

Year B

Isaiah 40:21-31

It's very human to begin looking for something and then forget what you're looking for. I know it's worrying: I have found myself at the top of the stairs coming to a halt and wondering why I climbed the stairs in the first place! That's a short-term memory problem. But we can also be beset by long-term memory problems too. Tennessee Williams tells a story of someone who forgot -- the story of Jacob Brodzky, a shy Russian Jew whose father owned a

bookstore. The older Brodzky wanted his son to go to college. The boy, on the other hand, desired nothing but to marry Lila, his childhood sweetheart -- a French girl as effusive, vital, and ambitious as he was contemplative and retiring. A couple of months after young Brodzky went to college, his father fell ill and died. The son returned home, buried his father, and married his love. Then the couple moved into the apartment above the bookstore, and Brodzky took over its management. The life of books fitted him perfectly, but it cramped her. She wanted more adventure -- and she found it,

she thought, when she met an agent who praised her beautiful singing voice and enticed her to tour Europe with a vaudeville company. Brodzky was devastated. At their parting, he reached into his pocket and handed her the key to the front door of the bookstore.

"You had better keep this," he told her, "because you will want it some day. Your love is not so much less than mine that you can get away from it. You will come back sometime, and I will be waiting."

She kissed him and left. To escape the pain he felt, Brodzky withdrew deep into his

bookstore and took to reading as someone else might have taken to drink. He spoke little, did little, and could most times be found at the large desk near the rear of the shop, immersed in his books while he waited for his love to return.

Nearly 15 years after they parted, at Christmastime, she did return. But when Brodzky rose from the reading desk that had been his place of escape for all that time, he did not take the love of his life for more than an ordinary customer. "Do you want a book?" he asked. That he didn't recognise her startled her. But she gained possession of

herself and replied, "I want a book, but I've forgotten the name of it."

Then she told him a story of childhood sweethearts. A story of a newly married couple who lived in an apartment above a bookstore. A story of a young, ambitious wife who left to seek a career, who enjoyed great success but could never relinquish the key her husband gave her when they parted. She told him the story she thought would bring him to himself. But his face showed no recognition. Gradually she realised that he had lost touch with his heart's desire, that he no longer knew the purpose of his waiting

and grieving, that now all he remembered was the waiting and grieving itself. "You remember it; you must remember it -- the story of Lila and Jacob?"

After a long, bewildered pause, he said, "There is something familiar about the story, I think I have read it somewhere. It comes to me that it is something by Tolstoi." Dropping the key, she fled the shop. And Brodzky returned to his desk, to his reading, unaware that the love he waited for had come and gone.¹

¹ Signs of the Times, June, 1993, p. 11.

Faith begins with memory. Spiritual amnesia suffocates faith: that has major life implications.

Victor Borge told about a couple going on vacation, standing in the queue waiting to check-in their bags at the airline counter.

The husband said to the wife, "I wish we had brought the piano."

The wife said, "Why? We've got sixteen bags already!"

The husband said, "Yes, I know-- but the tickets are on the piano!"

"Have you not known? Have you not heard?"

Isaiah proclaimed twice in our Old

Testament text today, just in case we didn't pick it up the first time; just in case we have forgotten the important things.

I can't hear the words of this passage from Isaiah without seeing the image of Ian Charleson, acting as Eric Liddell in the film *Chariots of Fire*, standing in the pulpit of a Paris church reading these same words in his soft Edinburgh accent. There is a strong sense of the urgent call of God. God knows that we have forgotten but he will not hold that against us, instead his desire is that we awaken and remember him.

What should we be remembering in particular? The people that Isaiah was addressing were trapped in a most miserable existence. They had been exiled from their land by an invading power, the Babylonians who had taken the fit away into exile in Babylon and left the old and infirm behind. So by the waters of Babylon they sat and wept as they remembered Zion. But they had forgotten their God.

When we find ourselves under pressure and struggling we can remember the good times with longing but we can easily forget God because we might feel he has abandoned us.

He is the God who sits above the circle of the earth, who stretches out the heavens like a circle, who can name all of the starry host above but that otherness, that might, is beyond our understanding and how can a God like that have any interest whatsoever in my small, relatively insignificant existence. I am nothing in comparison to all of that.

Have you not known? Have you not heard? He does not faint or grow weary. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their

strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

The mind blowing truth is that the Master of the heavens has come to us, right up close, and we have not been consumed by his might. He brings his love and his power into our lives that we might soar like eagles. And this is a message not to those who are already apparently soaring in their lives, but to the downtrodden exile; to those who feel that life has nothing more to give. That's why we find Jesus in the Gospel reading today moving from the healing of Simon's

mother-in-law out to the city where the sick and mentally distressed were brought to him and he healed them. He lifted them up as on eagles' wings. And when he retreated for a moment to himself he found that they were searching him out because the lonely, sick and needy of this world will not rest until they have found healing and satisfaction. That's what happens when the God of the universe appears among the people of the world. That's the immanence of the transcendent Lord of the Universe that we find uniquely in Jesus Christ.

There's a story about a city dweller who was visiting relatives on a farm and the farmer gave a whistle and his dog herded the sheep into the pen and then latched the gate with her paw. "Wow, that's some dog. What's her name?" The forgetful farmer thought a minute, then asked, "What do you call that red flower that smells good and has thorns on the stem?" "A rose?" "That's it!" The farmer turned to his wife. "Hey Rose, what do we call this dog?"

Hopefully, none of us are as forgetful as that! I wonder what God thinks about it all. His call to us today is to listen so that we might

remember and when we remember to fall on our knees and listen to him. We find him today in our homes, with our friends, on that walk along the seashore. The mighty God of the universe is here. Let us worship and follow.