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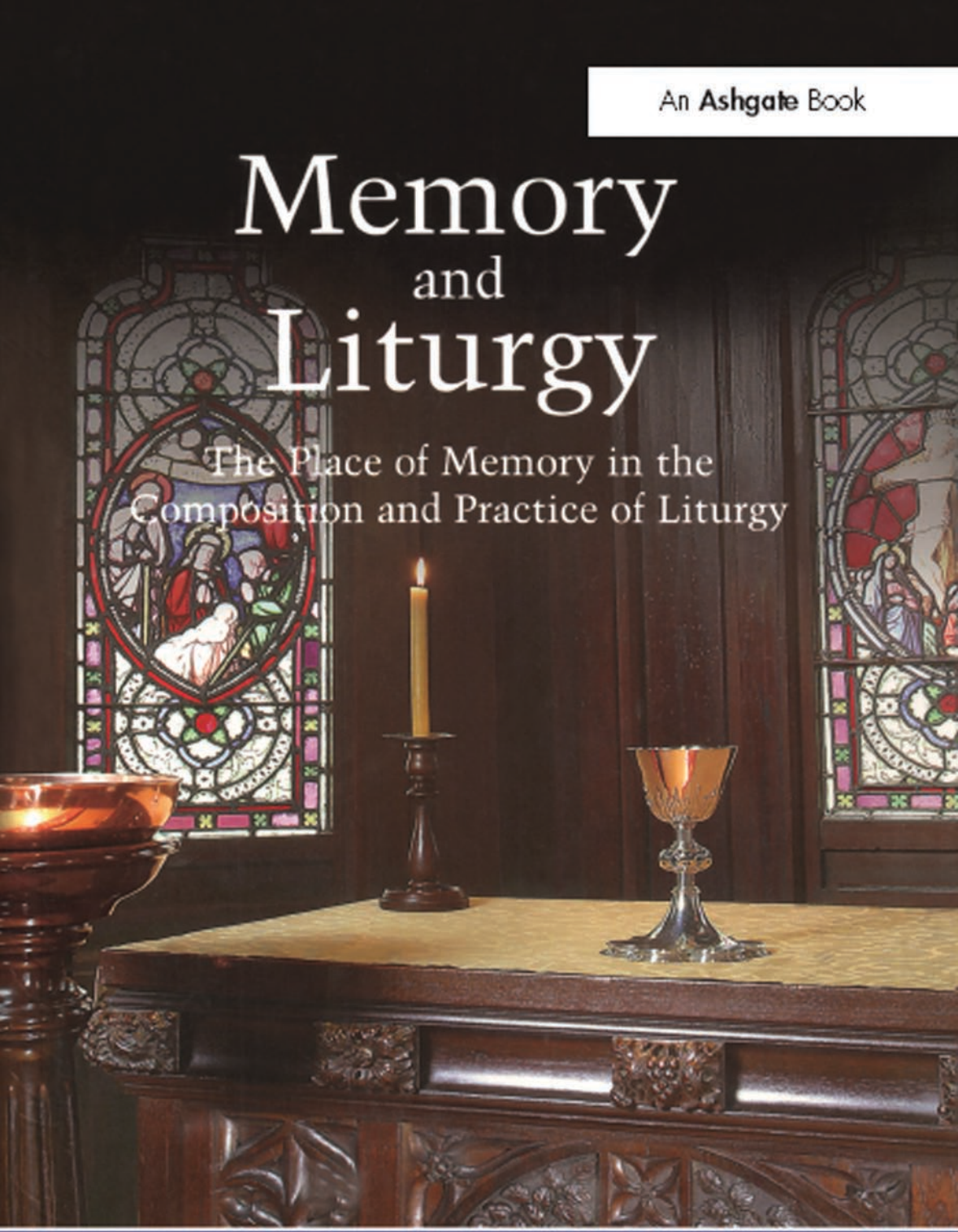
Memory and Liturgy

The Place of Memory in the Composition and Practice of Liturgy



PETER ATKINS

MEMORY AND LITURGY

Memory is a major factor in the composition and practice of liturgy. Recent research into how the brain and memory function points the way to how liturgy can best meet the needs of worshippers.

In *Memory and Liturgy*, Peter Atkins draws on the fruits of his research into the process of the brain and our memory and applies it to liturgical worship. His extensive experience in writing and using liturgy keeps this book rooted in reality. In its ten chapters the author applies the functioning of the brain and the memory to our remembrance of God in worship; God's memory of us through Baptism; our remembrance of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist; the corporate memory of the community created through worship; the healing of memories of sin and pain through forgiveness; three aids to help us worship; the process of continuity and change in liturgy; and the connection between memory, imagination and hope.

