

Fifth Sunday of Lent

Year C, 2025

Is 43:16-21 Phil 3:8-14

Ps 126 Jn 8:1-11

The remembrance of things past, nostalgia and loss

Let's begin today's homiletic reflection with the second reading from St Paul's letter to the Philippians, where he writes: "I consider everything as a loss because of the supreme good of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have accepted the loss of all things..." Paul is glad to lose all things, to accept the loss of all things, not so much so that he can have possession of Christ, but because, as he says, "I have indeed been taken possession of by Christ Jesus."

We do not take loss well. Think about it. Lose your keys, or your glasses, or your phone. What's the reaction? Bad words, frustration, anger, stomping around, banging things, and all the rest. The only thing we don't mind losing is weight. The things we want seem easy to lose. The things we don't want, it seems we can't lose.

In general, we suffer loss poorly. We are slow to accept that we have lost something. And we are slower still to embrace loss as something good, as a necessary prelude to gaining something greater, even when we know and desire that greater thing. Maybe this is why it's so hard to lose weight. To suffer even the momentary loss of enjoying food seems unbearable even though we know how much we will gain physically, emotionally,

psychologically, spiritually, and socially from that loss. Again, St Paul in our second reading displays a spiritually mature approach to loss: “I have accepted the loss of all things ... that I may gain Christ and be found in him.”

Now time is the thing the loss of which we experience on a daily basis. Time is something that we are always losing, so much so that it seems odd even to say that we *have* time. Time is something we have but cannot hold on to. The time we had just a few minutes ago when I began speaking, that moment, is no more, no longer. It is gone, passed by, lost we might say, except for the memory of it.

And we know how fragile memories are. We lose our memory. We forget. Forgetting is a failure of memory. When we forget, we lose hold of the memory of some thing that we wanted to hold on to. And if we are not exceedingly careful – and even if we are exceedingly careful – we have a disturbing way of misremembering, of remembering selectively, partially, of parsing and interpreting what has been lost to us by time, and irretrievably so. What and how we remember is often dictated by the needs of the present moment rather than by any objective, disinterested, or dispassionate recollection.

This is a wisdom expressed millennia ago by Qoheleth in the book of Ecclesiastes: “Do not say: How is it that former times were better than these? For it is not in wisdom that you ask about this” (7:10). In our own lifetimes, this is a wisdom given voice to by Billy Joel

in his well-known song, Keeping the Faith: “the good ole days weren’t always good and tomorrow ain’t as bad as it seems.”

Nostalgia is a wistful yearning for the past. Nostalgia can be sentimental and bittersweet, mixing “pleasure and pain in equal measure,” like when looking at old family photographs or home movies. Psychologically, nostalgia seems to be a desire “to experience a state of mind unburdened by what we have experienced and learned since childhood and the responsibilities we have taken on.” What the nostalgic wants is “not so much to recover something as to lose something... to flee what to them tastes like toxic knowledge about the world and themselves.”¹

Because nostalgia is always to some degree a fleeing from the present, it can be treacherous, dangerous, if indulged too long or too seriously. It can freeze us into a past that no longer exists and tempt us to try to seize what has already been lost – time itself, and the remembrance of things past – even sometimes by force and with violence. In the throes of unhealthy nostalgia, we misremember the past, romanticize it, idealize it, imagine it to be something it never was in actuality. We supercharge it with grandiose and often imaginary attributes. Excessive nostalgia can become pathological. It can hinder our acceptance of change, which is a kind of loss and a universal human experience, and blind us from seeing the good in the here-and-now, right before us.

¹ Mark Lilla, *Ignorance and Bliss*, 2024, p 191.

It is one thing to remember the past, even with fondness, and use that remembrance as a guidepost, a way marker for the present, treasuring the wisdom of the past, but it is another thing entirely to pine so deeply for the past that we do violence in the present to ourselves and those around us by trying to recapture or reverse time, to impose here and now what once was (maybe, if we have not imaginatively distorted the past by misremembering) but is no longer.

