

February 20

Mysteries as Memory

“Do this in remembrance of Me.” (I Cor. 11:24b)

My children grew up reading all sorts of children’s books – just as entertaining for me as they were for the kids.... Don’t start laughing.

We read several different Bible story books, typically with a simplified account, stripping away the minor characters and the nuances of the story. Even the artwork was simple and cartoonish in most cases.

But the children also read other books with elaborate artwork and some fairly astute prose. Three books by the same author were penned by an accomplished watercolor artist named Graeme Base. This might indicate that the pictures may have been superior to the writing. Although this may be true, I will say that the combination of pictures and lyrical prose did create both a joy and a potent mnemonic device.

The first book that we purchased by the author was Animalia. It is a delightful alphabet book with richly colored and very detailed paintings, sometimes spread across two pages: edge to edge with a simple little limerick employing alliteration – which truly enhanced memorizing both the words and the picture. Even to this day, I can remember that the letter “N” - includes this poem: *“Nine nautical newts navigating near Norway.”* And I believe I can probably recall most of the other poems and pictures.

How does God engender and strengthen our faith? How does He make our memory come alive? He does it through the mysterious sacraments. In the visual - God enhanced by the virtual*: visual images conjoined: color, touch, taste, texture, temperature, smell...all empowered by the living Word of God. We do remember that Jesus said, *“Do this in remembrance of Me.”* (Luke 22:19)

To this day, if I smell sulfur, I am transported back to Braddock Ave. in Pittsburgh. My office window looked out on that busy street, and I would often see trucks hauling smoking sulfur to and from one of the few remaining active steel mills in the steel city. Senses carry memory.

Of course, Jesus knew it. So when I smell the wine we use in communion, it is no coincidence that I remember mercy.

But the bread and wine, without His words, are just symbols. However, with the living Word of Christ, the elements become a real presence of Christ’s sacramental body and blood. Luther would say, *“...there are results when the Word comes to the sacrament of baptism and to the Lord’s Supper. Then we feel it as we feel the blowing of the wind; for when the Word is heard, we feel its sound in our ears.”* (WLS p. 1238).

The artist Graeme Base painted beautiful pictures. Better yet, the Lord Jesus Christ gives us beautiful reality in the elements of the sacraments – and especially in His Word. If I were to write a prayer in the tenor of the artist, I might pray:

Prayer: *Merciful Master, we praise You for Your presence – and presents! We marvel at the mystery of Your meal of mercy. The water of washing and the bread of blessing are the wonderful, illogical wages of our wandering: You have given us grace not guilt, joy not judgment, real redemption! Through communion, we remember and really receive our Redeemer! We rejoice! Amen.*

*“virtual” is used above, to signify that there is an additional sacramental presence of Christ’s body and blood, not apparent in the visual, touch, taste or olfactory receiving.