

The Core of the Remembered Gospel

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More than 15 years of work with people of all ages and abilities using the remembered gospel suggests that, in Britain, there are some core aspects that are commonly remembered. Other episodes are less frequently remembered. The Jesus we remember links directly to the theology we develop and our understanding of who Jesus is to us reveals our Christology. Thus to understand the core of the remembered gospel is to understand who people think Jesus is.

A key activity

If you use a printed bible the key thing to understand is how to find a certain book, chapter or verse. When rehearsing the remembered gospel these concepts are of little use. Although a few people will remember particular written versions of the text and therefore refer to a book, chapter or verse, most ordinary rememberers will refer to episodes, sayings, narratives or characters. Clearly this could lead to some confusion if, for example, a rememberer refers to 'the blind man'. There are several mentioned in the gospel and it can be challenging to identify the one referred to. But as many of the ordinary people of the gospels are referred to by descriptions rather than names this usually means rememberers have to give a fuller description or portion of narrative to establish the reference, much as a person would who was speaking about some members of the extended family who had similar names or occupations.

One way I frequently use of introducing the idea of the remembered gospel, and which I often repeat at intervals when working with the same group so we can revise our common understanding, is an activity I call the Jesus Life-Line (found in *Word of Mouth*). Originally devised for working with two small churches in Sheffield, Yorkshire, this activity has now been used all over the country by me or other people, and also in Kenya. To do it you need a very very very very long piece of string and some clothes pegs (you can also have tags or luggage labels if you want to write down responses in order to keep them to refer to again, but this is optional).

The string is stretched out across the space the group is using. Make sure that the two people holding the ends of the string have plenty of spare string in their hands. Begin by explaining the role of the string. The string represents Jesus life, ministry, death and resurrection. One end of the string represents his birth, the other his death and resurrection. The spare string before his birth represents the Christian belief that Jesus was alive in the Godhead before he was born. So also, the spare string at the end of his death and resurrection represents the Christian belief that Jesus is alive in the Godhead now. In representing Jesus earthly life the string is a tool, but not a

minutely accurate one. It is not really a question of how many centimetres represent a year of his life: there's no need to measure it out like that.

Invite each participant to think of an episode, saying or moment in Jesus' life which they remember. They can take a peg and clip it onto the string where they think it is represented in Jesus' life. Assure the participants that it is all right to remember the same incident as someone else, and that the position of the peg on the string is entirely their own choice. If it seems more profitable invite the whole group to gossip together informally before they come forward to present their choice. This may give some members more confidence as it acts as a sort of rehearsal in which closer companions hear their voice and affirm their choice before the whole group hears them. Remind all participants to listen and to respect the choices made by group members.

The facilitator needs to be confident that the group can do the activity (they can), encouraging of those hesitant to take part (although it is fine to do your own remembering), a listener and observer of the behaviour of the group as a whole and willing to learn something new every time the remembered gospel is explored.

How many pegs?

A group might wonder how many pegs they will need to do the activity. Have as many as possible. Don't stint on the pegs. It's fine to have unused pegs but it is not very encouraging to run out of pegs when participants still have things to remember. The same is true of time. Try not to rush the process, although sometimes you will have to fit it into a particular time frame. It can take from 10-30 minutes to over an hour depending on how many people take part and what the group does with the responses.

I was once challenged by a group of youth workers with the question 'what happens if there is only one peg on the string'. In other words what should the response be if only one participant puts a peg on the string to remember an incident from the gospel? First it is important to remember that the facilitator is only one of the participants. The facilitator may need to consider a response to this situation but other members of the group may also respond. The activity does not come with instructions for every possible situation. There is a significant amount of risk involved in commencing the remembered gospel process. Anything could happen. Don't panic but continue to engage with the group in the way that seems best suited to the situation. My daughter and co-facilitator, Hannah Warwicker, said in relation to this question: 'Embrace the peg'. That is the challenge of the Jesus life-line.

Remembering the gospel with two pegs

About two weeks after the question was posed to me, I found myself in a situation with a group in which two pegs had been placed on the string. The group were young children aged 3-5 years in a preschool unit. The two pegs were 'Mary rides on

a donkey to Bethlehem' and 'Jesus rides on a donkey on Palm Sunday'. Donkeys were a big feature of remembering the gospel in this group. They now sponsor a donkey who has visited them from time to time, particularly before Easter.

The two pegs were relevant and adequate. They helped me to understand what this group remembered of the gospel and gave us plenty of things to build on. There could be more donkey stories like 'Jesus goes to Egypt as a baby' or the Good Samaritan's donkey. There could be other animal stories like 'Jesus is like a mother chicken to us' or the story of the boy who feeds the pigs in the prodigal son. The two pegs marked to important points in the life of Jesus, one near the beginning and one near the end. The space in between and around the pegs was ripe for development. A repeat of the activity several months later had many more pegs on the string as we were able to remember many more stories together, having also gained confidence in the meantime.

