

The meaningful act of remembrance: creating space for memories evoked by the voices of decolonisation

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This paper investigates the relationship between painful memories and the meaningful act of remembrance as a tool to guide people towards healing. The context is post-apartheid South Africa. The research question is: Could the act of remembrance enable people to engage with painful memories while addressing decolonization? The research followed Dingemans's (reference, date?) visualization of a research project. The approach starts by considering the present situation. This is followed by theological reflection to ask how the gospel should be heard in these circumstances to elucidate the path of Christian obedience. The reflection culminates in goals and the identification of resources. This in turn leads to action, which becomes the basis for further reflection, and so the hermeneutical cycle continues. This investigation was done from a practical-theological vantage point with due consideration of important principles gleaned from recent research on this topic. The paper closes with liturgical perspectives on how remembrance could enable people to make space to work through their memories. Remembrance can enable people to listen, to be in contemplative silence, and also to interrupt silence and create opportunities for story-telling, which can itself cultivate remembrance. Such moments can bring profound hope.

1. Introduction

South African society took a decision in 1994 to formally put an end to the dehumanisation of apartheid. A thrilling feeling of liberation was followed by sobriety tied to the question of how South African society should, and would be able to, deal with its inherited traumatic memories. Consequently, a kaleidoscope of memories has been influenced by a decision not to forget the past but rather to deal with past memories. It is also important to realize that no society can function in a meaningful manner without remembrance of their origins, their past and their history (Ehrman 2016, 4–6). As Christians, we need to remind ourselves that we also belong to a religion that remembers, that remembers to survive (Bothman 2000, 22–23).

The history of colonialism and decolonization is of course a complex matter for South Africans. It is

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also ubiquitous: referenced all over social media and present in the political, academic and economic spheres. Decolonisation itself is inexorably intertwined with memories of a colonial past, which transcend politics and remain in the everyday, in thinking processes and ways of being. Memories of what happened in the past are inevitably retrieved in the mere mentioning of the word decolonisation. I embark on a qualitative literature inquiry whose ultimate goal is to offer guidelines for how practical





theologians might engage with the notion of remembrance, which in itself exposes one's attitudes, using the strife over decolonization as a practical example. I highlight throughout that people are unique in how they struggle to make sense of, and/or let go of, memories of the past.

Faith communities are bound up in collective memory. Our intertwined existence necessitates an increasing awareness of people's fragile individual narratives (Tubbs-Tisdale 1997, 32). Theologizing from a public practical-theological perspective calls for a sincere, cooperative and a constructive approach (Koopman and Smit 2007, 272), mindful that decolonization is not just a critical mindset, it always contains a cry of sadness. Cilliers (Cilliers 2015, 3) describes this as the in-between space of paradox. The challenge is that some people want to forget the past, while others are still processing the memories of the past based on what they are currently experiencing, perhaps the past is still very much present.

A painful past pervaded by memories inevitably creates an obstruction to experiencing a meaningful present and the prospect of a hopeful future (Kraidy 2002, 14–16). This article argues that we should be striving to meaningfully cultivate a framework for remembrance in the South African context. Remembrance after all, enables people to reconnect things that have become dismembered and disaggregated (Arthurs 2017, 12). Given this context, the research question is formulated in the following way: *Could the act of remembrance enable people to engage with painful memories, evoked by voices of decolonisation, in a constructive manner?*

According to a typical visualization of Dingemans' (1996:23) methodological insight, this research is divided into three movements that link in a hermeneutical manner:

- analysis of the practical-theological situation;
- normative perspectives; and
- Strategies for changing the problematic praxis.

2. Analysis of the practical theological situation

2.1 Perspectives on storytelling as fertile soil for everyday decolonization

Goudzwaard (Goudzwaard 1981, 22) aptly indicates that ideologies do not emerge by chance, they need injustice or a certain kind of threat in order to take

hold. For example, he illustrates that nationalist ideologies are more influential when religion is invoked. Voices in favor of decolonization often suspect that mainline churches in South Africa are remaining silent on the injustices of the past and do not go far enough to heal painful memories. This is where storytelling can play an important role. Stories inevitably illuminate the *content* (the details of "what happened"), the *affect* (the "how it felt"), as well as the *meaning* (the sense of "why this happened") (Hermans and Dimaggio 2004, 23). Stories consequently go beyond the lived experience of each individual, towards something shared. Storytelling gives us access to the multiple meanings of experience while tentatively building an understanding or theory to explain the meaning of traumatic and difficult events (Boss et al 2003, 457).

