Empathy, Memory and Compassion

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In the book of Deuteronomy, there is a beautifully lyrical passage in which the people of God are taught concerning the offerings of first fruits and tithes (Deuteronomy 26.1-11). Moses recounts how the people are to acknowledge the Lord by taking the fruit of the ground to the priest at the temple. And as the priest lays the offering before the altar, the people are to give voice to their shared memory:

> A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labour on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. (Deut. 26:5-9 NRSV)[i]

Meditation on these words invites those who would be reconcilers to reflect on how memory and empathy are interrelated; to ponder empathy's significance as a skill or habit; and to trace out what consequence follows from either of these concerns for remembering *well*: that is, remembering in such a way that might help with practical matters of reconciliation.

As this chapter will show, to read Deuteronomy together with John's account of Jesus' encounters with Lazarus' grieving sisters (John 11.32-37) and with his disciples at their last supper (John 13.1-17) is to root this meditation in the One whose conception, birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension and continued intercession offers reconciliation now to all people and who will come again one day to judge the living and the dead. In Christ and with Christ, deep may commune with deep, and so people may know peace and blessing unavailable through anyone else.

Memory and empathy

We should think of empathy as the ability to become aware of, to appreciate, and even to reconstruct in oneself the feelings or thinking of others, to mirror to some degree their inner life.[ii] But in what way is memory important to reconciliation? And how is it related to empathy? What people remember, how they remember and how long they remember are factors relevant to the work of reconciliation: whether, for example, people are able to remember their own or others' past offences with an understanding of the impact on those negatively impacted by them; whether people hold onto or release the debts incurred by offences; whether they remember the events of the past by construing them in terms of the past and future events of the gospel – the acts of God which are both recalled and anticipated.

St Augustine spoke of coming 'to the fields and vast palaces of memory', of walking down deep in this 'storehouse' of memory, as he reflected upon his own pilgrimage with others through life.[iii] In our memories we take up or put down items of our past. We may deliberately linger on a past with wistful longing; we may work hard to push a past sorrow deep into the recesses. But often, memories are not like things we may pick up or put down at will. Rather they may come unbidden and unwelcome to our consciousness. Whether deliberately recalled or intruding upon us, memories commonly come accompanied by affective resonances – someone may hate what she recalls, another may love the one he remembers; still someone else may rejoice in the good she brings to mind; another may be horrified by remembering the destruction of that which was precious to him. Though

deliberate recall is common, memory is not a matter of simple choice as to whether or not we remember; or indeed with what affective tonality. Memories often arrive unbidden – sometimes welcome, sometimes not.

This is true for one alone; and more complexly true for several together. As one participates by memory in the past of one's own life or the life of others, one may or may not have the empathy to imagine and so to reconstruct in oneself how the past is remembered by *others*. One may or may not discern with what emotion (or affection) the past is remembered by someone else. This matters since the skill or ability to enter into another's way of affective remembering – to journey a mile or more around someone else's emotion-filled storehouse of memory – is vital to the possibility of seeing the world now *together* in the light (and shadow) of that recollection. Consider how the differing memories of the past and imaginations of the future which characterise the differences between 'traditionalists' and 'progressives' within many churches such as the Church of England are inflected by differing forms of affection: wonder, joy, lament, shame, hope, anger, disgust – to name but a few. Or meditate on the differing memories and affections of the many different groups of people around the world who are affected and afflicted by the conflict in and around Gaza to see how difficult but how necessarily interrelated are memory and empathy. Without empathy, it would be impossible to set about the practical questions which accompany the work of reconciliation. But without memory, a well-informed empathy is inconceivable.

To speak of empathy, though, raises the question of *whether* we can ever understand how another feels. The radical claim that 'no one can understand how I feel', commonly heard in the case of victims of wrongdoing, has some truth but perhaps not as much truth as our current cultural context might suggest. A culture which surrenders to the deception that people are atomised individuals, islands unto themselves, rather than inherently social members of one human species, may talk much of empathy but deny the path to its realisation. Such a culture, perhaps particularly endemic in Western contexts and in apparently 'secularised' settings, can be formed in and around churches, thus diminishing the possibility of Biblical Reasoning.

Of course, on the one hand, a defensive posture in which someone denies the possibility of their neighbour having epistemological access to their inner world may be understandable on account of the unique memory of violence suffered. Moreover, to be open to the possibility of another knowing one's own sorrows – deep with deep – is a risk some will be unwilling to take. But on the other hand, if we are to make sense of reconciliation as a shared human practice, we must reject the claim of the radical inaccessibility of others' lives. For human life is *sufficiently* generically similar as to make the radical denial of any access to others' memories and affections implausible. The creation, over which the Spirit of God hovered, was the same creation within which the Aramean wandered, recalled in the memories of the Israelites in Deuteronomy 26; and it was the same creation to which Christ came; and it is the same creation within which we now journey, often in conflict with one another, and at times seeking reconciliation with one another. Naturally in such a creation, narratival self-understanding varies. Recollections of what has happened in the one creation we share will differ. And so it will ordinarily take time to gain any degree of access to others' inner worlds.

