

National Cathedral, Washington DC

September 11th 2009

REMEMBER ME:

A MEDITATION FOR 9/11

It is an honour and a privilege to be with you here in this wonderful Cathedral tonight and on this special, if poignant, day. As Dean of King's College London in England, I want to thank you for inviting our Chapel Choir to sing Evensong here and for asking me to speak upon what we are doing in our worship as we remember the events of Sept 11th eight years ago – and many other memories. And it is this theme of remembering that I want to reflect upon with you briefly tonight.

I remember first seeing the profile of this extraordinary building on the Washington skyline a few years ago when I was attending a conference of biblical scholars down in the town – and my regret that the conference programme did not allow enough time to come up here to visit. So when I spent the spring term as Visiting Fellow at Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria, I came to the Cathedral a number of times to join in the worship and to visit my friends, Canon John Peterson and the Dean, Sam Lloyd. We remembered times we had met before, being in Jerusalem with John Peterson and working with him in London on the Anglican communion, whereas with the Dean, I recalled how we had met at the University of the South in Sewanee Tennessee where he was chaplain, when I was chaplain of the University of Exeter. I was exploring the possibility of the call to become Dean of King's, while he had just been called to a new ministry in Boston, from which of course he came to here. And so our relationship in the present grew out of our shared memory – and thus remembering the past goes forward into new possibilities for the future, like my coming here to speak today.

It is similar for our tour with the King's College Chapel Choir – for it is giving us plenty of opportunity to meet alumni and friends of the College – and it is good to have some of you here with us in the Cathedral tonight, and I, together with Prof Richard Trainor, our Principal and President, look forward to meeting you afterwards. It may well be that hearing our choir sing will bring back memories of being at King's and our worship in the Chapel at the Strand there – and you will remember many other things about your time in London, I am sure.

Meanwhile, for the current members of our choir, this North American tour will be really something to remember in the future, as we have sung at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Duke University (where they have been enjoying 'southern hospitality'), and then we go on next week to New York and Boston. You see, remembering such things together gives us a relationship in the here and now. Memory is what forms our identity. We are who we are because of what we have been and done in the past – and what we remember, affects who we are and what we do in the present, and stretches out into the future. That's why remembering and recognising all we have said and done is crucial, as in tonight's Psalm, that confession of Psalm 51, which the choir sang tonight through the extraordinarily poignant setting by Allegri, *Miserere Me*, 'Have mercy on me, O Lord'.

So it is right that an anniversary like 9/11 is an occasion to remember the events of eight years ago, and all those who died or suffered, and its continuing consequences for us all today. It is one of those 'photographic moments' where we all remember where we were and what we were doing on that day. I remember chairing the pre-term meeting of our Chaplaincy team at King's when someone told us to turn on the computers – and we watched the images coming in of the planes going into the Twin Towers in New York and into the Pentagon here in DC. Fairly soon, we decided to stop our meeting early – for I wanted to go home to be with my young daughters coming home from school in the middle of what was our afternoon, just to find some comfort together. I also remember frantically trying to phone my friends at Trinity Church Wall Street, next to the World Trade Centre, wanting to find out how they were, and trying to contact Archbishop Rowan Williams who was visiting and teaching there at the time – and for a day or two we did not know

if they were still alive. A couple of years later when I was giving lectures in New York, I was visited Ground Zero with a clergy colleague who had been a Chaplain to the crews who were clearing out the site over the following months, I heard how every time they found part of some human remains, they would call her and she would go and pray with them. On one occasion, they unearthed a single hand with carefully manicured nails and wearing beautiful rings; from these rings they were able to identify the lady, and contact her husband, so that he could bury her remains. Although she had been dismembered through the tragedy, he could re-member her through those rings and his memories. Similarly here in DC, there is the Chapel at the Pentagon, with all of its benches to remember all the victims who died there, especially the children who were in the building. I remember the world-wide wave of sympathy for the USA at the time – but also how all of our subsequent decisions about military action in Afghanistan and Iraq have now polarised people around the world. You see, those memories of eight years ago still affect us today, and whether we like it or not, how we remember those past events shapes the world in which we live now and what we are trying to do for the future. And so we are back to my main point, that our memories provide our identity, and what we remember, affects who we are, and what we do here and now.

