

Reflections on THE Gospel, Another Visit Downunder

Crossings Colleagues,

Our house guest for a few days this week is Norman Habel, Aussie Wunderkind. His work could itself be the topic for this week's Thursday Theology post, but it isn't. Though if it were, I'd start out with this:

1. Norm is a world-renowned OT scholar with a commentary on the Book of Job in the Westminster John Knox Press series.
2. . . . is making headlines today with his creating—and convincing several church bodies to support the insertion of—a “Season of Creation” into the church year during September prior to the Day of St. Francis. If you want to see what—what all—this already has become, check this URL <http://seasonofcreation.com/>
3. . . . is initiator and promoter of a new “green look” at the Bible, his series THE EARTH BIBLE and the forthcoming EARTH BIBLE COMMENTARY. Google the first three words for details. He has just published a new “green” Biblical study called AN INCONVENIENT TEXT.
4. And way back in his early days as Old Testament prof at Concordia Seminary (St. Louis) a half century ago, creator of THE PURPLE PUZZLE TREE, a Bible-story-telling-for-kids series published by CPH that masses of Missouri Synod kids (and their parents!) got hooked on in those days. He's currently hustling a cyber-friendly reworked version of that primordial purple prose. Check <http://www.purplepuzzletree.com.au> for details.

But all that is what I'm NOT attending to today. [If you want to know more, Google his name. You'll get 30K hits.]

After the hullabaloo at Concordia Seminary back in the 1970s, Norm—one of the “bad guys” in the Old Testament department—returned to work in Australia, and years later inveigled the Lutheran Seminary there to ask me to come as guest lecturer for the 1994 academic year. And that’s the segue to today’s post. You’ve seen a few of these before from that era. Here are two more items that I confected for students during those two semesters in Adelaide, South Australia.

Peace and Joy!
Ed Schroeder

Course Title: Biblical Foundations. New Testament

What is THE Good News?

1. There is no “generic” statement in the Bible of the GOOD NEWS.
2. Good News is always expressed in “case-specific” terms, for some specific person, people, in a specific situation where “specific” BAD NEWS is the truth about them.
3. The over-arching Biblical term for the BAD NEWS about People which only God (and not just a good psychiatrist) can heal is SIN.
4. But sin too arises only in case-specific forms to specific people in specific situations.
5. There are some regular repeaters in the Bible about the form (the image, the metaphor) of the BAD NEWS in individual persons and in their particular cases. Although all could be called a manifestation of sin, each has its own dynamics: Guilt, shame, enslavement, death, oppression, despair/depression, fear, works-righteousness, etc.
6. And thus we also find some corresponding different

forms/images/metaphors for God's GOOD NEWS to be case-specific for these specific forms of BAD NEWS.

7. Thus for Guilt, it's the GOOD NEWS of Christ as forgiveness;
for shame, the GOOD NEWS of Christ is acceptance;
for enslavement, the GOOD NEWS of Christ is freedom;
for death, the GOOD NEWS of Christ is his conquest of death;
for oppression, the GOOD NEWS of Christ is rescue and liberation;
for despair/depression, the GOOD NEWS of Christ is hope;
for fear, the GOOD NEWS of Christ is his invitation of faith: "Fear not, just trust me."
for do-gooder works-righteousness, the GOOD NEWS is free (gift) righteousness, and so on.
8. Thus to teach a Bible text and do it so that it comes out Gospel, you have to see/hear what the BAD NEWS is. Or another way of saying it: what is the malady that gets "fixed" by the Gospel in this text? And then, of course, the second question: How does the person, the situation, then look when the Gospel has "fixed" the malady? What is the shape of the life that follows from malady-healed?

Case Study.

9. The BAD NEWS in Matthew 4 is clearly temptation, Jesus himself (and we Christians too) not immune from God's own enemy going after us to do what? (What's the tempter's goal when tempting God's children—both Jesus and us?) This one is dicey because popular piety has made the tempter out to be a very "little" devil, concerned with itsy-bitsy sins. Not so in the Bible. Not so in this text of Jesus' own temptations. What's he trying to do with Jesus? Not just once, but three times. Three times to achieve the same goal.

10. One help is to look at the immediately preceding episode in Matthew's Gospel, namely, what happens to Jesus there at the Jordan and what the tempter is out to do right after Jesus has been baptized.
11. Another help is to study closely the first (ever) temptation episode in the Bible in Genesis 3. It is the Biblical classic for what happens in every temptation story. Matthew's story of the temptation of Jesus has exactly the same dynamics as the drama of Genesis 3. Let's see if we can work them out.
12. If we thus get clarity on the malady in this text, what's the Good News the text offers to us? We must ask, of course, first of all, what is the Good News in the text for Jesus himself?
13. Then from that Good News in the Text for the person in the text (in this case Jesus Himself), what is the GOOD NEWS about Jesus that is GOOD NEWS for us?
14. Remember the GOOD NEWS about Jesus for us is always linked to the end of his story, his death on the cross and his resurrection. The 4 Gospels (Mt., Mk., Lk., Jn.) are actually just long introductions to Jesus' Passion and Resurrection. So you are not "cheating" on a text that comes earlier on in the 4 Gospels when you "go to the back of the book" to get the full story of all the GOOD NEWS.
15. What is the "full" GOOD NEWS for us in the story of the Temptation of Jesus when you "go to the back of the book" to see again how the whole story came out?

