

2004 Won't be a Happy New Year in the USA, So Long As

Colleagues, 2004 won't be a Happy New Year in the USA – as long as we're still in denial.

Background:

For the Sundays in December Fred Danker and I have been Bible Class leaders at our parish church here in St. Louis. Fred, as some of you know, is the world's superstar lexicographer for the Greek New Testament. [Check <Amazon.com> for the specs on his "Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament," most recent edition 2000.] Our parish PR said: "Read the Christmas stories together with Fred and Ed." The two of us did a pas-de-deux on Luke 2 (shepherds et al) and then on Matthew 2 (Herod and the Magi). Fred gave the "big picture" presented by each evangelist. I took each text through the Crossings matrix (diagnosis-prognosis) and then crossed it over to us folks in the room.

So last Sunday, December 28, it was my turn with the Magi. I took Bob Bertram's classic on this text from back in 1980 and presented the paradigm. It's all about authority. There are two kings of the Jews in the text. Herod in Jerusalem and Jesus in Bethlehem. It's about regime change. You know there's gonna be trouble. Bertram calls it a cliff-hanger.

Herod, though king of the JEWS, exercises his authority in "gentile" fashion—authority OVER with the folks under. When push comes to shove, the underlings get sacrificed so that the monarch remains. Au contraire the king down in Bethlehem. He comes with "Jewish" authority, authentic Jewish authority, where the king is shepherd, and when push comes to shove, the king dies so that the sheep may survive. David is the classic model—though he too strayed into the gentile mode with Bathsheba

and Uriah—and the one in Bethlehem is a son of David. That's not just genealogy; it's the label for "authority UNDER" the ones you're shepherding, not authority OVER them. To wit, "down" in Bethlehem.

See Matthew 20 for Jesus' own discourse on these two different paradigms for authority—over and under. I used two visuals for this. Two equilateral triangles, each with a crown at one of the points. One triangle held point-up with crown at the top, one held point-down with the crown down. Thus one where the underlings are there to keep the king at the top. The other with the king underneath to keep the people up. Though all his disciples get exposed as lusting for gentile authority, "it shall not be so among you," Jesus says. His authority is Jewish, not top-down, but bottom-up, with the ruler beneath the ruled, serving them, not being served by them. Authority not restricted—and jealously guarded—by the one at the top (and only one can be king of the mountain), but shared—yes, wantonly passed on—by this king at the bottom to all whom this king upholds. Especially the authority to be called—and rightfully so—God's own kids.

Underlings are always potential threats for the spot at the top. They get uppity. But in the other paradigm, with the monarch down under, they are themselves already "overlings," no threats at all for the crown at point-down. 'Fact is, their advance is his success.

But I digress.

So we did the 3 steps of diagnosis—astray, excluding, excluded—and 3 of prognosis—shepherded, including, returning (with this Bertram bon mot about the Magi "returning via the Jerusalem by-pass." Returning to their old tasks in the Gentile world, but with a twist that must have looked upside down to

their fellow point-uppers). Then came the crossing to us. How do these six terms link to our lives? Seemed that most all of the paradigms of our daily life are Gentile Herodian triangles—workplace, families, societies, economies, even denominational structures. Nations, even democracies, work with point-up models of authority. And now after 9/11 in the USA, so it seemed to some, with Herodian vengeance against those seeking to topple us from our pyramid-peak position. Others said not so. As discussion warmed up, I sought a temporary calming interlude.

Glad to see grandson Peter in the crowd, home for Christmas from his first semester at Reed College in Portland, Oregon, I tossed the ball to him, asking how Matthew's parsing of authority would play at his egg-head institution. "Well," he said, "the Marxists on campus wouldn't like it." "Haven't they heard," I replied, "that the Berlin Wall fell 14 years ago and with it the Marxist Empire of Russia?" "I think they're still in denial," he quipped.

I took Peter's quip and crossed it over to these United States. I asked: Aren't our people and our leaders "still in denial"? Well, the discussion got warm again, and I won't continue this partisan report about it. But Peter's words are my words about my country, "still in denial." That's one big reason why it won't be a Happy New Year 2004 for us. Denial does not make for happiness.

