

9-11 on the Third Anniversary

Colleagues, Just got home from a week in Barnes Hospital on Wednesday shortly before sunset. And good timing too, since both of my primary physicians—diabetologist and cardiologist—are observant Jews (one reformed, one orthodox, both “keep kosher”) and with yesterday’s sunset Rosh Hashanah began. Despite their genuine TLC for me over the years, they’d be taking time-out for the holiday—so better I get “better” and go home. Which they say I was after a final TEE (trans-esophageal-echocardiogram!) late afternoon yesterday.

The affliction—fever, chills, shakes—was never diagnosed with all the thousands of dollars (I’m sure) thrown at it, both to identify it and to make it go away. It has gone away, but nobody knows what “it” was. The highly probable case that it was a bug we brought back from SE Asia could never be verified even with a consult from Singapore, Dr Paul Ananth Tambyah, Associate Professor of Medicine (Infectious Diseases), National University of Singapore. Paul’s a member of one of the Lutheran congregations in Singapore. We became good friends during our 3 months there earlier this year.

One Barnes staffer said I was “sick unto death” when Marie wheel-chaired me in last week Wednesday and I did reflect on that right from the beginning. I need more time for that and for self-crossings, self-examination, and—God’s call from every trauma—for repentance. One thing I did do during the last happier days of the week was read Blessed Bob Bertram’s doctoral dissertation presented to the University of Chicago in 1964 . Paul Tillich and Jaroslav Pelikan were his Doctoral Committee. Why I’d never done that before perplexes me. But I have now. It’s quintessential Bertram. Sparring with the giants, Barth of Bob’s own day and Erasmus of Luther’s day. Taking the scenic

route. Teasing the reader all the way into the Socratic dialogue he conjures. And the title too is a tease: "The Human Subject as the Object of Theology. Luther by Way of Barth. A Study in the Grammar of Theological Predication." D.v., I'll do a review for you soon. [You can read a piece of it for yourself on the Crossings website, www.crossings.org. Click under "Library" on the list of Bob's publications. Scroll down to "How Our Sins Were Christ's."]

No one volunteered to offer a text for this week's ThTh posting. And since we've not missed one for 326 weeks, my persona and psyche won't allow breaking the sequence. Maybe after ThTh #364 (= 7 years of 52 weeks) the time will have come for closure. That's 37 more postings.

So finally back to the proposed topic: 9-11 on the Third Anniversary

1. The first ThTh posting after 9-11-2001 proposed that God's message to America in this unimaginable coup was really quite simple: "Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish." Those words come straight from Jesus in the face of a Siloam tower-catastrophe alongside a murderous slaughter of the innocents by the Roman governor Pilate. Jesus dismissed the question of guilt. [Luke 13:1-6, where Jesus says this twice!] Jesus does not say: first we must name evil for the evil it is. He does not offer pastoral care for the grieving survivors—although in the deepest sense he really does. He simply says: God's word to you survivors is one word: Repent. [And if you don't know what that means, ask.] In the last three years nothing has happened that signals repentance on the part of the USA. The current campaigns of both Bush and Kerry seem not to have a clue. Nor do the preachers to Americans.
2. The chronic affliction of those for whom Jesus weeps (and

his Abba weeps too) throughout the Scriptures is deafness and blindness. Eyes pasted shut, ears plugged. And so it continues. Also in these United States. In Matthew's gospel [13:13-15] that diagnosis is so severe that no hope is offered for any reversal of the symptoms. The doom and destruction of the nation are sealed. It's just a matter of time. There will be others, the nobodies, who strangely will have eyes to see and ears to hear. But the folks that count couldn't care less about what these folks claim to see and hear.

