

Lent V (C)  
Isaiah 43.16-21; Philippians 3.3-14; John 12.1-8  
St. Paul's Church, Halifax  
25 March 2007

**“FORGET IT!”**

~Paul H. Friesen~

‘Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old,’ said the prophet Isaiah. Forget it!

Come again?

‘Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.’ You know, the bit you just heard, about the Lord making a path of deliverance for the Israelites through the sea: it’s ‘old hat’.

Isn’t that a bit much, coming from a prophet? The Israelites had been told, over and over, to remember the Exodus. The remembering had begun as soon as the chariots of the slave- drivers had sunk below the waves. Moses, the greatest of the prophets had sung the great song of deliverance with the men. Miriam, the prophetess, had with the women of Israel echoed Moses’ song with voices and tambourines and dance.<sup>1</sup>

The ‘former things’ were the very words of the introduction to the Ten Commandments: ‘I am the Lord your God who brought you up out of the Land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. [Therefore] you shall...and [therefore] you shall not...’<sup>2</sup> The great deliverance was not forgotten in the annual Passover celebrations. It was rehearsed by Moses’ successor, Joshua, and by Nehemiah, the prophet of the restoration, and in the Psalms.<sup>3</sup>

And Isaiah, by the way, had just reminded them of the Exodus before he told them ... to forget it.

But how could they forget?

It would be as if a Christian preacher got up and said: Remember Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday? Remember the Eucharist? Well, forget it. We’re moving on now. There’s no need to look back on the ugly details of our past when the future beckons. In fact some Christians have argued: let’s ‘tweak’ the words a bit. Let’s not talk so much about the blood, and the death of our Saviour on the cross. Or let’s get right beyond the Eucharist and into the victorious, hopeful life. Christianity is all about faith in the future. Let’s begin

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<sup>1</sup> *Exodus* 15.1-21.

<sup>2</sup> *Exodus* 20.2-3.

<sup>3</sup> *Joshua* 2.10; *Nehemiah* 9.11-12; *Psalms* 77, 78, 89 and 106.

with Easter, with the smell of the ground after the rain—let's launch forward with the new birth, with new life. Let's cut our losses.

But this sort of thinking doesn't really ring true for the Church, nor can it for long. It is true that the author of the book of Hebrews did tell that community it ought to 'leave behind the basic teaching about Christ'.<sup>4</sup> But he didn't mean its members should 'get over it'. He meant, rather, that they should grow in spiritual maturity on the basis of the basics, in the strength of God's action in their lives.

There was a great danger that they might want to live the rest of their lives on the basis of the one great thing they thought God has done for us at one point in their life—likewise, that we might put our one great event in the museum of our spirit and continuously tour that spiritual exhibit, rather than lean into God's future for us.

Isaiah was aware of this and so he urged his neighbours to think that God could work deliverance again, that just as he delivered them through the Red Sea from Egypt, so he could bring them across the desert out of Babylon where they were wasting away.

Yes, said the poet in our Psalm (126): 'I can almost see it, I can almost imagine we have already been delivered.' We like they need to reckon with the tears, with the weeping of the Psalmist, before we can rejoice, before we can make any sense of the new thing God has promised to do. And so we confess our sins, as the collect for Ash Wednesday puts it, at the same time that God 'creates and makes in us new and contrite hearts.' To step forward with Isaiah is not to ignore the blessings of the past, but in humility to confess that God will bless us again, that God will deliver us again.

St. Paul understood what Isaiah meant when he said: 'Forget it!'

When he wrote his letter to the church in Philippi he took them through a brief tour of the blessings in his own spiritual museum. He had every reason to be confident, he said. As someone once put it, it was 'as though Paul were numbering [all seven reasons] ...on the fingers of his hand':<sup>5</sup> 'circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness under the law, blameless.'