To give this opinion some substance I might start with a quote by an earlier US president named George Bush. "It's the vision thing," he too once quipped. Denial is a "vision thing," looking at the same data as other observers do, and seeing something quite contrary from what they claim to see.

No wonder the OT prophets were called "seers." It's the vision thing. They were see-ers. They saw stuff that most folks didn't

see. Not that they had a vision in the night with no one else watching, but (most often) they looked at the same historical realities that everyone else did and saw something completely different. Sometimes there was even a stand-off between seers, each of whom claimed God as witness for the clean-contrary pictures they painted for the people.

Jeremiah types, Amos too, and most of the prophets whose visions got into the Hebrew scriptures, looked at the historical data of their day and said "God is lowering the boom"—on us. God's boom = our doom. Folks labelled "peace-prophets" saw it differently. "No way," they said, "it's shalom, shalom." Everything is going to be all right if we just keep doing what we've been doing. And trying even harder to do more of the same. Then as now the watchword was "security." And the model for "saving" the people from insecurity? Persisting in and intensifying Herodian authority. Our USA foreign policy and domestic policy too—George W. Bush's vision thing, and Ashcroft's too—have ancient precedents. But they are authority-over "gone astray" (Diagnosis level one in Matt. 2). In Jesus' "Realpolitik," in all the NT Gospels, authority gone astray always winds up dead wrong.

A front-page headline in this week's St. Louis Post-Dispatch hypes our local major employer, Boeing, getting an x-billion dollar contract to make umpteen even more super-duper jet fighters. Especially since the terrorists are still out to get us, this will help to preserve the "shalom" of America. Cross all this over to Matthew 2. The prognosis is grim. Herod's preemptive strike against Bethlehem pretenders left Herod finally dead and the intended Bethlehem victim still alive. But, said one of the Bible class critics: "That's your opinion. Mine is different."

So which seer do you listen to, which vision do you trust? Seems to me that the Jesus-Herod stand-off throughout Matthew signals

that Jesus linked himself to OT seers of the Jeremiah and Amos type. Not so much for interpreting current history in the Roman empire (though there is that), but for probing to the roots of the alternatives. If we're amongst Jesus' crowd, the chief gives the signals and calls the shots. Jesus linked the vision thing and the denial thing. They go together.

You deny what you can't see, especially what you can't see when you think you've got your eyes wide open. So what else is new? One of the most vivid vision/denial stories in the Bible comes in John 9. Here a clinically blind man "sees" who Jesus is, whilst the Pharisee crowd with 20-20 eyesight looking at Jesus "just can't see it." The guy who couldn't see at all saw the Messiah. The 20-20 vision folks said over and over again: "We know that Jesus is a sinner." So who was blind, and who could see? That is the parabolic conundrum. Then and now. The Pharisees denied that they were sinners, so who needs a sinner's healer? Jesus finally closes the case with this epigram: Had you "seen" that your own "vision-thing" was de facto blindness, you could have been healed. But so long as you stay in denial—"no vision problem with us"—you are stuck in your blindness and no healing can happen.

Throughout history empires and emperors are regularly in denial. Their denial links directly to their demise.

For our American empire—

1. We are in denial that we were lied to about Iraq's WMD. Though that seems perfectly clear to me, one Bible class person gave an emphatic "not so" — and he too has a doctor's degree. Policy-makers telling lies are in cahoots with the Father of Lies, Jesus claims. Not with the one he calls Father.
2. We are still in denial that we lost the Vietnam war. Thus

denying that we are beat-able. Even credentialed political analysts in our land are saying that, and opining that with such denial goes the Herodian reflex act to whomp some other Asian people(s) right now so we can cover for that defeat.