3. The folly of America's response to terrorism. Super shallow diagnosis. But what else to expect from the deaf and the blind? Here's the word of God on the subject: God is the ultimate terrorist. Jesus said so. Luke 12:4-7 is his diagnosis of terror. Listen to this: "I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that can do nothing more. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!" But that, of course, puts God into the equation—right at the center of terror. And against us. But God against us? God the one creating terror in us? That is impossible. We are the nation of God bless America. It's our national religion. Since God ALWAYS blesses America, there is nothing about God for Americans to fear. God's for us, not against us. We're not evil people. That's those other guys. But... But if there is no fear of God in us, other fears move in. In American hearts, empty of God-fear, fear of terrorists moves in. With fear of terrorists in American hearts, God is actually being displaced from the turf he claims for his own. The locus for terror is patently the human heart. From one end of scriptures to the other God claims human hearts as his own turf, the place for the proper exercise of human "fear, love and trust," those fundamental "verbs

of the heart.” To let Osama or Saddam get in there to occupy that turf is to aid and abet one’s own idolatry. Our national leadership has for three years been urging those “mini-terrorists” to occupy our hearts—and propagandizing us to welcome them as valid objects to be feared. Our national policy for survival is focused there. To which God says: I can tolerate that for a while, but as permanent policy, no way! By declaring war on these second-class terrorists, you guarantee that you’ll lose the war against THE terrorist who confronts you. And waging war on Him is sheer madness. You’d think that even a born-again Christian president would know that. But not if he’s a blind leader of the blind, a deaf leader of the deaf.

4. Why does this sound so hopeless? Because it is. Isn’t there any Good News? Only for those who can “hear” Jesus’ Siloam-tower invitation: stop turning your back on God’s word to you, turn around, listen, and do what he tells you—repent and believe the Good News. But the American masses give no signals of any interest in this. In which case we who do are called to do it—for the deaf and blind. Luther made a compelling case—at the time of the Muslim onslaught on Christian Europe in 1529—for “surrogate” repentance. That amounted to repentance on the part of a few having the quantum-leap consequence of “saving” the unrepentant masses. It was not a sure thing, he said, but God had been known to do so now and then in the past. And if there was no other option, then the few needed to do it for the many.
5. It’s unlikely that any of these themes will show up in Bush’s campaign speeches. Ditto for Kerry. But what if one of them did go public with something like this:
 - A. Empires are always unjust. Augustine demonstrated that. God has always finally destroyed unjust

empires. America is the only one left. We too are guilty as charged. By God. The Roman empire claimed it was bringing "Pax Romana" to the nations they conquered. None of the conquered ever thought so. They experienced murderous oppression. America's imperial conquests are planet-wide, both military and economic. We say we're bring democracy, freedom, prosperity. None of the conquered think so. America has a God-problem. God is our enemy.

- B. God uses villians to punish his chosen people. Isaiah and many of the prophets say so. God's use of "evil" terrorists to call America to repentance is God's standard operating procedure. Abraham Lincoln organized a national day of repentance at the bloodiest depths of the Civil War. Repentance for both sides. It actually happened. And he was a Republican. One military advantage of repentance (so Luther) is that when God is using evil empires to punish his self-acclaimed "good" people, repentance removes God from the equation. The "evil empires" lose their divine ally. You can never predict the consequences of repentance. But they always turn out to be Good News.
- C. Three hurricanes on the third anniversay of 9-11-2001. Should we not add that to Amos's list in his chapter 4?

"I gave you cleanness of teeth and lack of bread . . . yet you did not return to me.

I also withheld the rain from you . . . yet you did not return to me.

I smote you with blight and mildew . . .yet you did not return to me.

I sent among you a pestilence . . .yet you did not return to me.

I overthrew some of you [in a cataclysm] like Sodom and Gomorrah . . . yet you did not return to me."

And now some suggested add-ons for the USA:

"On your 9-11 third anniversary I sent you three messengers: Charley, Frances and Ivan (and possibly some more this year), and yet you did not return to me. I frustrated your war against Vietnam, and yet you did not return to me. I frustrated your war on drugs, and yet you did not return to me. I frustrated your war on poverty, and yet you did not return to me. I'm currently frustrating your war in Iraq, your war on terror, and yet you do not return to me. I've been frustrating your penchant for "wars" on everything, and yet you do not return to me."

Amos's conclusion for Israel is grim. Is it also for us? "Therefore thus I will do to you, O Israel. I will indeed do this. Prepare to meet your God, O Israel." That is not an invitation to a tea party.

No, that is not Good News. The penitential "return" it calls for, however, is (says Jesus in Mark 1:15) the first step that opens the gate for the second one: "Trust the Good News." Trusting that Good News IS Good News,

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder