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Memory, Readiness and Forgiveness

Last December I was hospitalised when my back broke down and any movement was agony. Eventually I was discharged after a procedure, and gradually resumed 'normal' life, including walking, eventually, without crutches.

The other day I was grumbling about various reductions in my physical abilities, and my wife pulled me up short by reminding me of my previous total incapacity.

And I again felt gratitude to God and the various kind and skilful people of the NHS who had helped me. I needed to be reminded of my previous debilitation - just as God's ancient people needed to be reminded of their wonderful liberation from slavery in Egypt.

It's this benchmark of normality that is such a decisive factor in our happiness - and in our faith.

Have you noticed how many people are fixated upon a return to a pre-pandemic normality?

They are determined to resume foreign travel, holidays in the sun, and the accoutrements of a wealthy lifestyle; eating out, convenient transport by car, vying to find the nearest parking space so as to save a few walking paces, aeroplane flights, convenience shopping for imported goods and foodstuffs.

They speak from a sense of annoyed entitlement, and are slow to adapt to the massive planet-wide changes we are experiencing.

By my reckoning, as a consequence of several factors, including the pandemic, Brexit, environmental degradation and rising poverty in the UK, many leisure activities will be beyond the purse of many of us in the coming days - and a new norm will have to be accepted.

But I'm not on doomwatch, even though I think our condition is grave. What I want to share is the need for us to change our expectations of the norm, and maintain our faith, and swim against the discontent that many already feel, and which is likely to provoke waves of dissent and upheaval. There is already some talk of a repeat of the 2019 riots.

The key to all this is preparation.

The parables of the wise and foolish bridesmaids and the talents in Matthew 25¹ remind us of the risks of complacency. The story is not only about the return of our Bridegroom, Christ Jesus; it also reminds us of a general principle of readiness, which requires forethought and prudence.

This is why we remind people of the need to be ready, in this Age of Documents, with wills and LPAs and Advance Directives; and why we focus attention upon preparations for old age, so that no one is caught out by failing health or distance from help and loving friends and relations.

But even more, we remind older people of the need to give attention to the inner journey. We recognise that readiness in the later stages of life often means that what once gave us strength now no longer holds us steadfast.

All of which brings me back to my first point, which is that the benchmarks set by our memories often deceive us.

What is the use of our dwelling in the past if it makes our present miserable? It is not only that we can no longer do in the physical realm what we once could. It is also that we hark back to golden moments, and in so doing miss out on the more frequent instances of silver and bronze- even copper, to stretch this metaphor!

And the comparisons between those golden moments- often inaccurately recalled and embellished by rose-tinted spectacles - and our perceived current condition, renders us distraught and discontented. In short, we lose our peace.

The remedy is mindful gratitude, and mining deeper into the moment. Dare I suggest that many older people make the mistake of living in the past, and are often encouraged to do so by well-meaning friends and neighbours?

Living in the past, dwelling on lost beauty and old accomplishments do not help us prepare for our future! This can even afflict people of faith, as we discussed in our Thought for the Day on the 24th July.

Sometimes our memories turn out to be sand, not stable bedrock. ²

To repeat one quotation from CS Lewis here; ³

“And the joke, or tragedy of it all is that these golden moments in the past, which are also tormenting if we build them into a norm, are entirely nourishing, wholesome, and enchanting if we are content to accept them for what they are, for memories. Properly bedded down in the past which we do not miserably try to conjure back, they will send up exquisite growths. Leave the bulbs alone, and the new flowers will come up. Grab them up and hope, by fondling and sniffing, to get last year's blooms, and you will get nothing. 'Unless a seed die...' ⁴

Let us add one caveat.

“Forgive us our debts/trespases, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” ⁵

Even here, memory can block us. I found this further comment from CS Lewis helpful: - ⁶

“To forgive for the moment is not difficult. But to go on forgiving, to forgive the same offence again every time it recurs to the memory - there's the real tussle. My resource is to look for some action of my own which is open to the same charge as the one I'm resenting. If I still smart to remember how A let me down, I must still remember how I let B down. If I find it difficult to forgive those who bullied me at school, let me, at that very moment, remember, and pray for, those I bullied.”

Some people get very angry when driving, don't they? Rage fills them as someone else cuts them up, overtakes dangerously, fails to indicate, goes too slow, too fast, impedes their journey...Remembering my own frequent driving errors and misjudgements keeps me forgiving!

“Do not judge, so that you may not be judged” ⁷

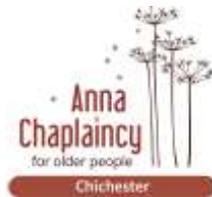
Let us pray.



Lord of All,
Let all that I was, all that I am,
And all that I will be,
Rest in your Peace,
Safe in your memory;
Wrongs saved by your Cross
Nothing good's lost,
Sharing your victory.

Love and blessings, David

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¹ Matthew 25: 1-30

² Matthew 7:24-27

³ Lewis, C.S (1960) *Letters to Malcolm, chiefly about prayer*. London, UK. HarperCollins: 35

⁴ John 12:24

⁵ Matthew 6:12-14

⁶ Lewis, *ibid*: 35-36

⁷ Matthew 7:1