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Anthony Gittins

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“Do this in memory of me”

Anthony Gittins CSSp

As we all know, the Church in our day is in critical need of inspiration and enlightenment and that this must come from the Holy Spirit.

I want to start with a prayer, a kind of responsorial psalm and your response is, “Come Holy Spirit and show us what is true.”

In a world of great wealth where many go hungry and fortunes are won and lost by trading in money...

R. Come Holy Spirit and show us what is true.

In a world of easy communication where words leak between continents and we always want a picture to illustrate each item of the news...

R. Come Holy Spirit and show us what is true.

In a Church that speaks a thousand accents divided over doctrine, creed and ministry, more anxious for itself than for the gospel...

R. Come Holy Spirit and show us what is true.

And in a Church touched by the flame of Pentecost may it move to generous sacrifice and costly love, interpreting the will of God with new insight...

Every single priest-presider completes the consecration with these words: “Do this in memory of me.” Certainly at this particular point in the Eucharistic liturgy, it applies to the consecration, to the consecrated bread and wine.

When they gathered in the upper room, it was the feast of the Passover which for the Jewish people down to our own day is a feast of remembering. So Jesus and his apostles gathered to celebrate the feast of the Passover and to celebrate his first Mass. Jesus is asking to be remembered. He’s trying to ensure that he doesn’t get forgotten. He says, basically, if you remember me then you’ll remember who you are. If you don’t remember me, you won’t remember who you are, or what you’re about and you won’t know why. So the first real issue is that Jesus is asking to be remembered. He wants his memory to last through generations.

The opposite of remembering is forgetting: if you don’t remember, you forget. And if you don’t remember there’s a great danger you might dismember. How many of us remember our grandparents? How many of us remember our great grandparents? And how many of us remember our great, great grandparents? What is going to happen, of course, is that over the generations there’s not going to be anybody left who actually remembers. And the first thing that Jesus wants to do is to be remembered by somebody. Then the question is, where is the memory? It might be in photographs. It might be in poetry. It might be in all kinds of things. But the memory needs to be kept alive.

Ancestor veneration

This reminds me of societies all over the world that have enormous respect for the ancestors. One of the major issues about ancestor veneration is that it keeps alive people who are dead. So when you gather together for an ancestor veneration or an ancestor ceremony there are a couple of different things that happen. One of them is that you call out the names of the people you can remember. And the oldest people, maybe, have the furthest back memories. So, all kinds of names will come up. And many of the young people won’t remember some of the people that the old people remember. But when their names are articulated people will say, “Okay I don’t actually remember that person but I know that somebody does. So, I remember because they remember.”

Then when all the people who are present have remembered all the people that they remember, what happens to the people that none of them remember? So there’s a kind of a prayer that goes up and it essentially is, “and for all those whom we now cannot remember we remember them too.” And we have that in our liturgy for those who have gone

before us marked with a sign of faith. So what we do in our liturgy is we remember the living and we remember the dead.

In societies that have ancestor veneration, they know that the community is composed of the unborn and the living and the dead. And there needs to be a connection between the unborn and the dead. The connector is the living. The job of the living is to keep in mind the people who have gone before, marked with a sign of faith, and to try and live the way they lived. And then to bring on the next generation, the generation that is unborn, so that they come into the same family and they learn the values and the virtues from those who have gone before.

The Last Supper

So, the idea is that if I am one of the living, I am receiving from those who have gone before me and I’m transmitting to those who are going to come after me. And then we try to remember who we are as a people, as a nation, as a tribe. And we remember who we are by virtue of remembering where we came from, whom we are descended from. And that’s what

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Jesus is trying to do at the Last Supper. He’s trying to say, “I want you not to forget me.”

So, what he’s going to do is he’s going to recapitulate his whole life. He’s got them for one last time and they’re very, very slow these guys. They’ve not been learning very well at all. And Jesus is going to go through his life and say to them, “Okay, do you remember this? Do you remember when I called you, Peter and James, and John and Thomas and Matthew? Do you remember what you were doing? Do you remember what life was like then? Do you remember what it’s been like since? Do you remember why things have changed so much in the few years, the few months since I’ve known you? Because I’ve been trying to teach you something and trying to show you something and I want you to do this. And remember me when you do it. Don’t do your own thing. Do what I’ve shown you. Do what I’ve taught you. Do what I’ve commanded you to do.” Jesus said, “Don’t eat yet. I’ve got something else to say to you. Do you remember this? Do you remember that?”

So I can think of Jesus at the Last Supper saying, “James and John and Peter, do you remember when I took you up the

mountain for the Transfiguration when you were so slow to understand? Do you remember a long time before that when the Holy Spirit came down at my baptism and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Beloved Son?” And they’ll go, “Yeah, yeah. Yeah we remember that.” And Jesus will say, “No, no you don’t. The voice then said, ‘This is my Beloved Son. Listen to him.’ Why? Because you hadn’t been listening. You hadn’t been listening. I want you to listen. I want you to remember.”

