

The Day of Jesus Embedded in the Tomb

Colleagues,

Introduction: Herewith a Saturday Soliloquy (in-between ThTh postings), a somber soliloquy – but not without hope. Some ruminations stemming from yesterday's 2 Good Friday liturgies. *[I checked "soliloquy" in my Webster. First definition: The act of talking to oneself. Yes, sometimes I wonder—especially on this topic. Some of you tell me that you wonder too. Not till the second definition do we get monologue, which this Holy Saturday posting surely is.]*

1. In both of the liturgies yesterday we heard the entire Passion Story according to St. John. Though neither of the two drew any connection to the headlines on the day's newspapers, you'll not be surprised that I couldn't help doing that.
2. At two places St. John's narrative jumped across to the newspaper in my head. "Jesus said to Peter, "Put your sword into its sheath; shall I not drink the cup which the Father has given me?" Crossing to today's headlines: God does not, before Armageddon, carry out God's war of good vs. evil with hammered steel. Evil is in human hearts, which swords can readily reach, but they never kill the evil. Evil and its energies always escape from pierced hearts to take up residence elsewhere. Taking a tip from my mentor of half a century ago, Werner Elert—and making it contextual—The Evil One has equally easy access to Iraq's presidential palaces as he does to the American White House.
3. The second Johannine text came in the long dialogue

between Jesus and Pilate. Pilate reminds Jesus that he has the “exousia” to kill Jesus. [Exousia is the Greek term for “authority,” the “right” to do something. Not “power,” as so often translated.] Whereupon Jesus reminds him “You would have no exousia over me unless it had been given you from above.” To today’s headlines: The “right” of those in power—the authorities, as we call them—to kill is a delegated right. It requires God’s authorization. Jesus acknowledged Pilate’s right to kill him as his God-delegated exousia—although Pilate doubtless didn’t have a clue about that. The God-authorization for the exousia to kill is fundamental in John’s theology—also in the subsequent political theology of the Reformation.

4. So we Americans MUST ask (so Jesus ala John) where is the God-authorization for us to kill Iraqis—even one of them—let alone the thousands of corpses we’ve given them as we liberated the Iraqis? It is NOT a trivial question, though some of you have chided me as an old grump in that I, most likely, take no joy when thousands dance in the streets of Baghdad. They are not dancing on this Holy Saturday, according to the headline in our morning paper today: The Voice of Baghdad: –Yankee, Go Home! So much for “vox populi = vox dei.”
5. Ruminating (as farmboys—once cow-milkers—are likely to do) during those 2 Good Friday liturgies, I connected this Exousia conversation with another Jesus-word in Luke 12:14. When asked to adjudicate a legal case between two squabbling brothers, Jesus responded: “Man, who made me judge over you?” God-authorization for carrying out God’s left-hand work in politics and secular society is not a trivial question. Luke’s Jesus says so. Of course, you can thumb your nose at the requirement, or like Pilate be clueless about it. But if you don’t have divine authorization, then according to the divine jurisprudence

you are committing murder. Murder is killing humans with no authorization from God. Even more, it's killing with God's flat-out forbid commandment against you.

6. Crossing now to the last month of our life in America and our war in Iraq. Pre-emptive strike [PS] is the root meaning of the Biblical word for murder [M].
7. The first recorded M in the Bible was Cain's PS against Abel.
8. PS means killing someone before (as you fear) they may kill you—or if not actually kill you, be the “death” of you in some fashion in the future.
9. The “fear” factor is the sin-root of M. The actual killing in a PS is already a consequence, a fruit, of the sin-root.
10. The NRSV translation of the “don't kill” commandment uses the M word: “You shall not murder.”
11. PS is now national policy in the USA. It happened without a debate, neither in the US Congress, nor in the public square. By the time Bush proclaimed it as our nation's policy, it was already public consensus. No wonder that we consented to the policy.
12. Fear is fundamental to this policy, to this national consensus. Our new “label-without-limits” for our most dangerous enemies is “terrorists.” But note, the terror is not in them. It is in us. They goad us by seeming so fearless!
13. Terror is mega-fear. [Biblical sample: Luke 2:9 (in the Greek) says: “They feared a mega-fear.” In English “terror-stricken.”] Merely admitting our mega-fear shows that the terrorists have already won.
14. And we “have to” become counter-terrorists. “They” leave us no other option. There is only one way to counter terrorism, we reason: Do unto these enemy-others as they are doing to us. But of course, we cannot predicate the T-

word to ourselves. Our euphemism for our counter-terrorist terrorism (killing them before they kill us) is “shock and awe.” It sounds so non-lethal. It is still murder.