When *individuals* fall prey to this sort of nostalgia, it is a pity, as their lives, no longer lived in the wonder and joy of the present, can be given over to dark, brooding feelings of depression and despair and isolation. But when entire *nations* are seized by the dark side of nostalgia and try to recreate the former glories of their past as they might imagine them to have been, the fallout can be cataclysmic. Material and spiritual ruin are the offspring of unchecked nostalgia, the inability to accept loss and change, whether on a personal or on a collective level.

In order to cope with the loss of all things and with the knowledge that he no longer possesses anything but has become a possession of Christ Jesus, St Paul writes: "Just one thing: forgetting what lies behind but straining forward to what lies ahead." *Forgetting what lies behind*. What loss is Paul letting go of by forgetting? His boast as a Hebrew, an Israelite, a descendent of Abraham, a Pharisee, all the things of his past that he was proud of and could boast of: his heritage, language, culture (2 Cor 11:22ff); his standing and

learning (1 Cor 1:26ff); his eloquence and wisdom (1 Cor 2:1ff). All these things are behind him, and he willingly forgets them, lets them go, loses them.

Paul is not a nostalgic. He acknowledges the past. He remembers it. But he will not dwell on it or try to live in it. Nor does he wish to impose the past on the present, somehow to “vindicate” the past. No, he will *strain forward to what lies ahead*. He will *pursue the goal*. He will strive for *the prize of God’s upward calling*. And all this *in Christ Jesus*. Paul leaves behind in the past all the categories that once meant so much for him and even defined him.

All this is loss. He possesses nothing. He is now the possession of Christ. He belongs to Christ alone, not to the distant memory of long-gone past. He belongs to the resurrected Lord and the life of the world to come, not to the present age. His inheritance is not the things of this world, but “the things that are above” (Col 3:1-2), what eye has not seen and ear has not heard (1 Cor 2:9). This is why Paul “considers everything as a loss” before the “supreme good of knowing Christ Jesus [as his] Lord.” All his confidence, all his trust in is the Lord Jesus, who from his throne in glory said: “Behold, I make all things new” (Rev 21:5).

Jesus alone can make all things new, reconciling the past with the present, and he will do this when he comes again in glory. In Jesus’s words we can make out an echo of promise of renewal that we heard in our first reading, where the Lord himself spoke

through his prophet Isaiah: “Remember not the events of the past, the things of long ago consider not; see, I am doing something new!” After which, the Lord interrogates his people: “Now it springs forth” – this new thing that I am doing – “do you not perceive it?”

Here is what God is saying:

Turn your minds from the past. I *am* the Lord, your God. Not I *was* the Lord, your God. Do not look for me in the past as if I worked my mighty deeds only back then. “In the wilderness I *make* a way.” Present tense. “Do you not perceive it?” Do you not perceive that here and now, in the present, in *your* present, I am making a way for you? I made a way for past generations. I will make a way for the generations to come. And for you, *now*, I make a way. Don’t be a bitter nostalgic, yearning for what is no longer. Don’t be a gloomy futurist, fantasizing about what may never be. You, who can live only in the present, look to me, your God, for whom past, present, and future are all one. I *make* a way for you. I put water in the desert and rivers in the wasteland for you, my chosen people, to drink. I have formed you for myself for you to announce my praise.

This is what God is saying.

We should know the past, yes, and study it, and learn from it. But we must not long for it. To do so invites harmful nostalgia and risks being ungrateful for the gift that is the present and being blind to what God is doing here and now, for us, and in our midst.

“Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation” (2 Cor 6:2). Let go of the “good old days.” They no longer exist. And “do not say: how is it that former times were better than these? For it is not in wisdom that you ask about this” (Eccl 7:10). Rather, wisdom lies in this, in this *one thing*: forgetting what lies behind but straining forward to what lies ahead, I continue my pursuit toward the goal, the prize of God’s upward calling, in Christ Jesus, who alone can make all things new.

Behold, today, our God renews his mercies and his wonders. “See,” he says, “I am doing something new.”