The church is subject to criticism based on its colonial heritage within the South African context. Therefore, the church should be available to cultivate opportunities for all ethnic groups, to listen to the stories of all peoples without criticizing, judging, or correcting. This involves letting the orator tell their story without interruption, with the knowledge that the audience will believe or accept the story as a valid representation of the orator's perspective (Nwoye 2006, 12). A liturgical awareness here offers the possibility of experiencing the honour of co-remembering. This can occur when they recognise what has been occurring in other people's lives, especially when painful memories are present. People can live and work within close range to one another, but they may be unaware of what the other remembers about the past. Co-remembering by means of storytelling entails looking through the eyes of others.

Storytelling events, where members of a congregation share their own stories with one another as well as having the opportunity to share stories with those outside the community, have the potential to be truly transformational. Remembrance in this way has the potential to stir one's own memories. Perhaps the ultimate purpose of remembrance after all is to prevent a never-ending cycle of hurt and violence. Ricoeur (Ricoeur 1990, 17) helps us to understand the complexity of this process, indicating that beyond the distinction of a happy memory and an unhappy one lies the possibility of a forgetting held in reserve. However, to forgive, is not to forget. It is this idea of a gift, not as requiring or expecting a gift in return but as something received and passed on as a second gift that leads to mutual recognition and a state of peace.

2.2 The importance of remembrance

Letting bygones be bygones is an imminent danger in the context of this research. It holds several pitfalls. *Amnesia* refers to the absence of narratives about experiences (Rothermund 2014, 62). Similarly, the term '*aphasia*' (speechlessness) in its metaphorical sense refers to an inability to articulate experiences for which one cannot find adequate expressions. This may happen if there is no social framework available that permits the formation of collective memory (Rothermund 2015, 70). In the context of audible voices on decolonization, a praxis of silence as a space where nobody speaks about what everybody knows, should be avoided. Contrary to the idea of voicelessness is the idea of silence. Dauenhauer (Dauenhauer 1980, 27) describes the various manifestations of silence. Silence as an intervening act has the function of pausing between sentences or units of thought. The intervening silence binds the parts of an utterance. The meaning of the preceding thoughts and the following thoughts are captured within this communicative moment of silence. It also has the function of articulating or making sense of speech. This kind of silence by its very nature acts to interrupt, but it is can also be something that opens up new possibilities for mediating acts and new patterns of communication (Muers 2004, 44). In this regard the concept of *interrupting silence* is relevant. Faith communities should contribute to establishing creative and interpretive moments of silence to reflect on societal issues. Silence has the potential to enrich the value of encounters between people, particularly people from different cultural backgrounds and beliefs. The act of liturgy could serve as propellant in facilitating such silent and reflective spaces.

Interrupting silence can play an important role in the context of painful memories. People normally remember parts of an event but tend to forget others, and which event details they recall are influenced by their current mind-set and moulded by thoughts and experiences that have occurred since the original event (Kensinger 2009, 13). The utilization of senses in this remembering is important. People do not only listen with their ears. They hear with their eyes (vivid remembrances) and with their sense of touch as they become aware of the feelings and emotions that arise from a particular message. People also listen with their minds and with their imagination (Grant and Boprcherds 2009, 52). Memories, however, fade like ink aging on a hand-

written letter (Arthurs 2017, 14). Therefore, neuroscientists often utilize the concept of '*engramming*' to describe the process of remembering. An engram is a pathway created in the brain when people receive information or have new experiences. These pathways could be described as memory traces. During this process, the engrams of new information are harmonized with the old. Opportunities to help people to remember should be cultivated.

Language and especially listening are indispensable in this process of remembrance (Kruger 2017, 13). Language after all, enables people to recall facts and has a definite trigger effect in people's lives. Words evoke memories and could even perhaps be compared to the lines of a bar code that evoke the particular item. Casey (Casey 1987, 3) connects his insights with the German concept of *Wiedererinnerung*. This denotes the idea of remembering things again, in effect re-remembering something. The idea of re-member-ing what has been dismembered or amputated is evident (Arthurs 2017, 21). The notion of the prefix "re" as indication of putting something together again, is striking. People are more likely to notice things that fit into their schemata and will often reinterpret things to make them fit. It is important to note that people are incapable of paying attention to all the data they receive. This could explain why different people could listen to the same message, but different aspects would be remembered by each person. People also invent detail to align a memory with their current beliefs.