With this in mind, and in the spirit of the ecumenical vocation of this work of Biblical Reasoning, it is reasonable to confess that the two-way highway into others' worlds will be made at least more level and the rough places smoothed if people relate their inner worlds to a common narrative such as 'a wandering Aramean was my ancestor…' In so doing, shared if variously interpreted reference points – songs, traditions, stories, practices, festivals – come into view, from within which we can, as invited, walk into others' worlds, entering by invitation into others' storehouses.

Perhaps then the most wholesome form of ecclesial memory is shared liturgy, when we recall the works of God in history. In that liturgical context, we must ask the intra-Christian, ecumenical question which Biblical Reasoning inspires: 'with whom will we humbly pray'? With whom will we learn to remember, listening to their prayers and so learning something of how their inner lives are

woven into the love of God: the inner life of the one who is orphaned (though I am not) or widowed (though I am not) or indigent (though I am not). Can anyone – with whatever experience or viewpoint – remain forever an alien – when together we come into the light of the story of Israel fulfilled in Christ, retold in liturgy, especially the eucharist?

So while it matters greatly just what form any shared narrative takes, in answer to the radical claim mentioned above, reconcilers inspired by Deuteronomy's lyrical recounting of the story of the wandering Aramean may confidently if prosaically say that 'While we cannot have complete empathy we can journey together with a greater, empathetic approximation of another's emotional memory.' That emphasis on journey means that empathy – and thus reconciliation – requires a certain level of trust and patience which allows others to gain access to *how* one remembers past circumstance and past offences which have given rise to the need for reconciliation – sins one has committed, sins committed against one. In being granted access and in establishing a two-way highway for affective traffic between deep and deep, each one has an opportunity to exercise empathy and so gain a more proximate understanding, to come closer, to go deeper.

Empathy and compassion

If we recognise that empathy is, at least in part, a memory-dependent or memory-defined skill in relation to others' affections (emotions), then a question arises. What should we call an empathy which is *well*-defined by memory and *well*-oriented to others? One can certainly imagine an empathy which is *inaccurately* informed by memory – preserving biases, prejudices or simply only partial insight into what has given rise to the need for reconciliation. Think of someone who assumes that their version of some wrongdoing is the one which captures all that is required for different parties to make a movement towards being reconciled. Or consider someone who believes that the only affections which matter to understanding wrongdoing and reaching reconciliation are always anger at the situation of the poor and hatred towards the rich. Such versions of 'empathy' are less likely to engage wisely with the one's neighbours' inner lives. One can also imagine an empathy which is *accurately* informed by memory and so more proximate to one's neighbours' inner lives but, for whatever reason, *poorly disposed* to one's neighbours' future welfare, and so uncommitted to the work of reconciliation. Think here of people who derive some kind of delight in their neighbours being continuously downtrodden – even relishing the memory of their losses relative to their own well-placed situation; or, more prosaically, those who know the good that they ought to do in relation to those whose situation they understand, but simply cannot be bothered to do it.

One can also imagine an empathy which is *habitually* disordered in either of these ways: inaccurately informed or poorly disposed, leaving others either misunderstood or (perhaps worse) well understood but, precisely because of that, more prone to abuse. To understand one's enemy's memories, their fears and their breaking points is precisely the skill brutal tyrants depend upon in order to trample others beneath their feet. In short, to think of empathy as a habit is not yet to say much about what reconciliation in a deep-to-deep encounter really depends upon.

So when we search for the positive term to describe those who remember well, are well-disposed to their neighbour and so seek to foster and practise reconciliation, should we say 'empathy'? Or should we say 'compassion'? While there is little point fighting about the terms themselves, I think 'compassion' has a great deal to commend it.

First, it is a term which encompasses a key dimension of Scriptural thought about God far more properly than 'empathy'. A common relevant term in the Greek translation of the Old Testament is *eleos* (ἔλεος). Deuteronomy uses this word to speak of God's compassion repeatedly (for example, 13.17, 30.3, 32.36). We hear the Psalmist sing that 'The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made.' (Psalm 145.9) This is echoed frequently elsewhere and, importantly for Biblical Reasoning, is fulfilled in the New Testament, not least in the passages from John's gospel mentioned above, to which we will return shortly.

Second, following on this observation, note that compassion is a more comprehensive and accurate term for the personal and interpersonal quality that enables reconciling action. Compassion *includes* the necessary skill (even habit) of empathy but goes beyond it to commit to a journey of feeling with and keeping company in suffering with one or more others: hoping that a story once shared but now lost, fought over, forgotten or never shared before could become shared peaceably in the future. Compassion, more fully than empathy, provides what is needed for the non-violent communication and mediation which the Rose Way so wisely seeks to promote.

Conceptually, on my account at least, compassion is 'a two-way quality of relationship' which 'is cognitive, consensual, affective, often bodily or intercorporeal, alleviative and, in principle, persuasive and narratival.'[iv] What this means is that compassion depends on deep listening, which forms a communicative relationship. Compassion is informed by an understanding of the other, willingly and so non-violently providing access to one's own way of seeing the world including, in this case, the memory and current perception of a conflict in need of reconciliation. In this, compassion is cognitive and affective, not one or the other: more precisely, affection is best construed as the beginning or dawning of understanding, an awakening to the world,[v] a necessary aspect of cognition, especially where memory is concerned. Compassion is also often dependent on bodily proximity between people. Perhaps we see this especially clearly in the case of reconciliation amidst conflict where spending time physically together is a necessary ingredient if there is even to be the possibility of peace. Moreover, unlike the more neutral skill or habit of empathy, compassion is by (divine) definition alleviative, seeking to lift the burden of pain, suffering and violence.

Finally, compassion is persuasive, curious and narratival, open to hearing and telling in new ways stories which are entrenched in conflict, looking for new chapters, finding new beginnings and drawing out new endings. As people at odds with each other journey alongside each other, often awkwardly and with discomfort, there remains a need for curiosity and openness to persuasion – precisely as a mode of enabling people to walk together rather than walk apart. The quality of compassionate encounters will differ according to the way that deep narratives meet one another in the task of reconciliation – the ways of remembering which encounter one another in the painful difficulties and days of groaning which the task of reconciliation requires.

And so if the vision this book serves is building 'peaceful, healthily plural communities' by 'identifying, navigating, and transforming unhealthy conflict'[vi] then it is not mere empathy which is required but this kind of persuasive compassion. For compassion is not just about telling different stories but about different perspectives on what counts as true and false, righteous and sinful. Compassionate reconcilers have a clear-eyed, tender resolution not only to acknowledge in themselves what the Church of England's liturgy of confession refers to as 'weakness, negligence and deliberate fault' but also to name it in others. Mercy – *misericordia*, a synonym for compassion which includes what Thomas Aquinas called 'fraternal correction' – requires that they neither ignore sin nor, however, allow it to be the full stop in life's sentence.[vii]

Remembering well: Christ, compassion and memory

This then takes us into the question of what remembering well entails. What does the memory found in Deuteronomy and in John's gospel offer to us? In particular, in John's gospel, recall the encounter of Jesus with Mary at her brother Lazarus' tomb; and Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet.

When we seek to remember the vastness of God's blessing, the abundance of God's gifts – the bounty – we open ourselves up to self-deception as well as the self-revelation of God, revealed in Christ, who brings decisive fulfilment to Israel's story and to God's compassion. In so doing, he makes possible reconciliation for both Jew and Gentile. So will we remember well? How will we know if we do? What ways of remembering disable healing and reconciliation? Who has custody – who keeps – this memory? Within what confines is memory kept? Is memory kept locked up, prevented from becoming shared, perhaps by fear or disappointment, world-weariness or well-

founded scepticism about the motives of others who want to understand our inner lives? By articulating our memories, we expose ourselves to the vulnerable possibility of being understood. Following the distinction made above between empathy and compassion, being understood is certainly not the same as being loved – for one's own sake or for God's sake.

The compassion which underpins true human compassion is the compassion of the reconciling God revealed in the Old and New Testaments. It is in the light of such compassion and from within the everlasting arms that the people of God are called to live out their own work of reconciliation. The God who heard the groaning under the cruelty of the Egyptians and the groaning of Mary and Martha at the tomb of Lazarus came amongst their suffering, journeying with them, weeping with them, suffering, dying and rising with them and for them. The deployment of the human skill of empathy in a disciplined life of compassion depends upon our ways of remembering and our forms of relating being governed by Christ. What then is the path into a compassionate (and so empathic) way of life? And what does this common way for all mean for any charged with responsibility for the work of reconciliation?

The path is through remembering Christ and the story into which he came. 'A wandering Aramean was my ancestor…' The long, hard road Abraham – and Abraham's children – walked to the promised land – away from the cruelty of Egypt, never forgetting what it felt like to be an enslaved or refugee people, walking on tired feet through the desert to the land flowing with milk and honey. This is the road on which Christ himself came to walk, journeying both within and on the borders of that promised land, stepping amidst and across the divisions between Jew and Gentile, clean and unclean, righteous and sinners, healthy and sick.

