

Thanks For The Memories (April 2017)

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By Rev Paul Graham

One of my favourite records whilst growing up was one snappily entitled “The Dinosaur Record”, a collection of child-friendly songs about those most cuddly of creatures, the long-extinct dinosaurs. With an array of children acting as chorus and backing singers, the listener is serenaded by synthesiser-backed songs ranging from the haunting “Lonely Pterodactyl”, the time-hopping “Brontosaurus, will you wait for me?” and the stomping “Triceratops Rock”. I’ve even managed to source a CD of the recording, so future generations can be equally blessed by the aural experience that I had all those years ago in Birmingham, as well as reminding me of days gone by.

This record holds a special place in my heart as it was the first time I was ever moved to tears by a piece of music. Strange as it might sound, but the final track on the album, a relatively heavy instrumental piece called “March of the Dinosaurs” used to make me well up. Full of synthesisers and electronic piano, it still evokes similar, if dry-eyed emotions today. In fact, listening to the album while writing this has taken me right back to the days when we used to play it on our old record player (an unusual model as it could be cranked down to play at a swamp-like 16rpm, the go-to speed for playing 78rpm singles).

Nostalgia ain’t what it used to be as the saying goes, possibly reflecting our thinking when looking at the current world around us. It seems that so much of life today is lived in the moment; so much of life is here today, gone and forgotten tomorrow. We have access to information all the time and we can publicise the most minute details of our lives to the widest audience possible, yet how much is retained, stored and retrieved at a moment’s notice?

As it happens, loads. This isn’t a “misery memoir”, harking back to a lost age where memories were written in permanent ink, waiting to be brought back to life at the hint of a song, a taste or the most evocative of the senses, a smell. These things matter today as much as they ever mattered. It’s just that we have more ways of storing and accessing these memories, which might make us complacent when it comes to using our own mental faculties.

And it is our gift to share these memories with others. One of the greatest privileges in ministry is hearing people’s stories: where they’ve been, where they’ve lived, who has crossed their path, what life has been like. Sometimes I get to hear these memories first-hand from the person who has lived them and sometimes they are given in tribute at funerals. However and whenever they are told, these stories are brought back to life by the teller, a unique story that interweaves with others, twining and curling within the broader landscape of world history.

Of course, I understand that with each loss we lose the detail of those stories. I sometimes learn more about relatives after they’ve died than when they were alive so I can never hear how these things made them feel, or how they would view the world today through the lens of their past. For example, I’ll never know how the world of the twenty-first century would look to my grandparents who all died before the turn of the millennium. Their ability to create their own memories died with them and the memories that they left with me will fade over the years.

Even for the living, the importance of memories may well diminish as new experiences take centre stage. For example, the memories of visiting Cambridge to stay with my grandparents during the 80s and 90s are strong, but the clarity of the images is reduced with the changing face of the city itself. Places are long gone, so no longer can I picture myself in Eden Lilley’s toy department or proudly and loudly ordering a rump steak at the Berni Inn (loudly, that is, until somebody pointed out which bit of the cow

that was). Instead, new memories are created by going to the leisure area built on the site of the old cattle market or by trying unsuccessfully to find the lion in the Lion Yard.

The changing world creates new settings for new memories, each overlapping or even over-writing the old. But the memory has a funny way of playing tricks on you. It can be a long-forgotten smell, turning the corner into what we thought was an unvisited road, even a song about dinosaurs and we're right back in the past, or what we can remember of it. Questions such as "where was I when...?" or "who were we visiting when...?" or "what were we wearing?!" are posed as the past comes swimming back to the present.

I find myself asking some similar questions when reading the Bible. I wonder how many times people would be transported back in their memories as their senses reminded them. I wonder if the children of Israel would remember the fear and anticipation of their last night of slavery in Egypt every time they smelt roasting lamb. I wonder if Noah would imagine that he could hear the cacophony of enclosed animals every time he heard the sound of thunder. I wonder if Jonah was taken back to the belly of the big fish every time he visited a port. I wonder if the disciples were reminded of Jesus every time they climbed into a boat, walked between Bethany and Jerusalem or saw a fig tree, a leper or a tax collector. So many memories, so many experiences, so many times God involves himself in humanity.

In common with churches across the world and across the centuries, we regularly remember Jesus' death and resurrection when we gather around the communion table. Each time we are not only reminded of the meal that Luke tells us Jesus desired to eat with his closest companions, but also of the eternal significance of what followed. We can also take time to draw on our own memories: other places and other people with whom we have shared communion.

At this time of year we are reminded in even more detail as we celebrate Easter, focussing on Jesus' path to the cross and empty tomb. We usually pause and focus on some of the major players in the drama of Easter. We may speculate about Judas and his justifications for betrayal; we may dwell on Peter's denial and the cost of grace that saw him restored to Jesus' side; we may see the counter-cultural message of the news of Jesus' resurrection being entrusted to marginalised women, giving them the spotlight so often denied to them by their society. At each step we think, we reflect and we see how these people's circumstances echo in our own lives and in the life of the world around us.

But what about the others, the minor characters we also encounter? Do we consider how the crowd who bayed for Jesus to set them free from Roman tyranny on Palm Sunday became those who bayed with equal force for his blood on Good Friday? Do we even consider that some of them would be in Jerusalem again some weeks later when Peter established history's first church plant on the day of Pentecost? Do we think how their memories of each of those previous events shaped their future?

Do we spend time thinking about Herod, Pilate, the chief priests, Pharisees, the guards at the foot of the cross and those at the tomb? What memories would they have of their involvement in the most significant moment in history? Did they ever even know how significant that moment was, or was it just another day at the office, another rebellion crushed, another false messiah put out of the way?

Living on the far side of the New Testament, we have the advantage of nearly two millennia of church history to begin to see something of the importance of that first Easter. The legacy of all those involved, from the fringe players to those on the main stage, echoes through history and will continue to resonate far into the future.