

The Prophetic Ministry of the Deacon IV *A Man of Remembrance of the Promises of God*



Elijah and Ahab

Among one of the most important and extraordinary capabilities a person has is the ability and desire to *remember*. For human beings memories are about identity and building *bridges of empathy* to the past and future that connect with the present. Memories tell us who we are in relation to others. They tell us of the things we value and the hopes we have for the future. They help to hold the life of the family, religious groups, and nations together. Certain memories are transformative, *subverting* the present order of things with a message of hope in a way that points to a future different from the present.

For the people of Israel, *remembering* is essential for their relationship with Yahweh. Such remembering recalls the fact that Yahweh was the One who brought them out of the land of Egypt, that place of slavery, to the new life of freedom and nationhood (Exodus 20). In the Old Testament, remembrance serves the purpose of bringing to present consciousness the pivotal saving act of God in the Exodus experience and Israel's commitment to the covenant God made with the people on Mt. Sinai. This memory serves to remind the people that God is a God of loving concern creating new and surprising opportunities for salvation. This is a God who is in solidarity with the people and who hears their cry of complaint (Exodus 3:3-10). This is also a God who makes *promises*.

Israel's *remembrance* of the promises of God always set up a tension with the present. Promises do that to the present because a promise is a message in which God says, *I am doing something new, can you not perceive it* (Is 42:9). The promise inspires the popular imagination to believe that things can be different. So we see that there is a relationship between *remembering* and God's promises. In fact, it is the remembering of God's promises that often empowered Israel to imagine and believe that the present situation of suffering was a prelude to God's new saving act. Was this not the case for the Jewish people in the Babylonian Exile of the 6th century B.C.?

Remembering and believing in the promises of God, especially the announcement of the coming Messiah can be considered *dangerous* and subversive, as well as liberating.¹ Such remembrance points out that all is not well, that indeed, God is going to act to undermine the present situation of oppression; there is going to be a reversal of

the way things are at present. This is the memory of the liberating God who acts to save human beings from those oppressive situations in life and who calls God's people to do the same. For Christians, the memory of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the central memory for Christian faith and lived expression of that faith in a lifestyle that announces the promises made by God in Christ.



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When we call to memory the life of Jesus Christ we are summoning forth the memory of the one who had compassion for the poor, the sinner, the sick and the outcast. We are recalling the memory of the one who spoke up for social justice, who sat at table in *bad company*, who announced in his message and person the divine clemency for our sins. We are recalling the service death for all on the cross and the vindication of that love in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Such a message is a message of joy and hope. Joy and hope energize people to continually assert the value and meaning of life that point beyond suffering to God's companionship in our journey and God's healing power that keeps us on the journey.

The life death and resurrection of Jesus Christ can be a memory that is both subversive and liberating at the same time.² For when we announce Jesus Christ to the world we announce that God has and is doing something decisive for salvation in Jesus Christ. Such an announcement undermines the present situation of the temptation to despair of the world and God in the midst of our suffering. Such an announcement subverts the sometimes oppressive use of power by tyrants with a message that the oppressive order of things is not the truth and not the future. This recitation of memory is also characterized by raising up the victims of history as a critique of any person or regime who would harm God's children. In the resurrection of Jesus Christ the present belongs to the future of perfect *freedom in love* promised in God's raising Jesus from the dead. This is a liberating message for it reminds us that life and love have the last word in reality.

This being the case the prophetic ministry of the deacon is characterized by giving *voice* to the subversive and liberating reality of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Such a manifestation of this aspect of prophetic ministry is about *anamnesis*. That is, remembering the saving action of God in Christ in the past, the promise of what God will do in the future in Christ with the coming of the fullness of the Kingdom, and how that impacts on our present experience of the Lord. Certainly this comes to us in the Eucharist. Here we remember the saving act of God in the past and bring it forward into the now, while remembering the promise of the Lord to bring the fullness of the

Kingdom. So we see that the Eucharist sits in the tension of present and *not yet* of the Kingdom of God.³ This tension is given expression in the deacon's ministry which points beyond the present to the coming fullness of the Kingdom, while witnessing to God's presence in the now. The deacon is called to be a model of hope that points to the transformed future. Like Moses on Mt. Nebo, the deacon sees and points to fullness the Kingdom that will come, even if he is not on earth to see it arrive! In this way the People of God will remember that we are still *on the way*. This stimulates believers to engage in the mission of the Church working with God and others to help bear witness to the present and future kingdom of God that is on the way.

This dimension of prophetic ministry is essential to the Christian faith experience and ministry of the deacon. Remembering empowers believers to place into perspective the suffering of the present and to celebrate the presence and future of God's gracious actions. Knowing that the future is one of true justice and peace, the deacon's remembering of this promise will stimulate the faithful to work with God and others to help reveal the future of justice and peace in their work for the same in this world. We are reminded by the World Synod of Bishops in their document, *Justice in the World, 1971*, that the proclamation of the Gospel must be made manifest in transforming initiatives in our world:

Action on behalf of justice and the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the gospel. #16

The deacon is a man who announces the remembrance of the promises of God which will always call for a commitment to a transformation of our world. This transformation will be directed toward actualizing the threefold mission of the Church in proclaiming the gospel, building community and rendering service in charity and justice. A greater realization of justice is bound to produce a more peaceful world. Yet, there is a purposeful form of prophetic ministry that often gets overlooked; that is the ministry of peacemaking. That will be the subject of the next article in this series.

Notes

¹ Johann Baptist Metz and Jurgen Moltmann, *Faith and the Future* (New York), Maryknoll, 1995, pp. 16; Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology* (New York), Crossroad, Seabury Press, 1980, pp.88-99; Bruce T. Morrill, *Anamnesis as Dangerous Memory: Political and Liturgical Theology in Dialogue*, (Collegeville, Minn.), The Liturgical Press, 2000.

² Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, pp.88-99.

³ Geoffrey Wainwright, *Eucharist and Eschatology* (New York) Oxford University Press, pp. 18-61 and Anne Y. Koester, Ed., *Liturgy and Justice: To Worship God in Spirit and Truth*, (Collegeville, Minn.) The Liturgical Press, 2002.