ehs

Course Title: Christian Ethics

Discussion items for Dietrich Bonhoeffer's ETHICS

Topic: Karl Barth and Martin Luther in DB's theology

1. The four stages (according to biographer E. Bethge) of DB's writing this "non-book." Non-book because DB himself never put together the bits and pieces that after his death Bethge and others collected and published as his Ethics.
2. The theological heritage from his LETTERS AND PAPERS FROM PRISON.
 - a. The religion-less secularity of 20th century western culture.
 - b. The call to follow Christ in such a world "etsi deus non daretur" equals "even if there were no god."
 - c. "Christ the center."
 - d. Christ "the man for others."
3. The tug-of-war in his ETHICS between his appreciation of Karl Barth's theology and his own Lutheran confessional heritage. Barth's proposal: radical "Lordship of Christ," God's claim over the whole world by virtue of the incarnation as a radical "Good News" answer to the "religion-less" world of DB's day.

Lutheran critics of Barth said that he too quickly accepted the world's self-proclaimed "religion-less-ness" at face value. That itself was part of the world's own delusion, that just because humans ignored God, that made their world religion-less. Maybe they did indeed eliminate "religion" from their conscious lives [they didn't go to church, didn't bother about religion in their ethics and human interactions], but they did not thereby eliminate God from their actual daily life. God the creator continued to do what God the creator had always done—even in epochs of "religion" in world history. Namely, God continued to be creator (creatio continua), sustainer, preserver, legislator, judge and executor in the creation.

For Barth (and DB?) what God has to overcome when sending Christ into the world (incarnation) is “revelation,” to wit, showing humankind that they’ve got it all wrong. First of all, God is not a God of “religion” at all. No, he is (and always has been) the merciful deity who is “for” humankind and not against them. The central element in human sinfulness is not immorality, but ignorance: ignorance of who/what God really is, and therefore who/what humankind really is intended to be. To overcome this (almost) overwhelming ignorance in people, God finally goes all the way to the cross to drive home once-and-for all God’s grace, mercy, forgiveness, love for the human race.

The Lutherans in the debate with Barth claimed that human sinfulness was much worse than such ignorance, even as damnable and perverse as Barth showed that ignorance to be. No, they said, the malady of human sinfulness is not only that sinners are alienated from God, ignorant about the truth of God and the truth of themselves. What’s really bad about human sinfulness is the relational reality: humankind created by God with incredible faculties (images of God, no less!) are rebels; at the deepest level they don’t love that creator God at all. That doesn’t mean they “ignore” God. Rather they hate God. Their lives curved-into-themselves amounts to a radical enemy-status with God.

And the worst of it all is not just how “baaaad” we are, but that the God who created us (a jealous God with reference to the creatures he made) says: I won’t stand for that. I’ll visit the iniquities of those who hate me with the “fairness” consequences of my law: The wages of sin is death.

Now to remedy that deep, deep, deepest dilemma takes more than revelation of just how merciful God really is. It takes action to rectify (literally: make right again) our human ethical dilemma with God. God says: You're not righteous enough, not faithful to me enough, etc. In short you are a sinner, and the payoff is you-know-what. In view of this alternate Lutheran anthropology, soteriology—namely, saving such humans—is a different task than Barth proposes.

God-in-Christ needs to reconcile sinners to God (not just clear up their knowledge-defect about God), not counting their trespasses (which is what God “normally” does with sinners, and does so “fairly”) against them. God pulls off this reconciliation by “making his Son to be sin in our stead, so that we can become God’s kind of righteousness in him.”

Barth needs no such “sweet swap” to get the human race saved. Calvary is a revelation of just how grace-oriented God is to sinners—God will “go all the way” to get us back. The Lutheran confessions claim that sin is more radical than Barth presents it, and therefore Christ has a bigger job to do in order to get sinners back to God. One might say: the sinner’s problem is ethical, not informational. His life and works don’t measure up to God’s criterion of evaluation for what a human being was created to be. To save the human race, the humans themselves need first a new ethos for themselves. Then they could begin living that new ethos out in the world of daily life.

So God does indeed connect with any- and every-thing in the world thru Christ when the new ethos is enacted, created, made real in the world. What that new ethos

replaces is not human cussedness or human ignorance, but the previous ethos we all have before God, an ethos that would eventually kill us. God operates in his world bestowing two ethos-verdicts on humans. Everyone gets the first ethos-verdict (sinner) because that's what we are as we come onto the world scene, that's what we verify in the way we live our lives—not fearing God, not trusting God, and curved into ourselves. The second (new, changed) ethos-verdict comes only through Christ and our participation in Him. But not everyone in the world has such participation (some don't want to have it, some haven't heard that it's available).

Christ's redemption is good for the entire world. The entire world does not (yet) enjoy that redemption and its ethos. So to that extent Christ is not (yet) actually “ruling the whole creation” in any realistic fashion. Where Christ is not (yet) exercising his “management by God's mercy,” God is still the creator-in-charge. He manages that “old” world the same way God has always done: the law of justice, fairness, equity. Sinners' lives are preserved, and the sinners themselves are held accountable before God. (That's the law in its use #1 and use #2 in Lutheran parlance.)

[2010 addendum: Yet even such a “greener” world of justice and equity, now extended to planet-wide care of every creature, is not yet “set free from its bondage to decay . . . [is still] groaning in travail . . . still waiting for the children of God to unveil for it” Christ's “adoption” and “redemption” offer. It is only creatures already so “adopted” and “redeemed” who have a clue for transforming creation—even a green creation—into God's “new” creation. (Rom. 8)]