

Dedication Festival 2018

Fr Michael Bowie

In the NT, truth is what is *unforgotten*, what is 'remembered'. That's not a philosophical statement but an etymological one, underlying the thought of Greek speakers and thinkers, slightly different from Anglo Saxon 'truth', which, like 'troth', is more about faithfulness. λήθη is a state of 'forgetfulness' (as in *Lethe*, the river of forgetfulness in Hades) or 'hiddenness'; the opposite, ἀ-ληθής, ἀ-λήθεια, 'true', 'truth', is something un-forgotten, or indeed that which is hidden brought to light. [cf. Erik Varden, *The Shattering of Loneliness*]

This linguistic environment offers a further rich background to the Eucharistic 'remembrance' at the heart of our worship, and our communion or fellowship in a particular Christian community.

I'm a big fan of Fellini; one of his most successful and accessible films, *Amarcord*, nails this. Characteristically he scattered half-truths and suggestive fantasies about the meaning of his title, but it turns out to be dialect from his native Romagna province, meaning 'I remember'.

Amarcord is a semi-autobiographical tale about Titta, an adolescent boy growing up among an eccentric cast of characters in the village of Borgo San Giuliano (situated near the ancient walls of Fellini's home town, Rimini) in 1930s Fascist Italy. Titta's sentimental education is emblematic of Italy's "lapse of conscience", or failure to remember itself. Fellini skewers Mussolini's ludicrous posturings and those of a Catholic Church that, he wrote, "imprisoned Italians in a perpetual adolescence", by mocking himself and his fellow villagers in comic scenes that underline their incapacity to adopt genuine moral responsibility or outgrow foolish sexual fantasies. The word *amarcord* has become an Italian neologism, meaning 'nostalgic recollection'.

The ending of the film is open and exuberant, though tinged with sadness: Titta's mother's funeral is followed by a wedding party for the town heart-throb, Gradisca, celebrated outdoors, the parish priest in slightly uncomfortable attendance; the cycle of the seasons is completed in the town, with some characters disappearing into unresolved futures. Fellini-philes like me will immediately connect this with the

joyous but open ending of his masterpiece *8½*, where Marcello Mastroiani, standing in for the writer/director, joins in a circus parade with all the characters of his life, saying to his long-suffering wife,

'Life is a celebration. Let's live it together. That's all I can say, Luisa, to you or the others. Accept me for what I am, if you can. It's the only way we might find each other.

Now of course that isn't enough, from a Christian pulpit. Fellini, like many Italians, was certainly a Catholic: *cattolico sì, ma non fanatico*, as they say. But accepting, and *loving*, each other as brothers and sisters in Christ, and living the celebration together, is not a bad template for finding not only each other but our heavenly home.

When I come back here, the Christian community which was my home for six years after I first arrived in England, I too 'remember' things. One could never remark *cattolico sì, ma non fanatico* here. This is, proudly, *not* the bland English middle-class interior to which the CofE defaults. I wouldn't have bothered coming back if it had been. But of course, quite quickly, it was not the exuberant, if then rather shabby, interior which compelled my return, but the community of faith I found and joined, 'for God's temple is holy, and that temple you are'.

The saintly Fr Harold Bennet, the unforgettable Fr Richard Holloway, Fr Paul King who co-sponsored me for ordination, Fr Hugh Wybrew, still a friend, Jocelyn Demant the eternal churchwarden and MC, Pauline A. Blackburn (whose middle initial was essential on all documents), Mrs Lord the blind centenarian sacristan, George Bailey the retired college porter who was donor and cleaner of the most extreme *candelabrae*, Fr Walter Hooper, whom I witnessed being proclaimed Bishop of Narnia in the sacristy by Robert Runcie, Les Day who caught fire one High Mass by leaning too close to our Lady of Walsingham, a conflagration put out with these bare hands.

And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of [so many more] ... of whom the world was not worthy.

But as 'I remember' these and so many others, and liturgies, and drinks, and dinners, and serving and subdeaconing Mass, and restraining mirth at some of the more extraordinary efforts of the then choir, I am 'remembering' in a larger, more theological sense. It is that particular sense of remembering 'remembrance' for which we gather, not only this morning, but certainly today with particular intent.

My home diocese of Sydney (where, happily, I was *not* ordained) isn't very fond of this sort of thing. I can picture a brother or sister from there joining us here this morning and joining in with Jesus' words to the Samaritan woman,

'you worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from GAFCON. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth.

As 'I remember' this morning, Dedication Festival, it seems a good moment to interrogate what we *do* know, about what are up to here together, and in all the churches of Christendom, especially on a Feast which has a peculiar character in the church calendar. You will know that Dedication Festival outranks even Feasts of Our Lady and the Apostles, because it is traditionally understood as a Feast of the Lord. There are two reasons why the dedication of a single church building should be so privileged.

First, the building, for which we do thank God, has never been understood by Christians as merely a place *inhabited* by God, a 'house' in that sense. Rather, in a church, the altar, with its five crosses for the five wounds, announces the central place of Christ in *our* life and worship; the sacrifice we celebrate and share here brings us to the foot of the cross and beyond; our daily bread of the Mass makes us who Dom Gregory Dix reminded us we are: the *sancta plebs Dei*, the 'holy common people of God'. In that, we do 'worship the Father in spirit and in truth'. Here we '*remember*', properly, *who we are* as we make the offering, and we need to be able to give an account of it, as St Peter suggests we should:

Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you;

1 Peter 3

If you want a footnote on that, I'd go to a fairly recent book by a Jesuit, Michael McGuckian, *The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass: a Search for an Acceptable Notion of Sacrifice*. Fr McGuckian has constructed a credible account of the Mass as a sacrifice in continuity with the communion sacrifices of the Old Testament, which relies heavily on Anglican theologians of the last century, principal among them Nugent Hicks, a member of Balliol (so, technically, a parishioner here), who became Dean of Keble and

successively Bishop of Gibraltar and Lincoln. Dom Gregory Dix, whose big idea about the 'shape' had been somewhat picked apart by others, is also put back in the light. So, first, properly remembering who we are.

Second, the gospel is about relationship: our relatedness to God and each other in Jesus Christ. Relationships are not theories: they are always personal, local and particular. Our relationship with God, which Jesus teaches us takes priority over any other, is no exception. That is what is 'dedicated'.

Once we 'remember' this, and 'remember' that we are celebrating a Feast of Christ our Lord and Brother, ranking alongside Christmas and Easter in the particular church building, here where our relationship with God is nourished and shared, we may think again what it means to say 'how awesome is this place, this is none other than the house of God and the gate of heaven'. As a window on heaven, a place where we may glimpse glory, it sends us out into God's world to find and 'remember' him in all the places and people we encounter, even those we wish we could avoid.