

Some of you may remember Tony Morrison’s powerful novel and film *Beloved*. Among other things, it is a story about the lingering effects of systematic racism and personal brutality on a family. It seemed to me that one of the points of the story is that the “ghosts” of past trauma can far outlive their memory, and continue to distort lives in the present.

So why do we do that? Why do we forget, sometimes systematically, the TRUTH about the past? The truth about ourselves? Perhaps the memories are painful or unpleasant. Maybe they are confounding, confusing, or misleading. And so we attempt, quite understandably, to protect ourselves. We do this for any number of reasons – but this kind of forgetting has its costs.

Maybe at the heart of this forgetting is a belief that we ARE our memories, and if these memories are damaging, then we ourselves are somehow damaged. The ghosts of past trauma can have a way of depriving us of our BEST goals, or even our BEST selves. It is at that point that the prophet Isaiah invites the empty-handed and the broken hearted to come to a feast... to delight in God’s abundance... to remember joy. Three times Isaiah tells his people, who are refugees, to LISTEN to God’s invitation, and FOUR times he tells us to COME TO GOD. Regardless of any previously unmet desires, or any present needs, regardless of any bitterness over the past, Isaiah calls them into an incalculable benefit and an inscrutable risk: a covenant with God. And the only thing he gives them to go on, is the memory of a shepherd who became a king - David.

Well of course, we might say, THIS is the kind of memory that should NOT be forgotten. But then, not many of us have memories that measure up to THAT standard of history! THAT, however, is NOT the vision of the psalm we read, because the psalmist knows that God has entered OUR lives and memories, that somewhere in OUR past God was there upholding us; that our own past is even part of salvation history, and our own stories might also be redemptive. But they can only BE redemptive when we understand what these stories, what these memories are for: they are for compassion; they are for sustenance – and not ONLY for ourselves, but as the psalmist says, “for every living creature.”

We may rail against our past or our burdens, remaining inwardly focused – bowed down as the Psalmist says. Before it can be fruitful or redemptive, our memories, CAN BE FEARSOME, or scary. Whatever has confused, or shamed, or hurt can leave us battered, and feeling very small. And this diminishment can come with the corrosive suggestion that we don’t have anything to offer. Eventually, we may believe that this is simply “how the world is.” At that point, we will find ourselves in the company of the disciples in today’s Gospel, who said to Jesus – about themselves - “We HAVE NOTHING HERE!”

Thank God – for the sake of every creature that ever lived – that the story did not end there! For we hear that Jesus was not afraid of deserted places; places of introspection, places of RISKY REMEMBRANCES. Where the disciples only saw a DESERTED PLACE, with “NOTHING THERE” – Jesus saw something else. Where they saw only burdens, he saw PEOPLE. Where they saw only demands, he saw COMPASSION. Where they saw NOTHING, he saw a feast.

So Matthew’s story contains this redemptive memory. For Matthew, Jesus brought sustenance out of our empty places, our barren imaginations, and our

broken hearts – but he could ONLY do it when we gave him our “NOTHING HERE’s.” It is only in offering Christ our APPARENT emptiness and pain that Jesus redeems it, and finds an ABUNDANCE where there is not only enough for us, but also enough for us to SHARE.

In the certainty of this knowledge, Paul plumbed the depths of HIS memory, and spoke of his anguish that the people with whom he shared his past would not share his future. When Paul wrote these words he was NOT exaggerating. He was broken hearted. He knew that the Roman Christians who read and heard his letter ALSO had regrets and broken ties in their past. Some of those memories were fresh, and some quite old. But what he also knew, was that the TONIC for healing our hearts is CHRIST JESUS. He says he knew, he was CONVINCED, that NOTHING in the ENTIRE UNIVERSE can separate us from the LOVE WHICH CREATED US!

Today’s scriptures teach us that we must go to those desert places in our lives, and offer to God our “NOTHING HERE’s” so that God’s compassion WOULD become “something here.” When we offer to Jesus the burdens of our hearts, the bottom of our barrel, our last two fishes and loaves of bread: that is when God’s feast can truly begin.