Ages and abilities

This activity, and remembering the gospel in general, is not just for children. Although the illustration just given is probably one of the youngest groups I have worked with over a period of time, I have worked with groups of all ages and abilities and I have not yet met a group that cannot do the activity, both in Britain and East Africa. We all have a remembered bible in us may sound like a wild generalisation, but I have not yet been disproved. In a diverse school community where students come from different faith backgrounds it is not only Christians who can and will remember things to put on the string. For example this conversation between two 17 year old boys, one white and 'not religious' (boy 1), one British Asian and Muslim (boy 2):

Boy 1: What happens when he gets to Jerusalem? I don't know; I'm not religious.

Boy 2: That's when they arrest him and kill him on the cross.

Note here that the Muslim boy presents the Christian view of the story, i.e. that Jesus dies on the cross, not the Muslim view that he doesn't.

Where physical, sensory, mental or communication impairments impact on the participants the Jesus life-line and the remembered bible in general can be accessed by a wide range of people as it is a group rather than an exclusively individual activity. Observation, listening, support and encouragement across the group are important characteristics to foster in participants. Examples may be signed or mimed or drawn or more than one participant may 'share' a peg with their neighbours.

The core gospel remembered

So what is in the core gospel? Here is a list of the most frequently recalled examples from the string activity.

The annunciation –to Mary, to Joseph, 'Mary and Joseph work it out';

Some other pre-birth story – like going to Bethlehem on a donkey;

Birth stories – inns, stables, shepherds, wise persons, angels, stars and so on;

Infancy stories – the presentation at the temple, the responses of Simeon and Anna, the escape to Egypt, the massacre of the innocents, the return to Nazareth;

Childhood stories – ‘Jesus went to visit his granddad’, ‘Jesus went round all the houses’ and other episodes based on childhood experiences;

Adolescence – Jesus got lost on a visit to the temple, Jesus taught in the temple, Jesus went back with his parents and was obedient to them;

Baptism – Jesus was baptised by John the Baptist;

First steps to ministry – the temptations, the calling of the first disciples, the first miracles like water into wine at Cana;

Main part of ministry – Jesus teaching, in the Synagogue, the Sermon on the Mount, parables of seeds, coins, sheep, sons, workers, Samaritans etc, sayings about light, salt, love, I am sayings, miracles of healing, blind people, deaf people, paralysed people, other outsiders, feeding people, travelling around, calming storm, walking on water, Transfiguration, raising Lazarus, ‘He told them he was going to die’;

The Passion – entry to Jerusalem with palms and donkey/s, visiting the temple, visiting Bethany, teaching, cursing the fig tree, last supper, praying in the garden, arrest, trial/s, carrying the cross, crucifixion, death, body placed in tomb;

The Resurrection - Easter morning, empty tomb, speaking to Mary, the walk to Emmaus, the ‘not-last supper’, speaking to Thomas, the breakfast on the beach, speaking to Peter;

And after – The Ascension, the promise of the Holy Spirit.

Some surprises

Although this summary does not represent every single response ever given to the Jesus life-line activity it does seek to capture some of the richness of the responses received in many different places. Those responses in inverted commas are actual responses that I will comment on further.

‘Mary and Joseph work it out’

I asked a group of 14 year olds ‘Where did the Gospel begin?’ Some of the responses were about Jesus birth in a stable and someone mentioned the annunciation. But one said ‘When Mary and Joseph work it out’ which seems to me a good way of putting it and is based on understanding parenting from within a family.

For this 14 year-old boy the gospel began which Mary and Joseph talked it through and agreed to go ahead with it.

Childhood and adolescence

For many people the dearth of material in the printed bible about Jesus' childhood and adolescence is frustrating and an omission. It has been addressed in some gospels described as apocryphal, but few of the participants I have met have heard of these. Children do sometimes suggest examples based on their own experiences of growing up. Two memorable ones include 'Jesus went to visit his granddad' and 'Jesus went round all the houses', clearly something the participants themselves did but not unlikely for a boy in first century Galilee. However, less likely is 'Jesus got an X-box for Christmas' as this would not be first century stuff.

'He told them he was going to die';

Occasionally participants remember surprising things. One recalled 'he told them he was going to die', which is crucial to the story as a whole but is not often remembered specifically.

'the not-last supper'

The supper at Emmaus is a commonly remembered Easter story. It took a group of 14 year-old boys from a housing estate in Huddersfield to call it 'the not last supper'. Such a good description I have called it that ever since: the memorial of all memorials and one Christians continually re-enact.

Conclusions

'Your mum mentions the bible more than other Revs' said one student to another (my daughter) about three weeks after I started as school chaplain. Hannah did say to me 'You say a lot about Jesus, whilst others mostly just mention God'. This is because I believe that who Jesus is for us lies at the centre of faith and we cannot decide that if we've never met him, never remembered him. As the current Archbishop of Canterbury said at a recent royal baptism to the chosen godparents: their simple task was to 'make sure he knows who this Jesus is'. It is the first priority of my ministry and will continue to be

I practice the use of the remembered bible everyday in one form or another (e.g: oral, visual, aural, kinetic/dramatic) and have now done so for nearly 20 years with different groups of people of all ages and abilities in Britain and more recently in East Africa. It is a useful tool to use with both 'insiders' to the faith and 'outsiders'. It continues to be the bedrock of my ministry: I do nothing without it. Furthermore I continue to record the responses it evokes, the ways in which it contributes to building community and the activities I develop through using it. I'm grateful for this sabbatical (May to August 2013) as an opportunity to reflect on this.

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