The conclusion summarizes the main practical issues. This provides a check-list for those serving on Liturgical Commissions and those involved in the teaching of the practice of liturgy. This book is a positive contribution to the ongoing search for suitable liturgical worship and music for the twenty-first century.

In memory
of all those saints and colleagues
who have inspired me
with the words and drama
of liturgical worship

Memory and Liturgy

The Place of Memory in the Composition and Practice of Liturgy

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Acknowledgements

My love of liturgy was first inspired by Dean Dwelly at Liverpool Cathedral in the 1950s. He had an exact eye for colour and movement and so was able to match the grandeur of the emerging building with the activity of the human actors in the drama of the divine liturgy. A greater appreciation of liturgy grew through the new developments in the celebration of the Eucharist put in place by John Robinson as dean of Clare College in Cambridge in the latter part of the same decade. In the 1960s my inspiration came from the new prayer book for the Province of Melanesia in the Pacific which was devised by Canon Charles Fox, one of its honoured linguists and saints. Soon after my return to New Zealand I was invited to join the Commission set up there to revise the services for the Anglican Church of that Province. I shared that task for the next 17 years. It was a privilege to be part of that multi-talented team so inclusive of age, gender, culture, language and church order. *A New Zealand Prayer Book/He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa*[1] was published for Advent 1989, and twelve months later I was teaching Liturgy and Worship as part of the degree course at St John's College in Auckland, again in an ecumenical team situation. The regular inspiration for my worship came from a daily and weekly pattern of services in parish, diocesan and college settings. To all of these 'saints' who helped to develop my relationship to God through worship I acknowledge a deep debt of gratitude.

As I record this list, a host of vivid memories is evoked, rich and powerful in their association with people, places and prayer. It was a few years ago when I wrote and gathered the material for *Worship 2000! – Resources to celebrate the new millennium*[2] that I began to make the connection between memory and liturgy. I wanted to find out how our brains create the memories which bring to mind the wonderful experiences of God in worship – both for the individual and for the corporate body of Christ. I also wanted to understand more fully why some people resisted the new words for worship, and declared that we were trampling on sacred memories. Those questions so teased my brain that I knew that I needed help to discover the answers. My years on the Faculty of Theology at the University of Auckland encouraged me to take advantage of their interdisciplinary approach to learning. Through the dean of Theology I was put in touch with the deans of the Schools of Medicine and of Education. Respectively they found for me two colleagues for this journey of discovery.

Dr Roger Booth undertakes teaching and research in the area of brain function within the department of Molecular Medicine. I warmly acknowledge Roger's patience and guidance as I read the literature, watched the videos he lent me, and with him attended a series of Robb lectures at the University given by Professor

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[1] First published by Collins, and referred to as NZPB (1989) in this work.

[2] Peter Atkins (1999), *Worship 2000! – Resources to celebrate the new millennium.*

Steven Pinker from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.[3] Dr Booth helped me to find the words to describe the working of the brain and the memory function, and then apply these findings to my own field of liturgy. Of course what I have written is my own, but I acknowledge Dr Booth's quiet expertise in pointing me in the right direction.

For Chapter 7 of this book, 'Memories of Sin and Pain', I needed to have access to any research into ways to 'correct' memory patterns laid in the brain as a result of misinterpretation of data or from false learning. Dr Richard Hamilton of the Research Centre for Interventions in Teaching and Learning made available to me the summaries of research printed in journals which set out ways to correct mis-learnt or mistaken concepts in the fields of science. I acknowledge with gratitude the way Richard so quickly realized the issues I was raising and provided me with the photocopies of the relevant research. Dr Hamilton also read my draft material and gave me useful comments. I was fortunate for this chapter that I had access to Dr Charles Elliott's outstanding research[4] into the connection between memory and the theology of salvation which helped me to fill in the gaps in my understanding of the way the brain can undertake the process of accepting forgiveness. Again the words in Chapter 7 are mine, but the research comes from specialists in a wider field.

In retirement I am so fortunate to have the resources of a first-rate theological library near my home. I acknowledge the help of Mrs Judith Bright and the staff at the library of the College of St John the Evangelist, Auckland, both in locating material and also letting me borrow armfuls of books for a month at a time. My own liturgical library has been enlarged during the last six years as I have had the privilege to review a number of recent books in this specialist area. As a regular contributor to *Reviews in Religion and Theology*[5] I am grateful to its editor, Dr Isabel Wollaston, for selecting such books for me to review.

