

of the past as some kind of resource for the future. And all this seems necessary and good. So what am I uneasy about with Anzac Day?

In a nutshell, I think it is to do with aspects of the *character* of our public remembrance and so its capacity to contribute authentically to healing, maturity and compassion in our national life. So let me try to unpack that a bit.

I've said that remembering matters because it's to do with healing and wholeness – salvation. For individuals, as Rowan Williams has said: 'If the whole self is the concern and the theatre of God's saving work, then the past of the self must be included in the scope of this work'.¹ Salvation, transformation involves knowing myself at deeper and deeper levels, being restored or opened to the full truth of myself – including my past. This *can* be a painful process – recovering memory of abuse or trauma, owning the truth about ways I have diminished myself or others, acknowledging failures, disappointment, shame and regret. But it's only this process of re-membering that can liberate me, ultimately, from being a fugitive or exile in my own life, and open up a different future. The same is true for communities and nations – it's why history which tells the truth about what is honourable and what is shameful in our past is intrinsic to the possibility of national integrity and freedom.

But there's something critical also about the *way* we remember, the way we tell the story of our past. It's not just about a truthful historical record – which is of course necessary – but what we make the past mean about ourselves and others in the present. There are people who make of a painful childhood a license to continue living as a victim, refusing responsibility and manipulating those around them; there are national communities that make remembrance of past conflicts and injustices justification for continuing enmity and even atrocities.

This question of *how* we remember is raised powerfully by theologian Miroslav Wolf, who suffered what he describes as 'a mid-level form of abuse' at the

¹ Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel*, revised edition (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2002), p.23.

hands of the Yugoslav army. He was not physically tortured, but he underwent prolonged, psychologically humiliating interrogation about trumped up charges which carried with them the threat of imprisonment effectively without trial for 8 years. Wolf 'remembers' what happened to him – how could he forget it? The question he asks is: how to remember rightly? How to remember so as to open the possibility of healing – for himself, and potentially also for others? He writes: 'it seemed to me that there were so many ways in which I could remember wrongly ... I could remember masochistically ... by remembering only those things from the incident that make me displeased with myself. Or I could remember sadistically, guided by a vindictive desire to repay evil for evil'.² But 'how should we remember for our memory to foster flourishing?'³

This is an extraordinary question. Wolf is not asking how we might massage a version of the past, so we all get to feel OK about it, or avoid its true horror. Rather, he is asking – how can I hold the truth of my experience open to healing, such that even this can become an occasion of grace and new life? This is what the risen Jesus asks Peter to do – to remember his betrayal, his three-fold denial – in the context of forgiveness and the promise of continued relationship. And in that context, remembered in that way, Peter's acknowledged and forgiven failure becomes the source of a new identity and vocation for him. It's not a return to innocence – as if the past had never happened. But from the perspective of Peter's new understanding of himself and his vocation, this shameful, painful past is held in a different way, its remembrance neither clung to or avoided, but now part of a bigger self, a deeper humanity.

So, if this is what remembering redemptively means, then how does it speak to our Anzac remembrance? Well, it seems to me that there *are* signs that we are remembering in ways that deepen our collective humanity... most notably the fact

² Miroslav Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), p.11.

³ Volf, *The End of Memory*, p.20.

that the Anzac story is not told to engender continuing enmity with the Turkish people. To a remarkable extent, our countries remember each other's losses and trauma. This is a sign of hope – of new identities and growth in national maturity.

There are also less encouraging signs – although it's not so easy to articulate them. I sense a growing sentimentality and faux solemnity in our relationship to Anzac Day – epitomised by the commentary on commercial TV and recent tele-movies. There seems a growing tendency to co-opt the experience of those who suffered as a badge of national identity or pride, something that political and military leaders trade on and deploy. This is memory grasped and clung to as possession, fixed and unchanging, ever more rhetorically solidified as the years go by. Redemptive remembering, by contrast, cannot become self-satisfied or sentimental – because it involves being with the past such that we may be drawn into a more truthful and authentic future, never complacently settled, but maturing and continuing to grow.

The witness of the apostles is that our past – personal and communal – can be redeemed, can be made somehow a source of deepened life for me and for others. This doesn't mean that suffering is justified by the 'good' that flows from it; nor that suffering will come to an end. But resurrection means there is no experience that can't be transformed in the context of Christ's forgiveness and continued call. Memory that is not held against this horizon is always liable to become closed, fixed in patterns of either self-justification or self-destruction. Re-remembering in the light of resurrection is different. It's a work of contemplation and conversion – being with what is, waiting on God, trusting that new life can rise from death. It's a practice of redeeming the past through patience and attention, through faith, hope and love.

And this brings us back to Anzac Day. If we are to remember rightly those who suffered and died 100 years ago, they require of us – not sentimental and vacuous emoting, not a fixed narrative of national pride, but truthful engagement with the past in such a way as to deepen and expand the possibilities of the present. They

require of us the continuing transformation of features of national life that are still pervasive and that led to their being slaughtered like sheep – things like political evasion, systematic mendacity and sometimes cruel disregard for those least able to protect themselves. Now that would be an Anzac remembrance healing for us all ... and worthy of them.