Remembering

Jesus has recapitulated his life in order to forge a memory, the memory of what Jesus showed and what Jesus taught them. And that way, if they remember who Jesus was they will remember what discipleship is. Discipleship is not just doing something for Jesus or doing something for God. It is God doing something for us and calling us to do not just what we want to do. And the only way that we can do what God is calling us to do is to remember, to remember who God is for us. To remem-

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ber who Jesus is for us. To remember what Jesus has taught us. To remember what we have learned and what we have failed to learn. So, the Last Supper is an hour or two hours of Jesus saying, “Remember, remember, for God’s sake, remember. For my sake remember. For your sake remember. And then go out after I am gone and do this and that and the other thing. Do it all in remembrance of me.” That’s remembering.

We become dismembered

Failure to remember is forgetting. Failing to remember will lead to dismembering. And Jesus is concerned that very soon after his death they will go in so many different directions. They will run away. They will be scattered. They will be dismembered. And there’s only one thing that will bring them back and that’s the memory of Jesus.

So what happens throughout the history of the Christian church and the Christian experience is that for a variety of reasons people scatter. People go away. People say, “I can’t take this anymore. This is driving me crazy.” And we become dismembered.

In the world today there are more than 40,000 denominations, all of whom call themselves Christians. This is the body of Christ dismembered.

So, one of the things that Jesus is doing the night before he dies is saying, “Don’t let this happen. I pray, Father, that they will be one, you in me and I in them. And that they always will be one and not dismembered.” So he’s trying to call them together to be all part of one body and not separated, scattered to the four winds. Holy Thursday, the Last Supper, is this recapitulation of his whole life so that days and weeks after the death and resurrection of Jesus they’ll be able to say, “Remember that night? Remember that last supper before he died? Remember how powerful that was? Remember how that made us know who we were and, therefore, who we are to be now. Then let’s do this again, periodically. Let’s gather around the table again. Let’s tell the stories again. Let’s read the stories. Let’s remember the life of Jesus and then we can do this in memory of him.”

Jesus is recapitulating his whole life so that our lives can be a recapitulation of his life. The question is how do we, two thousand years later, remember? We remember in two kinds of ways. We remember through the Eucharistic Sacrament. And we remember through the Eucharistic Thanksgiving. So, we’ve got two words: Sacrament and Thanksgiving.

The people to whom Jesus’ command applies is not just the Twelve, not just those in the room for the Last Supper. It is to anybody who will come after — all those who are embraced by God’s call.

Hear, listen, use your ear

And God’s call goes right back to the very beginning of the Israelites, the Hebrew people, who were called to observe the commandments of God. The call is the Great Shema, the great rallying call of Deuteronomy. It starts with, “Hear O Israel. Listen O Israel. Use your ear.” The defining characteristic for the ancient Israelites was having ears. That’s all it meant. This Shema was an appeal to their ears, to anybody with ears, to come and listen. And then they could go and do holy things.

So, “Let these words I urge on you today be written on your heart. You shall repeat them to your children and say them over to them, whether at rest in your home or walking, or lying down, or rising. You shall fasten them on your hand as a sign and on your forehead as headband. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”

Talk about remembering. That’s how you remember. You talk about it. You tell it. You repeat it. You write it. You fasten it around your arm. You fasten it around your head. It’s very difficult to forget if you do all of those things. We too are left with this call, “Hear O Israel” — pay attention.



Parable of the Sower

Many years later, Jesus comes along, to people who have not listened, to people who have forgotten, to people who don't know who they are. And Jesus starts again with the same appeal: "Listen, you people." When Jesus starts his public life the first parable that he gives in Matthew's gospel is the Parable of the Sower. This parable is all about listening. Jesus is trying to explain to people that if only they would listen they would know what to do. And if they knew what to do, then they could go and continue to do holy things. But the people don't listen. They said to Jesus, "So why do you tell them parables?" And he said, "Well some of them just want to be entertained. Some of them just want to hear a story." And he said, "The problem is that some people have ears but they don't listen." So he said, "They have shut their eyes for fear that they should see with their eyes or hear with their ears or understand with their heart or be converted and healed by me. But blessed are you," he says, "because your eyes see and your ears hear."

Now this is the very beginning of his public life where he's kind of flattering them a little bit saying you're good, you're listening. But from then onwards it's quite clear they're not listening and they're not good. And so they have to constantly come back and say, "Excuse me, what did you mean? What did you mean? What did you mean?"

We all know that the parable of the Sower is something that's pretty self-evident. It doesn't need a whole lot of explanation. Jesus has just told them this parable and told them that they are privileged people and therefore, they obviously, understand it. Yet they say, "Excuse me. Could you please explain the parable to us just one more time?" So Jesus, very patiently, goes back and explains the parable. He does so five times! "Listen, listen, listen, listen, listen; ear, ear, ear; hear, hear, hear."

"When anyone hears the word without understanding it, the evil one comes and carries it off. The one who hears the word and welcomes it with joy is the one who receives it on patches of rock where it cannot take root. The one who receives it in thorns is the one who hears the word but the worries of the world and the lure of riches choke it and he produces nothing. But the one who receives the seed in rich soil is the one who hears the word and understands it; the one who yields a harvest now a hundred fold, now sixty, now thirty."

So, what Jesus is doing is calling people to listen to his words, to watch his actions and then they'll know how to do this in memory of him, the whole lot of it. ■

Part Two of Fr Gittins' Mission talk will appear in the Summer 2012 issue of *Spiritan*.