3. We are in denial about our own Herodian empire, denying what St. Augustine (and Luther after him) found to be “perfectly clear” that no empire (in his day the Roman one) can be an empire without incriminating itself in the blood of the peoples it claims to benefit. Pax Romana and Pax Americana don’t look like peace for those receiving on the receiving end of it. If it’s enforced with military might, it’s oppression. For both Augustine and Luther such “perfectly clear” political analysis was grounded in their reading of the Bible—specifically about God’s law and injustices measured thereby. America now has a Bible-reading president. He too tells us that the correlation between his actions and the Bible is perfectly clear. But it’s the vision thing—and for reading the Bible it’s the lenses that create the vision. Bush’s lenses aren’t the ones used by Augustine and Luther. It parallels the stand-off in John 9. Who is blind? Who can see?
4. Linked to that is our even greater denial about who runs world history. As the last empire around these days we think we do—and, of course we MUST do it. It’s noblesse oblige. And if we’re in charge, then God, though invoked, is not. It’s a given: our will is God’s will. That no longer needs to be verified. Yet in Jesus’ day that was the Pharisee heresy. Not only is it untruth. It becomes lethal when we can no longer “see” God in any way critical of us. We then can no longer read our own history to see God’s own “third use” of his law: You have been weighed and found wanting, and here are your just deserts.
5. Yet the Scriptures do not leave us with this stalemate: I

read it like this and you read it like that. We contradict each other, and we both think we're right. but there's no way to adjudicate who "sees" aright.

6. Not quite. At least in the Bible's proposal for clear vision, there's one additional fundamental element. It's called repentance. Not breast-beating, or "feeling sorry." But a turn-around action that clears the vision—like opening the eyes of the blind—about everything, starting with my own self, my own country. Perfection, un-marred, un-blemished, non-sinners—we are not. No one is. But those stuck in denial of that truth about themselves are doomed to mis-read everything, first of all their own selves. "Because you deny your blindness, you are stuck in your sin—and you'll stay that way till God's doom-boom comes crashing down." The vision thing is always a product of something that comes before—for good or ill. Jesus' proposed sequence is "Repent, and THEN believe the Good News." Repentance is the beginning of new vision for sinners. It is "the truth" about ourselves. This truth does not yet "make you free." In fact, it more likely will "make you FLEE." But there are two ways to flee when you "see" this truth—either into despair or into the hands that beckon "come unto me." Such "truth" undoes denial. But it does not heal it. Needed is "grace," the Messiah's beckoning open arms. Thus John's Gospel in the prologue contrasts Jesus with Moses. "Law came through Moses." Yes, God-given, but law rests finally on coercive authority. It is always critical, also critical of the critic criticizing the obvious wrongdoers. With sinners on the scene the law is bad news. And the knee-jerk response of all of us is to deny it. Needed is "truth" about the law and our culpable dilemma "under" it, as Paul likes to say. But that won't rescue anyone. So we need—and at Bethlehem it comes—the "grace" of the genuine King of the Jews with

upside-down authority. That and only that is the way of escape from livfe under the law, and under the Herods who administer it. So “the law came through Moses.” Ouch! “Truth and grace came through Jesus Christ.” Hallelujah!

Summa:

Denial starts crumbling when truth intervenes. Vision changes when truth replaces cataract-cluttered lenses. Hearing the truth about America’s Herodian pyramid of power and the way we exercise it is not good news. It is regularly contradicted by alternate seers. But were such vision-change (not regime-change) to happen, it would be step one toward a de facto Happ-ier New Year 2004.

Given the current lay of the land, that will take some witness-stand plain talk from those who’ve been blessed with such vision. For 2004 also to be genuinely Good News, it will take a sequel-sermon from these same witness stands, e.g., yours and mine in every venue where we live out this new year. A sequel sermon—and a sequel praxis— of Jesus’ upside-down authority. We are called to articulate such “authority under” inside, not outside, the zillions of point-up pyramids where we too will live in 2004. ‘Course there’ll be conflict. Even with other Christians. So what else is new?

But the sequel sermon on the “Grace that came through Jesus Christ” is what it takes for blindness to be healed after it has been exposed by Christ’s truth. Paul’s words to his Roman co-confessors remain a grace-imperative to us: “And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?”

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder