

41 Days and 40 nights in Europe – Part II

Colleagues,

After last week's interlude to remember the events of September 11, 2001, it's back to "How I spent my summer" (well, half of it). In the first paragraph of Part I (The missiology conference in Hungary)—a fortnight ago—I promised not to give a travelogue, but focus on three items for three ThTh postings. The missiology conference in Hungary was the first. The next two were described thus: "the July conference honoring the 200th birthday of Wilhelm Loehe, major figure in USA Lutheranism in the 1800s; and then some observations on the sermons in the six Sunday liturgies where we worshipped, one of them even by yours truly in Budapest." I'll take the second of these two for this week's offering: Six sermons and six Sunday services.

1. First one was in Lorsbach, a village near Frankfurt am Main, where the huge international airport is. Pastor/proclaimer that morning was Rahel Hahn, rostered ELCA clergywoman (!) married to a US Army officer stationed at a US military base there. Rahel was our neighboring pastor (Litchfield, Illinois) a few years ago across the Mississippi while her husband was stationed at Scott Air Force Base. Born and educated in Germany, Rahel came to the USA to get a Ph.D. and then stayed. So in the town where the family now lives she is the "natural" choice as guest presider/proclaimer when the local Padre (in this case, Madre) is on vacation. That happened on July 20. No surprise, Rahel preached the Gospel.
2. Ditto for next Sunday, July 27, though the venue was. It was the soccer field at Lehrberg (near the Loehe

conference site of Neuendettelsau, near Nürnberg). Why there?! It was the 100th anniversary of the Lehrberg Associated Sports Club. And here is where the old territorial-church tradition—once upon a time “state-church”—comes into play in Germany. If the town is celebrating something on Sunday, then a church service must be part of the celebration. And if some Lehbergers are Roman Catholic and some Lutheran, then it will be an ecumenical worship event. Punkt! And so it was. Local folks with sport artifacts in hand – soccer ball, tennis racket, hula-hoop(!), unicycle(!)—participated in the liturgy. Lutheran Pastor Rudolf Keller was the preacher. He too preached the Gospel—crossing both the diagnosis and prognosis of his scripture text with the “Sport-geist” of his town neighbors—all gathered under a big tent. Since it was Germany—and Bavaria to boot—there was, of course, a “Beer-tent” right alongside the main tent to provide potables needed for the picnic meal following the service.

3. Next Sunday was August 3. We were in Lübeck in North Germany at the Lutheran cathedral in this ancient city, once “Queen of the Hanseatic League.” The history of Lübeck includes Dietrich Buxtehude as long term musician, Bach coming to Lübeck as a youngster to study under Buxtehude, the hometown of Thomas Mann, and many more salient segments of German history. E.g., the place where marzipan candy was first confectioned. The Sunday liturgy—Holy Communion included—was classic and edifying. Ditto for the music. We attended with the retired bishop, my classmate at the theological faculty of Hamburg University 50 yrs ago. The sermon was brilliant—but there was no Gospel in it. So taken was I that even though I never learned the pastor’s name, I wrote him a letter once I got home. Copy pasted below.

4. August 10 it was Berlin, at the American Church in Berlin,

“An Ecumenical, International Christian Community.” It’s ELCA-connected: rostered ELCA pastor, ELCA worship book, ELCA seminarian as intern, who on this Sunday was saying farewell to go back to the seminary and so was the preacher for the liturgy. Here too the proclamation was Gospel-less. With all the farewell hoopla following the liturgy, Marie and I couldn’t even get close to the much-beloved intern for conversation of any sort. So, go to Plan B. Since the ELCA is “my” church, when we got home I wrote to the president of the intern’s seminary indicating that this student still “needed help” before being turned loose on our denomination. Copy pasted below.

5. August 17, Budapest, I was guest homilist at a Lutheran congregation on the “Pest” side of the Danube in this Buda and Pest combination capital of Hungary. I know what I said in English, but I haven’t a clue as to what my native Hungarian interpreter said. Later at lunch he teased me about that very fact: “You’ll never know what I said you said.” Since he’s a graduate of an American university, I know he could do it right. But did he? ‘Nuff said.
6. August 24, Budapest again, week-long missiological conference just completed, day before our flight back home, a colleague from the conference, American Evangelical working in Budapest, takes us to his church, The Danube International Church. It is THE church for English-speaking Protestants living in Budapest—US embassy (and military, as we learned) personnel, international business folks, educators. A large number of Asians and Africans. When we see the band up front on the podium, no altar, no pulpit, projection screens—we can guess what we’re in for. Yup. “Please stand up.” Then thirty minutes of praise music. Then came the sermon, pastor taking the mike and standing before us. “The first of a series of three, maybe four or five, that I want to preach on the

coming Sundays on the text of Exodus 33:12-23, Moses wrestling with God in prayer." We were given half a dozen particulars about what serious praying is, taking Moses as our model. [How many more points are to come in the subsequent Sundays, we could only guess.] The sermon lasted for one hour. Then came a general prayer and we were dismissed.

No surprise, no gospel in the sermon. Jesus mentioned only at the end as the one and only way of salvation. Not much Gospel either in all the "praise songs" at the beginning.

That was it. Five Lutheran preachers, one Baptist (as we later learned). Gospel proclaimed—three for six (if yours truly actually did do that on August 17 AND it did carry over into the Hungarian language). That's 50%. So, not to complain. Even if the cup is only half full, that's good news. Something to celebrate, as St. Paul does in the sticky-wicket of Philippi: "What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed . . . and in that I rejoice." (Phil.1:18).