And while he prayed that all things and all people may come to complete unity before God his Father (John 17.20-23), he was not a tyrant set on trampling others beneath his feet and teaching others to do likewise. Rather, in John's gospel we hear that once Jesus knew that the Father had given all things into his hands, he displayed just what his hands and ours were now to do. Jesus did so when he washed the disciples' feet. He asks, 'Do you know what I have done to you?' (John 13.12) Consider that phrase: 'what I have done'. Jesus did something to his disciples and to any of us who would be reconcilers. He changed our perspective. One cannot wash another's feet by standing above them but only when kneeling before them. With that view in our mind's eye, we hear Jesus' words to his disciples: 'you ought to wash one another's feet' (John 13.14) And with the recollection of those words comes next the memory of the offer and anticipation of blessing in Jesus' invitation and promise that lie on either side of the (translator's) comma: if you know these things (comma)….you will be blessed if you do them.

Will *you* (plural) be blessed? Will *we* be blessed? The blessing requires the presence of one another – and being present to one another. It requires an attending to one another, a compassionate kneeling before another's life, a consensual entering of another's storehouse of affectively drenched memory, to the extent that this is possible and fitting. So the doing that Christ calls for requires one another. It cannot be done alone and the blessing cannot be received by one alone. Compassion (and its constituent element, empathy) requires community – obvious to say, how hard to live! For such a path requires not only the sharing of the gospel but obedience to the accompanying vocation to share our lives as well (1 Thessalonians 2.8): to invite others into our lives and to accept others' invitations into theirs – even in the midst of profound conflict. We interpret this sharing well if we think of it as 'participation' – a deep-to-deep word implying not mere membership but a metaphysics of mutual indwelling, at home with Father, Son and Spirit, and so with the door of our inner room hospitably open to make peace with one another. Just as the Father is neither Son nor Spirit and yet Father, Son and Spirit are together one God, just so the first-person plural, the 'we' formed and maintained by the Spirit in the bond of peace, holds together the true unity available to humanity in compassion *one with another*, a unity which depends utterly on our true distinctness, *one from another*.

What can stand against this reconciliation forged by divine indwelling? If even the door of dead Lazarus' tomb did not snuff out the possibility of new life then perhaps even the doors of our

hearts may be open to one another. However, as Peter's initial resistance attests – 'you shall never wash my feet' (John 13.6) – and as each of our own hearts bear witness, how hard it is to receive a washing! How unsettling of our established sense of self; and how awkward for leaders if *their* feet are washed by those whom they are called to pastor and teach.[1]

But we are only blessed if we do these things that we now know, the things Christ has taught us. Each one of us then needs compassion. So what am I blocking out about my own past and future, which I need you to help me see and feel? I pray that some messenger of Christ's compassion might see so clearly as to enable a new telling of my own story and so perhaps of their story, so that we might pass through the desert, weeping on our knees at the sealed tomb of our frozen conflict and yet, because of God and for God's sake, rise in peace as we walk out of the grave and live together through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

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[i] See Rose Castle Foundation, 2020, *The Twelve Habits of a Reconciler*, p.12 where empathy is related to the memory of being strangers in the land.

[ii] Hordern, Joshua, 2013, *Political Affections: Civic Participation and Moral Theology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.37; Hordern, Joshua, 2020, *Compassion in Healthcare: Pilgrimage, Practice and Civic Life*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.34, p.83. See also Rose Castle Foundation, 2020 which describes empathy as enabling people 'to be seen, heard and understood' (p.12). For an argument that empathy is essentially biased and innumerate see Bloom, Paul, 2012, *Against Empathy: the Case for Rational Compassion,* London: Penguin; for critical discussion of Bloom and a case that empathy is morally neutral, requiring connection within a wider moral outlook in order for it to morally freighted, see Hordern, 2020, p.34-36, p.81.

[iii] Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 10.viii.12, tr. Henry Chadwick 1998, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[iv] Hordern, 2020, p.116.

[v] Hordern, 2013, pp.62-93.

[vi] Ford, David, 2026, 'Christian Biblical Reasoning as a Fresh Reconciling Practice', in Ford, David et al. eds. 2026, *Twelve Habits for Peacemakers: A Christian Wisdom of Reconciliation*, xxx Canterbury Press.

[vii] Hordern, 2020, p.234; see Aquinas, Thomas, *Summa Theologiae,* 2a2ae33a4.

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[1] There is a resonance between this awkwardness and the "reluctant guest" describes in Georgia May's chapter.