Thus it should not be surprising that remembering plays a crucial role throughout the Bible. The ancient Israelites are told to remember many things to affect the way they live day to day: for example they are commanded ‘to remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy’ (Exod 20.8) or to remember the Passover and their liberation from slavery as a way also of having pity on others who suffer, and to ensure that they never treat others the way they were treated in Egypt (Exod. 12.14; Deut. 16.3). Of course, how this text and that Exodus event is remembered now has profound implications for today, and all that is going on now in the holy land of Israel and Palestine, and more widely throughout the world, how those who were once victims treat others when they are in power. Throughout the Bible, various individuals ask God to ‘remember’ them at key moments, like Samson before he recovers his strength and pulls the house down on himself and the Philistines (Jdg 16.28), or the

childless Hannah asking God to remember her and grant her a baby, who grows up to become the prophet Samuel (1 Sam. 1.11). Similarly Nehemiah ends his account of all he has done to rebuild Jerusalem by asking God to 'remember me' as a consequence (Neh. 13.31). In response, the biblical narrative often begins new ventures by saying that 'And God remembered' Abraham, or Rachel, or whoever – and then did something (see, for example, Gen. 19.29; 30.22). Above all, God is depicted regularly as 'remembering his covenant' with his people (Gen 9.15; Exod. 2.24; Lev.26.42; Ps. 106.45, etc).

Equally in the New Testament, the gospels note the way that, after his death and resurrection, the disciples 'remember' what Jesus said or did, even if they did not understand it at the time (eg Jn 2.17, 22). At the heart of our Christian faith and worship is the eucharist or the holy communion, which Jesus commanded us to do to 'remember' him, as we break bread and pour out wine in remembrance so that we might receive the grace to live for him today and in the future (Lk. 22.19; 1 Cor.11.24-25). And lastly – but most importantly for tonight's theme – of course, there are the final words of the dying thief on the next cross 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom' (Lk. 23.42).

But I have to admit that, these days, my memory is not what it used to be. I suppose that comes with being a Dean, that you find yourself failing to remember things as well as you once did! My children - or my students - get exasperated with me when I repeat something which I have already told them, or fail to remember to do something which I had promised. It is as though my memory is already full up – like my computer's hard drive. I wish I could go out and buy a new memory stick to insert into my head, or an upgrade to give my brain more memory space! That is why watching a loved one slip into senility or Alzheimer's Disease is so terrible – because along with the failing of memory goes the loss of identity. We are who we are because of what we remember, and as we forget who we are, so we lose that sense of self. Even more upsetting is the failure to remember '*whose we are*'* – those key relationships which make up our identity as someone's husband or wife, child or parent,

friend or lover – those who go on remembering us even when we have forgotten them, re-membering those who have been ‘dis-membered’, having forgotten their identity in the web of close relationships. That is why, for me, the prayer of people in the scriptures to God to remember them is so crucial – to go back to the words of the penitent thief, ‘Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom’.

You see, even if our memories are fading through lack of brain space or increasing years, they are saved as God remembers us, and all we are. All that we say or do, what we remember, and the relationships that make us members of one another, are stored in God’s hard drive, if not in ours – and his memory space is infinite. You see, this sermon began life back on a static computer on my desk back in London – yet I was able to save it on a memory stick, and bring it with me over here, a place where my desktop could not go, yet that saved memory enables me to give it new life as I preach it to you here and now. So too, God saves and stores our memories in his infinite data bank – and he can rewrite them in our new and eternal existence with him, in the resurrection where we will be fully known as we have known, and understood as we understand (see 1 Cor. 13.12).

So, all those memories which we evoke on this day, the memories of the events of 9/11, the Twin Towers and the Pentagon and Flight 93, the remembrances of those who died or suffered on that day or in the conflicts subsequently – and all our other memories, for our choir of this tour, or for our alumni and friends of King’s College London – they are all stored as part of the memory of God, now and for ever. In the End, we exist not because we remember things, but because God remembers us, and holds us in being, sustaining us in his memory. And as God remembers us, so he re-members us, makes us members of one another in the Body of Christ, and re-makes us in the new life of the age to come, when Jesus comes into his kingdom. So the challenge for us both on this special anniversary, and yet also through every day, is to work out what we want to be, and to do, that we would like to remember, and what we would like God to remember, now, and in all eternity.

And to that same gracious and forgiving God who remembers us all and in whom alone we find our identity finally, be all might, majesty, dominion and power, now, and throughout the ages of ages, Amen.

* See David Keck, *Forgetting Whose We are: Alzheimer's Disease and the Love of God*, Abingdon Press, 1996

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Dean of King's College London