15. Murder as national policy, we once claimed (60 yrs ago), was the national policy of Hitler and Hirohito. Japan’s PS on Dec. 7, 1941 was a “day of infamy,” our then president said. Our PS on Iraq is a war for “their liberty,” our president now claims. And most of us agree that he’s speaking for us.
16. Hitler did a PS on Poland September 1, 1939. We still say it was murder. Even though it was perfectly clear to German people that this PS was “just” bringing back “home into the Reich” the German lands given to Poland at Versailles a mere 20 years before. One of those places was Parlin bei Bromberg, my (German, of course) grandmother’s home town. Even so we still see it as murder. Hitler’s Polish Blitzkrieg took a mere 26 days. Did ours in Iraq even take that long? We are a more developed country than Germany was.
17. Thus besides the fear-factor, there is the truth-factor. We are liars—especially about murder. Pre-emptive strike is our euphemism to make murder sound kosher. Just as “taking out” two to three thousand Iraqi defenders—that was one of our soldiers’ count—in our first “in and out” thrust into Baghdad doesn’t quite sound like bloodshed. It is not just in our propaganda to others, but to ourselves. The most deadly deception is self-deception. Even apart from the Bible, secular folks know that “the first casualty of war is truth.” Also in our American war on terrorism.
18. Truth, like fear, is the vocabulary of theology—not just psychology or morality.
19. Fear is now inescapably woven into the turf of the fallen world, populated throughout with sinners, fractured images

of God. There was a time when fear was not. In the primal Biblical narrative it came into the world with Adam and Eve's unfaith. In fact three "new" things entered human history with that act of unfaith, three realities that had never been there before: Conscience, fear, and the law of retribution. [I'm taking this from Elert's *The Christian Ethos*.]

20. Conscience. Prior to the act of unfaith, the primal parents did not evaluate their own behavior. Seems that they simply took their behavioral signals from God, letting him decide what was good or evil. And they never gave it a second thought. Especially not to evaluate ex post facto "was that right or wrong?" The question never surfaced. Couldn't surface. There was no mechanism for it. But now with un-faith functioning, they "have to" be self-evaluators. That was fundamental to the pitch of that "other voice" in the Garden, "you will be like God." And one of God's jobs is determining what's good and what's evil. But they moved into God's preserve, ate from the good-and-evil-knowledge tree. So they are now stuck—and all their offspring thereafter—yes, now condemned, to use the fruit they ate, evaluate issues of good and evil. Yes, they do start to evaluate the good/evil of others, including God himself and verdict the behavior of others as evil. "The woman thou gavest me..." "The serpent beguiled me . . . [and you know who made all the animals!]" But that first recorded evaluation of others is already passing-the-buck to get the "evil" evaluation off their backs. It arises from their self-evaluating conscience working within. That is the primal phenomenon of "conscience," internal self-evaluation. Conscience is a performance-checker now working inside everybody after the fall, "conflicting thoughts [that] will accuse or perhaps excuse them." [Rom.2:15]

21. Fear. "I was afraid," Adam tells God, "when I heard the sound of you in the garden." Fear is un-faith now focused on the future, my personal future. An anticipation that some "ouch," possibly even a lethal one, is coming toward me in the future.
22. Law of retribution. That is the third "new" reality in creation after the fall. It is the connector between conscience and fear. The awareness that what I have done in the past will indeed result in debit-credit consequences in the future. Conscience operates on the law of retribution. Good behavior will bring good in the future. Bad will bring bad. So behavioral evaluation is a necessity for survival.
23. America's current mania for security (and, of course, the rest of the fallen world is just as manic) is founded on these three "new" realities in the "old" fallen world. That mania now mobilizes our entire national enterprise. [An eerie parallel: the Nazi "SS" was the "Schutzstaffel," the "security battalion—in charge of intelligence, central security, policing action, and eventually the extermination of those considered a threat to the nation." N.B., John Ashcroft!]
24. CONSCIENCE: We are never-ending in measuring our national behavior, and telling ourselves and the world how good we are. Very little "accusing" of self; lots of "excusing."
25. FEAR: What need have we of further witnesses in USA today? Terrorism is on every tongue. Worse yet, in (most) every heart.
26. LAW OF RETRIBUTION: We fudge on this one when it comes to seeing our own "ouches" as something deserved, rightful come-uppance for our own past behavior. Even less do we have any national antennae (any longer) for acknowledging these blows (e.g., 9.11.01) as GOD's own exercise of HIS law of retribution. (Past ThTh postings noted that past US

presidents Adams and Lincoln did have such antennae) We protest our innocence—land of the free, home of the brave with liberty and justice for all. The Pharisee heresy reigns.