To his young apprentice Timothy, St. Paul simply called himself 'the chief of sinners', at the end of his rope.<sup>6</sup> But here the Apostle first reads out his spiritual resume, composed of four spiritual blessings he inherited, and three spiritual accomplishments he could claim. His resume, though full of God's mercy and

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<sup>4</sup> *Hebrews* 6.1

<sup>5</sup> Ralph Martin, in *The Epistle of Paul to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), p.141.

<sup>6</sup> *I Timothy* 1.15 (*King James Version*).

his own faithful responses, he said, he had learned to count as refuse, as rubbish when it came to what mattered in the great crisis of his life, when he collapsed on the road to Damascus. What mattered, to the Apostle? 'To know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death,' so that he could share in Christ's resurrection.

When it comes to our spiritual journey, of becoming like Christ on the way to our spiritual home, we ought to look forward into God's grace that carries us rather than backwards into our past faithfulness—this is what St. Paul said.

Have you brushed up your own resume recently? I have thought recently of my first resume, not written by myself, but by my kindergarten teacher. I re-discovered it a few years ago. It is succinct and memorable, if I may quote it: 'A little slow, but moves well to music.' The perfect qualifications for a priest! [Actually, my wife as a woman would affirm the first judgment simply because I am a man like all men; but deny the second because she once attempted to take dance classes with me.] But it is hard to laugh off resumes that we count on. We all need them to help us persuade potential employers that we are the right person for their future.

It is true that our life's work matters, and that our performance as a parent or a sister or a friend should not be forgotten. When it comes to the future of human relationships one cannot say; I've done my thing, that's it. But when it comes to moving forward in a relationship, past love can't guarantee a future. It is quite the same when it comes to our spiritual life, our Christian journey. This is why the Apostle, like the prophet said: 'Forget it!'

'Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Jesus Christ.' This was Paul's description of his own life and, at the same time, his advice to the whole church.

Today's Gospel, in a wonderful way, brings us to the same conclusion, and helps us prepare for Holy Week. The disciples could not bring themselves to come to terms with Jesus' future because it implicated them, and their future. In other Gospels the woman is unnamed, and all the disciples protest, not Judas alone. In all accounts of this story the problem is the same. Mary is looking ahead. She knows the moment of Jesus' death is at hand, and is not distracted by insincere public relations gestures to feed the poor. The poor, in general, await her ministry. But she has let her future be carried into the future of Jesus Christ.

What Mary's worship would become in the following decades is revealed in the ministry of the church to the oppressed and the distressed in the book of Acts. But at this decisive moment in her life and in Christ's she turned her eyes to the passion of Christ, to his suffering and death. She leaned into the future by

anointing Christ's body before it was prepared for burial, we later read, by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus.<sup>7</sup>

To hear the call of Isaiah, and St. Paul, and above all of Jesus, to 'forget it' is not a call to unfounded optimism. The future is sometimes very difficult to lean into. But we confess, as Christians, that God awaits us beyond every personal future, every future of the church, every scenario about this planet and humankind—we confess that 'God's kingdom has no end.'

'I am about to do a new thing,' said Isaiah. It will take your breath away so much that you will almost forget God's goodness and your own thankfulness in the newly revealed grace of God that will sweep over you. So look for it!

What new thing is God about to do in this ancient building, and in our parish house? What new thing is God about to do in this congregation, in this parish? What new thing is God about to do in our spirits and our bodies? Whatever age they might be, God's grace awaits us.

As we walk forward into Holy Week, next Sunday, what will we be thinking? The best thing to do might be to read over this wonderful story about Mary, so loved by Jesus among all his followers.

St. Augustine, after he had read today's Gospel, about Mary's forgetting the past said: 'Now the house was filled with fragrance; the world was filled with good report.'<sup>8</sup>

May our fragrance proceed us we worship Christ in the sacrament of the Eucharist today. May we forget our past only as we see God's great new work of Christ this coming week.

*Amen.*

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<sup>7</sup> *John 19.*

<sup>8</sup> *Tractate 50 in Tractates on the Gospel of John: 28-54*, trans. John Rettig (Washington: Catholic University Press of America, 1993), p. 264.