The proposal for this book was submitted to Sarah Lloyd, publisher at Ashgate Publishing Ltd of Aldershot in May 2001. I was very grateful for her enthusiasm and for the advice of her series editors for Liturgy, Worship and Society. In their wisdom they encouraged me to widen the research and take 18 months for the writing process. This has indeed given me the chance to explore issues at greater depth, and also maintain my other writing programmes. I acknowledge the value of this advice and the care they have taken to bring this book to publication.

Finally I pay tribute once again to the constant support of my wife Rosemary, who so patiently debates with me the flow of enthusiastic ideas I pour forth and thus helps me to mature them into more worthy offerings for a wider audience. Like me she shares a passion for good liturgy.

To all these friends, living and departed, I acknowledge my indebtedness, and give thanks to God for the way liturgy has been sustained as a living and memorable activity within the whole Body of Christ.

Auckland, New Zealand All Saints' Day 2002

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[3] See Steven Pinker (1999), *How the mind works.*

[4] Elliott Charles (1995), *Memory and Salvation.*

[5] Published by Blackwell, Oxford, five times a year.

Introduction

Curiosity

Curiosity is a very human attribute, and curiosity is to be largely credited for the germ of the idea that in the end gave rise to this book. I had heard about the current research into the working of the brain. At the same time I was saddened by the difficulties experienced by a number of friends who were suffering from a severe loss of memory. My curiosity was aroused as to what the new research had to tell us about the way the brain worked. In particular I was eager to know what caused the memory to function, and why and how it could lose its ability to 'remember'. This basic curiosity was extended when I realized what an important place my own memories had in my approach to the composition and practice of liturgy. How did my brain cope with continuity and change? Why was I angry when a hymn was sung to a different tune to the one I remembered and with which I had many positive associations? So the ideas for *Memory and Liturgy* were born from basic curiosity. That is a curiosity that I trust those engaged in the composition and practice of liturgy will share. As they follow the findings of the research, my hope is that they will discover how liturgy can fulfill its objective of enhancing our relationship with God and keeping the nature and presence of God in the forefront of our minds.

Two Commands in the Liturgy

There are two key phrases in the liturgy of the Eucharist which hold strong memories for me. The first is part of the 'Summary of the Law' which in the New Zealand Prayer Book liturgy often precedes the invitation to confession:

> Hear the teaching of Christ:
> you shall love the Lord your God
> . . . with all your mind.[1]

The second comes later in the same liturgy during the Great Thanksgiving Prayer:

> Take, eat, this is my body
> which is given for you;
> do this to remember me.

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[1] NZPB (1989), p. 406.

After supper he took the cup;
. . . do this as often as you drink it,
to remember me.[2]

Love God with all Your Mind

On hearing these words and knowing of the current research I asked how I could really love God with all my mind if I did not know what my mind did and how it worked. What was the connection between my mind and my brain? Now that modern scientific discovery was revealing the working of the brain, could the brain also be regarded as the seat of the emotions (the heart in Biblical terms), and of our religious capacity to respond to God (the soul in Biblical terms)? I had heard about the theory that there were right and left sides to the brain – one governing a person's feelings and the other one's logical processes, though that is far too simple an explanation of both the research and the findings as I was to discover as I wrote this book. My interest in the Myers Briggs personality preference theory has developed as I have shared with Professor Leslie Francis the task of writing a series of Gospel commentaries in the *Personality Type and Scripture* series.[3] I wanted to discover how that theory might be connected to the functioning of the brain. So the command to love God with all my mind stimulated my quest for knowledge.

Do This to Remember Me

In my teaching of liturgy and worship as part of my duties as a lecturer in theology in the University of Auckland I had become more and more interested in the meaning of the word 'remember' when it was used in the Great Thanksgiving Prayer. I considered that if I could really come to grips with what this word meant I could begin to sort out the various positions taken in the sharp debate about the way in which Christ could be said to be present during the Eucharist. My elementary grasp of the Hebrew language has taught me that the best way to understand words in another language is to see the context in which they are used on various occasions, and also the associated ideas that are linked to those words. When I was engaged in the current research I realized that 'linkage' and 'association' (or reference as it is also called) is a basic feature of memory. So this book has helped me to see the word 'to remember' in two new ways:

1 'To remember' can be causative, that is, this object or idea will cause you to remember that one.

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[2] NZPB (1989), p. 422.

[3] Published by Mowbray/Continuum with the titles: *Exploring Luke's Gospel* (2000); *Exploring Matthew's Gospel* (2001); *Exploring Mark's Gospel – Revised and expanded edition* (2002).

2 'To remember' is to link past, present and future in a single fold. The brain has this fantastic capacity to work in a multi-time zone without loosing touch (if it is functioning 'normally') with the reality of time. I can make the past present, and I can imagine the future now, while at the same time remaining aware of the 'history' of the past, and the 'image' of the future. The brain does not operate on the 'either-or' principle, but has a 'both-and' ability.

So in the liturgy the call 'to remember' at the time of thanksgiving for the bread and the wine at the Eucharist can *cause* the brain to recall the presence of Christ for this moment of time while also recognizing that Jesus is part of history and that his presence now foreshadows the coming again of Christ in future glory. So I approached the writing of Chapter 5 of this book with a new set of insights.

Seeing Inside My Head

I began the exciting journey of discovery through research for this book with that eerie feeling of looking at my inner self from an outside position. I knew I had to learn to think about the very activity of thinking. I had to see inside my head and observe the very pattern of thoughts about which I was thinking. I became aware that much of the research into the brain had taken place in the last fifty years. When I asked 'why?' the response was a sobering one. Until we had modern scanning machines it was only possible to observe the brains of those who were dead, when the brain had ceased to function. In the last fifty years it has become possible to observe (though still with some difficulty) the workings of the living brain. Such research is still a guessing game where the researcher must fill in the gaps to make deductions from what has been observed. But then the 'guessing game' is exactly what the brain has been set up to play, and it is remarkably adept at guessing and testing the appropriate answers.

To undertake the research of seeing inside my head I had the good fortune to meet Dr Roger Booth of the School of Medicine at the University of Auckland. His generosity I have already acknowledged on page vii. With his help I was able to write the first two chapters of this book. Originally I thought that I could cover the functioning of the brain and the memory in one chapter, but I quickly realized that these were two different topics and that each had major implications for the composition and practice of liturgy.

The Brain at Work

Chapter 1 records what I discovered about the way the brain works. I was humbled by what I learnt and fell in awe 'at the feet of my Creator'. Humanity is indeed 'wonderfully made'. In our brains we have a truly amazing instrument not only for gathering information but also for computing it so that we can act on what we have received. The immensity of its design and its capabilities still leaves me with a sense of mystery. In addition it is the instrument that allows us to be in touch with the divine Creator. It is the home of the spirit which can link us to the Divine

Spirit – and this makes worship and relationship possible. Sir Charles Sherrington speaks of a 'cosmic dance' which occurs in the brain.[4] For me this became a parable of the great cosmic dance in which my spirit engages every time I take part in worship. On those occasions I link with worshippers present in person and present in memory and in imagination, and join the 'dance' of adoration and praise to the Triune God within whose nature is the ultimate dance of love and wholeness.[5]

I conclude the first chapter with some initial thoughts on the implications of this research for liturgical worship. Other implications keep occurring throughout the book, and so I have decided that these should be gathered together in summary form in a Conclusion.

How the Memory Works

Because the focus in this book is primarily on the memory function, Chapter 2 is devoted to a greater understanding of how our memory works. As what we know is closely tied to what we remember, this chapter is as much about knowledge as it is about memory. Before my research I had not realized that we imitate to learn and learn to imitate from the cradle to the grave. This puts a responsibility on each generation to 'model' the art and practice of worship for the next generation. Worship cannot survive as an activity for individuals. It is a corporate art and a corporate responsibility. This observation and some guidance from the series editors at Ashgate Publishing caused me to add a chapter on corporate memory (Chapter 6) to my first proposal for the contents of the book.

We can only know who we are if we remember to whom we are related. This is a sober reminder to a society that tries to glorify the individual to the point that individuals are encouraged to think that they can cast themselves adrift from the community as a whole. The way our memory accumulates knowledge tells us this is nonsense, and dangerous nonsense at that.

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[4] See Chapter 1, page 5.

[5] This is well expressed in the final verse of a hymn by Marie Barrell, one of New Zealand's many composers:

> Great and deep the Spirit's purpose,
> nothing shall be left to chance.
> All the lives will be united
> in the everlasting dance.
> All fulfilled and all perfected,
> each uniquely loved and known,
> Christ in glory unimagined
> once for all receives his own.

By 'unimagined' I assume she means 'on the edge of our imagination', for what we cannot imagine does not register in the mental process. (See Chapter 10.)

Remembering God

Once I enter into worship I remember who I am and to whom I am related. The basis of worship is the relationship between us and God, and this relationship is re-enacted and further developed every time we remember God. The advantage of the way our brains are designed is that they can hold together a vast array of memories and knowledge so that we can integrate a substantial picture of the nature of the Almighty. The regular repetition of the knowledge about God allows the worshipper to hold on to the great variety of such knowledge. The tendency in modern liturgy is to multiply alternatives in the forms of prayer and to simplify theology. Liturgy, because it is frightened of being boring to the worshipper, provides much variety in expressing the one simplified theological statement 'God is love'. The account of the many-sided nature of God often becomes shortened. The temptation in worship has been to reduce the number and length of the Scripture readings and frequently to omit the full statements of the belief of the Church as expressed in one of the Creeds. Thus the worshipper, who is capable of integrating a multifaceted presentation of the nature of God, is presented with a trimmed-down theology within the liturgy. Our brains call out to be used more extensively and become dissatisfied with the limited opportunity to remember God in all God's fullness.

Baptism – God's Remembrance of Us

The sacrament of Baptism has been a cause of division as well as unity for Christians. Baptism has been widely accepted as the means of entry into the whole Christian community, but how baptism should be administered and to whom, has been the subject of deep divisions. If we approach this sacrament as the assurance of God's memory of us, a whole new dimension emerges. In Chapter 4 we will see how the brain is capable of constantly updating the relationship with God established at baptism. We remember who we are because of what God has done for humanity. Our own very name recalls both our birth and our new birth in Christ at baptism. In this chapter I examine in turn five metaphors for baptism and show how memory is vital to the way we can bring these metaphors to life. Such life can only remain current as the memories are reactivated through regular worship. One of the key reasons for worship is to prevent spiritual amnesia – the loss of memory as to who we are and who God is. The connection between baptism and worship therefore needs to be frequently re-presented in our liturgy, and I have outlined ways in which this might be done.

Remembering Jesus Christ

In the heart of the book, in Chapter 5, I examine the central topic of how we remember Jesus Christ. I aim to show how research into the functioning of the brain helps us to see how our memory of Jesus Christ is enabled through reinterpretation and re-enactment. The sacrament of the Eucharist provides us with

all the necessary 'triggers' for this memory to stay active. First of all the 'memory' is evoked through Scripture as it is read in the fellowship of the Church. Then the 'memory' is re-enacted through the spirit of prayer and the communion of contemplation. In particular worshippers find the memory of Jesus Christ, the Risen and Ascended Lord, comes into sharp focus at the Eucharistic Table. So in this chapter I discuss the ways that our brains are capable of interpreting 'presence' and provide us with new insights into what Jesus might have meant by his words 'Do this to remember me'. When we examine the various parts of the Liturgy of the Eucharist in detail we can see how memory provides the means for the worshippers to recall the person and presence of Christ, both as Saviour and Lord.

Corporate Memory

The person of Christ, Christ's body, and the body of the Church, are all so linked through our memory at the Eucharist that our brains tell us that each individual is forever linked with the corporate whole. I was particularly conscious of this corporate aspect of our lives when in mid-2000 I was asked to provide the sermon for a Commemoration service at my Cambridge college.[6] A group of alumni from the late 1950s were gathered to assist the college celebrate the generosity of its leading scholars and benefactors from the time of its foundation more than four hundred years earlier. This corporate memory still inspires its current vibrant community of scholars as they face the changing circumstances of today's world. Their tradition is sustained by the best of the past as it is adapted to meet the challenges of the present context. At the same time they must amend the tradition of learning to meet the emerging, just imagined, circumstances of the future. Out of its memory it forms its continuing identity and passes on its evolving story to the next generation. As always with the gathering of alumni (and now also alumnae) there is a temptation towards nostalgia, but if we allow our brains to function properly, they allow us to stay firmly rooted in the reality of the present situation. As the two generations of scholars meet, many hopes are expressed about the future health and effectiveness of the ongoing community. Memory and imagination combine to make certain that the future is at least equal to the past.

As I shared the sermon in the College chapel I was conscious of the heavy responsibility that rests with each generation to keep the 'tradition' in these memories alive. Once the tradition has been lost the bonds with the past and the hopes for the future are broken. Equally society as a whole is in danger of losing so many important memories – particularly in the area of corporate worship. The Church needs to consider afresh its responsibility to remind society of its need for corporate worship, and to find ways to reach out to the wider community before it loses the art of functioning as a worshipping body. I took my experience at my own college into account as I wrote the material for Chapter 6 and looked at the connection between worship and the maintenance of corporate memory. This

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[6] Commemoration of Benefactors at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, 1 July 2000.

chapter ends with an examination of the opportunities provided to the community to celebrate the 'rites of passage' with appropriate liturgy.

Healing Memories of Guilt and Pain

The healing of painful memories has been a focus of attention in society as we become even more aware of the hurts that have been afflicted on so many of our community. Chapter 7 examines whether it is possible for the brain and memory function to erase or let go such painful memories in such a way that the outcome is positive for the health of the individual and of society. I was fortunate in being able to access some key research in the field of science education through the good offices of Dr Richard Hamilton of the Department of Education at the University of Auckland. I aimed to apply this to the field of liturgy, and I found many key areas where the research was very useful. Charles Elliott's book *Memory and Salvation*[7] also helped me to see some of the implications in relation to sin and forgiveness. In particular I am convinced that the brain has the ability to re-weight the significance of a memory by laying alongside the memory of hurt and guilt the more powerful memory of salvation and forgiveness. Christians exercise such reworking of significance every Good Friday when the cross, the symbol of shame, becomes the cross of glorious redemption. At the conclusion of Chapter 7 I examine the role of liturgy in bringing about the mending of a memory, while still retaining the memory of the consequences of sin that are so hurtful to the individual and the community. Again the brain is capable of this both-and conjunction, even when the joy of healing and the pain of hurt are found in such contrary memories.

Aids to Remembrance

I am by birth an Irishman, and so I have always valued a sense of holy space, symbol and time. Anyone who has had the opportunity to stand beneath one of the towering carved high crosses of the Celtic Church will know of its sense of the sacred. Such crosses – made first in wood and then in stone – marked the places where the itinerant missionary monks would stand and proclaim the Christian gospel. The carvings on the cross retold the story of God's people and became an aid to remembrance for those who heard the story for the first time. Later generations raised a church building near to those already holy places to house the faithful and to give them a continuing memory of the holiness of God. There the worshippers would find a sense of awe and mystery, and learn to develop their relationship with God. The same God would also go before them to every hill and valley, and across the seas to the furthest continents and islands of the globe. Such missionaries in turn would carry with them the symbols of the sacred to recall their memory of the continuing presence of God in Word and Sacrament.

In Chapter 8 I examine the power of such spaces and symbols to evoke our

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[7] Elliott, Charles (1995).

remembrance of God. At the same time the way that the brain operates makes us realize that spaces and symbols can become sterile if the memory of the community is unable to maintain reference and links to the reality to which these point. The Church has also used 'time' as another aid to remembering who God is and what God has done. The annual calendar is a key instrument by which both Church and society 'remembers' the Christian story, and stays in touch with its power to transform lives.

Continuity and Change

As one of those involved for many years in the revision of liturgy and the composition of new liturgical material I was fascinated by the reaction – both in myself and in others – to the issues of continuity and change. I have delivered, and suffered, tirades on the topic and have always wondered what were the factors involved in such reactions. In Chapter 9 I set out the fruits of my research, and also of some of my experience. I now more fully realize why some people had such varying responses to 'new' forms of liturgy. Much of the enthusiasm and the bitterness could have been better understood if we had spent some more time in examining the factors in continuity and change, even if this meant a little less time for the contents of the proposed liturgies.

What was true about liturgy in general, was, and still is, true about continuity and change in music, as every congregation and its musicians know only too well. In the last twenty years there has been a crescendo of new music within worship, and this has led to both excitement and confusion. Brian Wren in *Praying Twice*[8] has provided us with much good advice and comment on the way that we might handle the opportunities for new music without disregarding our treasured memories of music from a previous generation. He and I both point to the value of tradition without losing our enthusiasm for contemporary words and music.

Memory, Imagination and Hope

In Chapter 10 I look at the connection between memory, imagination and hope. The imaginative function is a key part of the brain's work. Without it we could not be in touch with the Divine or see ourselves beyond the immediate situation in which we live. Using the available research I describe the nature of imagination and apply that to the way liturgy can exercise that function in relation to the Divine. Imagination is an essential component in the art of praying, both for ourselves and others. In Biblical terms there is a strong connection between the working of the Holy Spirit and the function of the imagination. This is not only true in prayer but also in the receipt of guidance for the future. For that future we are sustained by hope, a hope that imagination is able to foresee and foretaste, long before we can attain the future in reality.

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[8] Wren, Brian (2000).