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

Here are the responses (mentioned above) generated by two of the no-Gospel homilies.

To the pastor who preached at the "Dom zu Lübeck " [Lübeck cathedral] on August 3, 2008

I don't know your name, so I address you as Dear Brother.

I am a pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, now retired, 77 yrs old. My wife and I were present for the Gottesdienst [divine service] at the Dom on August 3. We were

with the Kohlwages. Karl-Ludwig and I were Kommilitonen [classmates] as theology students in Hamburg in the 1950s. We have continued to stay in contact with each other ever since.

At lunch after the liturgy we discussed the worship service—and, of course, your sermon.

Here are some items that I added to the discussion.

1. Christ was never mentioned in the sermon until the very end—and then only in a reference to the Gospel Lection for the day, Jesus telling the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax-Collector. In the language of Apology IV of the Lutheran Confessions, there was no “Christum necessare” presented to the congregation—Christ being necessary for the sermon to achieve its goal of getting the congregation to trust God’s forgiveness.
2. In sharp contrast to that was the hymn immediately following the sermon, #345, where “Christum necessare” [Christ is necessary] was fundamental to every one of the final four verses.
3. Karl mentioned that Christ is not presented as “necessary” in either the Gospel text for the day, nor in your sermon text about David and Nathan [“Thou art the man!”]. True, I said, but that then raises the question: How to preach a “Christum necessare” sermon when “Christum Necessare” is not in the Biblical text? Here too Melanchthon in Apol. IV speaks directly to that topic. In several places he says: If “Christ’s promise” is absent in a Biblical sermon text, “it must be added” to that text in order to preach a Christian sermon from that text.
4. In America too, we often hear that one should “preach the Biblical text,” but for Lutherans, that is not the case. The mandate is to “preach the Gospel,” not “preach the text,” and use the text as instrument for doing so. Final

test for any pastor's sermon is: Did I preach the Gospel? If Christ is never mentioned in my sermon, then he surely isn't necessary in my sermon. If Christ is not necessary, then I did not preach the CHRISTIAN Gospel, but, as Paul says to the Galatians, "an other gospel."

5. Of course, I am not saying "Just mention Christ and the sermon is OK." That is nonsense. To draw another insight appearing many times in Apology IV. Christ must be "used" for the very purposes that he himself commands us to "use" him, to bring his promise to sinners and to strengthen the faith of those who already do trust Christ. You may remember that one of the major critiques Melanchthon makes of scholastic preachers of his day is that they "waste" Christ and never "use" him at all to bring Good News to the people.
6. Preaching Christian sermons on Old Testament texts is difficult. It is relatively easy to preach a "Jewish" sermon on OT texts. I am very aware of this because I live in St. Louis, Missouri, a city with many Jewish synagogues and temples. I am active in ecumenical discussions in our city. I know Jewish Rabbis (good friends) who preach about the David and Nathan text, commending their congregation to trust God's mercy and forgiveness. And, of course, Christ is not necessary in their sermons, and is never mentioned. When we were walking through "downtown" Lübeck, Karl showed us the local synagogue. I wonder what would come from the discussion if you and that Rabbi talked about the David/Nathan text.
7. For many years I have been working with a group in the USA (mostly Lutherans, but not all) who are giving attention to these themes in Christian preaching—especially the topic of "necessitating Christ." It is the Crossings Community. The work of the Crossings Community is available on the World Wide Web. Our web-address is

<www.crossings.com>. We have been doing text studies during these years and offering them (at no cost) to anyone who is interested. We follow the "Revised Standard Lectionary," a three-year cycle now widely in use across the ecumenical spectrum of Christian denominations in the USA—from Roman Catholic to Baptist. For each Sunday in the lectionary year there are three readings: Old Testament, Epistle, Gospel. During the first years our Crossings text studies were done on the Epistle and Gospel readings. Beginning with Advent 2007 we are now presenting studies on OT lectionary texts. If you want to see the "necessitating Christ" motif at work in OT text studies, I recommend that you go to our web site and see for yourself.

8. From my many years as a Lutheran pastor I know it is "difficult" for one of us to comment on the preaching of an "Amtsbruder," [pastoral colleague]. Nevertheless I do so in the confidence that you too are convinced of "necessitating Christ" in pastoral work and Christian life. Therefore I tell you what I think I heard (and didn't hear) in the Sunday liturgy at the Lübecker Dom on Aug. 3, 2008.
9. My wife and I were overjoyed that the celebration of the Lord's Supper was part of the Sunday liturgy.

Pax et Gaudium!

Edward H. Schroeder

To the president of ELCA Seminary xxx

"Your student needs help"

Seminary president zzzzz

MAIN REASON FOR THIS MISSIVE is your returning senior student

(named so-and-so), intern this past year at The American Church in Berlin. Marie and I were there for the liturgy August 10. It was the intern's farewell Sunday and last time in the pulpit. The intern didn't preach the Gospel and didn't know he/she wasn't doing it.

With all the farewell hoopla attending after the liturgy, we didn't get to talk face-to-face. So this SYS—save your student before he/she goes Gospel-less into pastoral leadership—goes to you as presiding officer of her/his seminary. This student needs help. You've got one more year. Do something.

Pax et Gaudium!

Ed

[Said seminary president responded: "Thanks. I will indeed do something."]