27. BUT we are firmly committed to exercise that retributive law on others. The thousands of corpses we've left on Iraqi soil are powerful testimony to our commitment to "retributive justice" for others. Of course, there is no retributive connector to show that they "deserved" to die because we "feared" our security threatened. It is deception. The four-letter word is liar. And to claim, as President Bush has done, that we Americans are acting in God's name—in the fight of good against evil (SIC!)—is what the Bible calls "blasphemy." Born-again Christian that he is, he patently does not see that adjudicating good and evil is at the core of human rebellion against God. And to claim that America now has that role—as he articulates it and we believe it—for the entire planet, is *lèse majesté* never before usurped in human history. The Tower of Babel attempt to take over God's turf ("the heavens") was kindergarten stuff. But Babel does sketch the Anti-god template that fractured humans regularly replicate, and that America will now bring to perfection.
28. What else is our self-assumed position as Judge of good-and-evil for the whole world but grabbing from God ALL the fruit of the "good-and-evil-knowledge-tree," with nary an apple left for God himself. Talk aboutchutzpah! Talk about hybris! And that now implemented by PS (a.k.a.murder—of 1000s) with no divine authorization! Talk about incurring God's wrath and judgment! Yes, God can delay (according to our time clocks)—and often has—even through a thousand years of our "glorious victories." He took a 100 yrs to give the Roman empire its come-uppance for its usurpation of his prerogatives. Hitler's lasted,

however, for only 12 years. Might ours go even faster? Jesus said: The last estate of that [nation] is worse than the first. But then, to signal that there was a possible escape, he called to repentance and thereafter trusting his Good News.

29. Summa: If our terror-fixation were “rightly” focused, as Adam’s was, on God our critic, that would be a great leap forward. Though not yet our healing. But it could lead to that. And the key, you’ve read it here in ThTh postings a zillion times since 9.11, is repentance. That’s the exact word used by those two US presidents cited above—in time of war! Adams in the War of Independence, and Lincoln in the Civil War. That continues to be God’s own prescription for us in the “War on T.”
30. It’s a repentance unto life! But as a nation, from our leaders on down, we haven’t a clue. And America’s alleged religious leaders don’t either. So we are going to lose this war—even if it takes 1000 yrs. Regardless of our presence in Baghdad. If you can’t, don’t, won’t talk about God in the mix of our “national security threat,” you’ve got your head in the sand. Talking “about” God, however, isn’t yet salutary. Talking “to” God is. That’s the only God-talk that can save. And in America, we probably are incapable of doing that. We are in prison. WE, who claim to be liberating others, we are the ones needing liberation. Big time. Physician, heal thyself.
31. This week, even though it was Holy Week and we were “churchy” for two of the evenings, we did catch most of the four-in-a-row two-hour PBS programs “Avoiding Armageddon” [AA]. Grand old media man Walter Cronkite was the host. [Was that name once Krankheit? Hmmm.] It was terrifying. It IS terrifying. What’s all out there, and what one single match could unleash—or perhaps is already unleashed. There were dozens of themes, theological

themes, to reflect on and respond to in the litany of impending doom and the counsel given by many. And it was all focused on AVOIDING Armageddon. But God never got mentioned—neither in the analysis nor in the avoidance counsel. Talk about straining at gnats and swallowing camels!. With one exception. See below.

32. Neither Cronkite, nor any of his dozens of super-experts from all sides all over the world, ever mentioned the word. Significant for his absence in AA was God. Can you imagine that? For 8 hours focused on the Biblical term Armageddon, the site of “the battle on the great day of God the Almighty” [Rev. 16:16], they forgot to mention God! Only in America.
33. There was, however, one constant exception: Whenever Muslims were interviewed—and there were lots of them, some calmer than others—they were unable NOT to mention God. Armageddon talk for them meant God-talk. Had extra-terrestrial beings caught the program, the conclusion would be perfectly clear: “Muslim analysis is correct: the West is indeed godless. Muslims were talking about God all the time. The Western folks never. Not even in response to the Muslim God-talk.” They would have concluded: “If there is a deity operative on that strange blue planet, we’re sure whose side he’ll be on.”
34. This is patently not a plug for Islam. Examined through the lenses of the Reformation, Muslim theology hypes “deus absconditus,” God hidden. That needs radical help from God-in-Christ. Its way of salvation is performance and reward. That formula needs the same radical transformation. But at least they talk about, and to, God. Not to talk about God at all is cream-puffing the Muslims’ God-talk. Worse still, it is cream-puffing God himself. For which it is known that there are lethal consequences. Call it the law of retribution, operative since day one of

fractured Eden. That retributive axiom now in operation throughout God's world was not Adam's invention. It has God's signature in the corner. It hovers over our nation as never before.

35. Listening to God's critique by itself will save no one. Remember Judas. But without listening to God's critical call to repentance, you can't even HEAR the Good News word called Easter. When repentance happens, good things can follow. Remember Peter. He got Eastered. Jesus gave the formulas—both for the bad news, and for the good. The former, "Except you repent, you will all likewise perish." The latter, "Repent and believe the Good News."
36. Maybe nations, as such, can't "believe" the Good News—it's hard to imagine—but they can repent. Besides John Adams and Abraham Lincoln, all the Hebrew prophets said so. Jesus agreed. Repentance is the day(s) before Eastering. To get to that Sunday the road leads through a mortifying Friday and a grave-embedded Saturday. Even if "nations" can't believe, thier security

Yours in THAT Easter Joy!

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