South Africa's history is painful to the majority of the country's citizens, especially those who were affected by the injustices. Remembrance however, does not have as its goal to restart a harmful process or to make painful memories more painful. It also does not offer analgesics to people. Rather, the voice of decolonization, for example, enables people to revisit their own memories, but this time round with a willingness and an awareness to see things differently by considering other relevant perspectives. Remembrance could offer people a hermeneutical tool with which to reach a fusion of horizons of other people's remembrances as a deeper foundation towards a hermeneutical understanding according to Habermas (cf. Flemming 2012:13). The way to reach a true understanding of people's needs and interests is to engage in a democratic debate where these needs are shared, clarified and transformed (Otto and Fourie 2009, 226). After all, the conviction that free, open, public discussion has a transformative function is central to Habermas' think-



ing and could provide a possible framework (Flemming 2012, 14).

Expecting citizens of post-atrocity societies to simply forget a period of violence and injustice is not humane. Often, those who most adamantly ask of others to forget and move on do not realize what it entailed to be the victims of dehumanizing practices in the first place (Kerry and Whigham 2017, 23). Remembrance of the past should serve to promote cohesion and hope, rather than create further division among people who are experiencing painful memories. Furthermore, memory should not be used to prevent a healing process when listening to opposing voices. People do remember events in the history differently and therefore listening could help to see things through the eyes of other people. Memory, after all, is the way in which the past influences the present and the future. We should acknowledge that what is written about the past will always be subjective and that the different narratives of people are not always captured in the documentation of history. The benefit of collective memory is that it opens up spaces for co-remembering.

3. Normative perspectives on remembrance – αναμνησις

Remembrance relates to understanding the past in such a way that the events of the past become a force in the present. It is true in more than one way that remembrance and recognition equates to participation. Therefore, igniting people's remembrances during a sermon reunites them mentally, emotionally and volitionally to the God proclaimed in the sermon. This section offers brief perspectives from the Old and New Testament as well as some perspectives on hope.

3.1 Old Testament perspectives on recognition and remembrance

The concept of remembrance is central to the Old Testament as it expands to enable a specific function in the present (Merrill 2000, 28). The verb for *zkr* for example occurs 222 times in the Old Testament. From a liturgical perspective, remembering enters the process because it is precisely the person and works of God that must be brought to mind as objects of adoration and wonder. These are recovered only as the worshiper has the capacity to recall them (Vallet 2001, 158). But, it is important to realize that

during Old Testament times and in the text itself, every event and feast became a teaching opportunity. The following two examples illustrate this idea. The importance of the Sabbath and the fact that Israel should observe (remember) the Sabbath day to keep it holy, entails the idea of devotion (Le Roux 2006, 1010). Moses, according to the Old Testament, appointed men, priests, whose main task was to see that the people never forgot what happened that night they ate the Paschal lamb. The lamb kept alive Israel's faith in God. The Lord told them that the first-born of their sons should be given to him and that they should do the same with their sheep. The first-born of the beasts were to be sacrificed and the first-born sons were to be redeemed by a lamb (Le Roux 2006, 1012).

The importance of transmitting the remembrance from one generation to another should be noted. Children (and even adults), after all, learn best when something is demonstrated in a ritual or symbolic manner. In Hebrew culture the children occupied a special place in the learning process. Adults were encouraged to learn from the questions of children (Le Roux 2006, 1014). Fundamental to Israel's faith was the recognition and recollection that Yahweh was Israel's God. In the Old Testament, people were encouraged not only to remember God's acts, but also to remember God himself (Pakpahan 2012, 33). In view of God's relationship with Israel through his covenant and the relationship between the two covenant partners, listening to God and remembrance of Him receives priority. Not only does Israel remember God, God himself actually reminds his people of his relationship with his children.

God himself makes it clear what he wants people to remember (Baxter 2010, 6). He even requests Israel (Joshua 4) to establish memorial stones, twelve of them, when they enter the Promised Land. Whenever they look at the Jordan River, they should remember the fact that it was God's gracious and almighty acts that enabled them to enter the land of Canaan. In this instance the memorial stones also provided parents with a teaching tool, they were able to instruct the next generation based on their memories. Baxter points out that the memorial stones were important so that all people could understand that the hand of God is mighty (Joshua 4: 24) (Baxter 2010, 8). At the very least, this remembering within the covenant seems to imply that the God who performed the past mighty deeds is the same God who is present with his people as they remember those deeds. He is present as the living



God, bound to them in election and covenant as He was to their ancestors in days past, for He is Yahweh, *'I am who I am.'* Concepts like 'think about', 'meditate upon', 'pay attention to' and 'recalling' are regarded as important building blocks of remembrance (Holyoak and Morrison 2005, 7). In fact, the act of remembrance is based on the assurance that God himself is a re-member-ing God.

Remembrance (recognition) of past events and of God's acts in the past creates new memories and makes encounters with him into meaningful events. People in the Old Testament are therefore also exhorted to remember God in their various feasts like Passover, the Feast of the Tabernacles and the Purim Feast (Vorster 2011, 33). With these feasts, people remembered God's acts of deliverance (cf. the exodus motive) and his providence. However, it is important to realize that the source for remembrance is always God's activity. The past subsequently becomes present in cultic rituals and therefore believers become participants in God's mighty deeds of salvation in the past (Jones 1986, 437).

3.2 New Testament perspectives on remembrance (anamnesis)

From the perspective of the New Testament, remembrance (recognition) is closely related to the significance or meaning of events and words (Pakpahan 2012, 42). Through the act of remembrance, the person or deeds that are remembered are brought to the realm of the here and now (Brouwer 2009, 27). Meaning is created in the process. From a New Testament perspective, the idea of a re-lived and re-experienced experience within a new and meaningful realm, is vivid. The concept of remembrance (anamnesis) is often utilized in the context of an encounter with God (liturgy) in the New Testament. Through remembrance, the active God of the past is remembered as active in the present. This very idea provides a dynamic hope for the future. It moves like a wheel that is able to move backwards, but also forwards.

It is evident from above that the concept of remembrance (anamnesis) is often utilized in the context of an encounter with God (liturgy) in the New Testament. Liturgical remembrance of God's action on behalf of and in relationship with humankind in history is both a *starting point* for worship and flows *from* worship. Remembering God entails seeking and obeying him in the present (Jones 1986, 435). Remembrance (recognition) should not be confused

with the idea of remembering that certain things happened once upon a time. When believers for example celebrate Holy Communion, they experience and relive the power of the crucified and resurrected Christ that freely bestowed on them the message of reconciliation. Remembrance in its functioning is not a cycle, but rather an arrow aimed at significance. Remembrance renews and replenishes people's memories, mediating any of feelings of despondency and hopelessness.

4. Strategic perspectives on changing a problematic praxis

4.1 Storytelling as a safe space for healing

One has to ask about the reason or reasons why liturgy has a seemingly limited influence on people's outlook on societal issues. Decolonization's for example agenda covers all spheres of life: social, economic, political and religious (Mashau 2018, 4920). Within this tension-field some scholars are afraid that churches themselves could again become the sites of the oppressive power of coloniality (Ndlovu-Gatshweni 2015, 486). De Klerk and Kruger (Kruger 2017, 23) indicate that people might experience liturgy as if they were mere observers rather than seeing liturgical actions as being dynamic, working powers that operate within and through participants. Liturgical acts that serve as propellants should lead participants towards the reality of life so that liturgy becomes a way of life that does not engage in an observer mentality. This mediation bridge should open eyes and provide new possibilities to change attitudes that are still embedded in colonizing thought patterns. The bridge of liturgy also offers new insight into the past, because the bridge is open. The same bridge is open to the future. Yet at the moment participants in liturgy are often like stationary vehicles that are ever so slowly trying to bridge the gap between yesterday and tomorrow (Kruger and De Klerk 2017, 21).

People in South Africa are indeed living in a post-conflict society in which gigantic sociocultural shifts have occurred. An essential part of the healing of painful memories in a post-colonial society rests on the ability to tell one's story and to have someone listen and acknowledge pain and suffering. Something should change, in our epistemological thinking of practical theology, too. People have to learn to see and describe the world they are living in



differently (Smit 2008, 22). Worship enables participants in liturgy to look in the right direction for meaningful answers. This is actually what happens in liturgy. God speaks for us to see (to perceive).

Co-remembering can take place through building relationships within daily life. This means that people from different viewpoints are obliged to learn anew to look through the eyes of others. This makes liturgy a bridging act receptive to the idea of a vision for the other. Liturgy as an encounter with God and with other people creates possibilities for meaningful social relationships. Stories help people to make sense of their experiences. Stories or creative images with words can provide a release of emotion and can help one connect to others when learning to live with a certain loss. Viewed from a practical-theological vantage point, it is important to realize that the way in which people remember the past has often been described as the impetus for renewed reproaches rather than constructive healing (Wielenga 2013, 212). Memories are part of stories that people tell themselves and each other about the past. People are constantly in the process of writing and rewriting the stories of their lives to make sense of the world around them. Their memories become part of this story and part of their sense-making efforts (Rosenwalt and Rochberg 1992, 21).

Healing and hope come not so much from the act of remembering itself, but from interpreting memories and inscribing them into a larger pattern of meaning and stitching them into the patchwork quilt of one's identity (Volf 2006, 12). It is also true that in the realm of collective memory, what a nation chooses to remember or to conceal, can have a significant impact on the identity of that nation and the direction it takes. One's memories could lead to bitterness and revenge, or to a desire to ensure a better future for oneself and others (McAdams 2006, 110). A valid question to be revisited is whose memories should be remembered, and whose version of the narrative within the voice of decolonization has to be emphasized? This kind of willingness to listen and to see differently does not allow for an attitude of 'us' against 'them'.

4.2 The fertile space of the interrupting silence of liturgy for remembrance

The acts of listening and of seeing are ingredients of a hermeneutical process of understanding, but they need fertile soil to thrive. Heitink (Heitink 1999, 17)

for example emphasizes that the relationship between theory and praxis needs mediation. Mediation in Heitink's understanding has to do with communicative aspects that mediate the gospel to private life, social establishments and to the public sector. Liturgy within this framework offers a communal and a pastoral space for participants to serve God, each other, as well as the world. In attending to this interaction, practical theology is not an occasional, problem-solving technique, but an ongoing way of doing theology and living the Christian faith (Kinast 2000, 11).

Brueggemann (Brueggemann 2018, 7) emphasizes a possible starting point in doing theology by highlighting the complexity of silence. Silence could refer to awe in front of unutterable holiness, but it can also refer to coercion where some voices are silenced in the interest of other people. Remembrance is closely interwoven with the essence of liturgy during worship services but also in daily life. The power of remembrance (anamnesis) lies in reliving the saving acts of God in such a powerful manner that it enables people to appropriate all God's promises and to embrace their responsibilities. Remembrance viewed from a liturgical angle is related to the memory of familiar aspects or of persons that form the foundation for living memories and vivid experiences. Remembrance therefore draws people into the reality of the fullness of the life in Christ. Moltmann (Moltmann 2007, 11) indicates the importance of this kind of remembrance by saying: *"without the memory of Christ's passion there is no Christian meditation on the future life and conversely, without hope for the coming of Christ and therefore the remembrance of Christ loses its power"*.

Remembrance enables participants in liturgy to link memory with significance (Atkins 2004, 19). It functions like a photograph. In seeing the photograph, it is not only the subject, but also what the subject is doing in the photo that comes to the fore. Every worship service has to be open towards society. Being blessed by liturgy also entails being a blessing to other people in daily life. Remembrance of painful memories is in itself an editing process and the emphasis is therefore not on editing people's versions of memory oneself. The community of believers should instead invite people to become part of a new way of *communitas*, a communicative, remembering community where listening and seeing are integral parts. Therefore, storytelling events, where members of a congregation have the opportunity to share their own stories with one another and



the opportunity to share stories with those outside of the community, have the potential to be truly transformational.

5. Conclusion

Memories evoked by this the voices of decolonisation could either be associated with hope or hopelessness. It is true that reflection on colonialism and on decolonisation is challenging for practical theologians as well as for faith communities. Remembrance mediated by liturgical acts in enabling people to re-remember and to co-remember should be cultivated. Liturgy that deals with remembrance in reliving the saving acts of God in such a powerful manner that it enables people to appropriate all God's promises and to embrace their responsibilities, should be facilitated meaningfully. Meaningful liturgy could enable participants to become more aware of togetherness in society and could help people to work through and reflect on painful memories, perhaps in turn providing hope for the future.

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