

The Gospel as Advent Theology

Colleagues,

First a correction. Second some Advent Archival Items. Third a word about the Tin Cup (again).

I. CORRECTION: Two items of introduction were missing in ThTh 76 last week, Annemie Bosch's essay "Memory and Forgiveness." They were already missing in the original cyberspace transmission I received and then passed on to you. One was this notation: "This article was written for and published by African Enterprise. It may be reproduced in whole or in part, provided its author and African Enterprise are acknowledged. To learn more about African Enterprise visit their website " [Ed's comment: GO and see that!]

The second item was a brief paragraph about the author: "Annemie Bosch is an elder for a local congregation in Pretoria and a long-time helper and supporter of African Enterprise. With her late husband, the renowned missiologist David Bosch, Annemie worked tirelessly through the Apartheid years, and still works in the present for reconciliation and justice in South Africa." Not having those words in hand I composed a few sentences about Annemie myself. But way too much hype, she subsequently told me. "I am not a missiologist, definitely not a 'major voice' in IAMS. Missiology was one of my majors for the BTh degree – and I perhaps know a little more about missiology because I was married to David." To which I responded noting that already in Jesus' day there was confusion about who was major and who was minor in the Kingdom.

II. ADVENT ARCHIVAL ITEMS – Two Texts from Advents Past

First One: THE FUTURES MARKET FOR ADVENT

Church vocabulary in the (Latin) Middle Ages had two words for the future: *futurus* and *adventus*. The word *futurus* designated what lay up ahead in view of what could be extrapolated from the past. This future was to some degree predictable. [E.g., weather forecasts are *futurus* stuff.] *Adventus*, on the other hand, signalled something up ahead that arrived from the other direction. Not at all the consequences of the past, this future was an invasion from up front, from what had not yet happened.

Small wonder that the early Christian community latched on to *adventus* as the word for their future in the light of the Good News. What they had once expected from God was not what actually came. Even if some of the clear-eyed ones had a hunch that the deity would arrive enfleshed, none could even imagine what this humanized deity finally did. For that there was no precedent. It was indeed a new thing.

One apostolic advertisement for *adventus* goes like this: "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor human heart even conceived, that's what God has coming from the future toward those who trust him." (I Cor. 2:9) But can anything so un-conceivable be described at all, if it is so radically brand new? Paul answers yes. It is grounded in the Jesus story.

What happened from Bethlehem to the Ascension was *adventus*, nothing you could have deduced from preceding human experience. Here's one way Paul re-words it: "In Christ God was doing a balance sheet, settling accounts, you might say, with the tenants in his world. But God did this by not calculating their trespasses as debits against them. Call it a New Creation." (II Cor. 5)

From what all of us know about balance sheets, is this any way to reconcile accounts? Of course not. But our convictions about balance sheets are deduced from our past experience. Call it Old Creation. We know of no case where accounts ever get settled by simply cancelling debts and never returning to collect—either in the world of economics or of personal relations. Our lives in what we call the “real” world seem to make sense only when we use a debit-credit calculus for human relations. But not so for God, the God of Gospel-adventus.

Yet if you don’t count people’s debits and credits, how on earth do you reconcile the books? How does God do it? Answer: With another surprise, an adventus original. “God had his Son, the Christ, take ownership of the debits of us all, and in the transaction transferred to us all this Son’s own native credits.” (Ibid.) What a deal—our liabilities for his assets! Our frightful futurus for his advantageous adventus. What a way to run a railroad! Yet in view of who the beneficiaries are, why should we quibble?

So the Good News for Advent lies in the new futures market. Sinners, even very moral ones, are offered an alternate future to the one they normally expect. Therefore expect the unexpected this Advent. Expect what otherwise never happens in the Old Creation, God’s debts-for-assets exchange—Christ’s assets for our debts. It’s a “froehlicher Wechsel,” as Luther calls it, and as Bob Bertram translates it, “a sweet swap.” That’s the way God reconciles accounts operating out of God’s own future, or, as the Lord’s Prayer puts it, the way “God’s will is done in heaven.”

No wonder the Bethlehem shepherds were scared stiff on

Christmas Eve. The heavenly messenger sings that in the mangled Messiah God's will is now "being done on our earth as it is in heaven." How can you run things on earth with such a management system, such strange bookkeeping? Yet, if true, it is good tidings. And if we are the beneficiaries, then an earthly "gloria!" is our best response to the angel's heavenly one.

And, oh yes, one more thing. In the time of your own Advent waiting, get some practice in settling your own accounts by sweet-swapping (call it "forgiveness"). Take advantage of Advent. See what happens when you transact your own business of living by this Christic-calculus. Folks with whom you settle accounts in this way may well think you crazy. All the more so if they are committed to cornering the market for their own futures by "trespass-counting." But that's their problem. They are not crazy enough.

For we have it on good authority that sweet-swapping is the way of the future, the one that lasts. The Christ of Advent says we have it coming to us. We have his word for it.

[EHS November 1992]

Second One: AN ADVENT FOLK HYMN

Here's a German folk hymn, both tune and text, discovered some years ago by Steven Mager (our church musician at Bethel Lutheran in St. Louis) and then translated—in several versions—by M&E Schroeder. Below is one of the renderings. [Melody and Mager's setting available on request, although I don't know how to transmit musical scores via cyber-space.]

Dear Christians, rejoice, for Advent is here,

*See the first candle bright & clear
Attention on these, our holiest days.
Prepare your hearts for God's own ways.
Christians, be joyful, with one accord
Near at hand is the Lord.
Dear Christians, rejoice, for Advent has come.
The second candle signals John.
In our darkness too his message brings light,
Points us to Christ, from faith, not fright.
Christians, be joyful, with one accord
Near at hand is the Lord.*

*Dear Christians, rejoice, for Advent is here.
See the third candle, bright and clear.
Our God, three in one, sent Mary his call
To bear his Son and bless us all.
Christians, be joyful, with one accord.
Near at hand is the Lord.*

*Dear Christians, rejoice, for Advent is here.
See the fourth candle, bright and clear.
The circle is closed, we soon will be fed
At Bethlehem, God's House of Bread.
Christians, be joyful, with one accord.
Near at hand is the Lord.*

III. TINCUPThTh-beneficiaries may become ThTh-benefactors in supporting the Crossings team (Robin Morgan, Marie & Ed Schroeder) heading for South Africa next month. The event is the Tenth conference of the International Association for Mission Studies in Pretoria January 21-28. Christology for the New Millennium is the theme. A few days after the conference Robin will return to parish duties in St. Louis, whilst we (Ed and Marie) stick around for a couple

more weeks. Our agenda, d.v., is to visit 3 seminaries as well as Christian folks we know in S. Africa, to check out the ministries of former Seminex students now pastoring in Malawi and Kenya, and then conclude with a homecoming (and some guest lecturing) at the Mekane Yesus Seminary in Addis Ababa. MYS was our work world in 1995.

Benefactors get US income-tax-deductible benefit by sending your check to Crossings, Inc., P.O.Box 7011, Chesterfield MO 63006-7011. Mark your check: "Crossings in Africa."

Peace & Joy!

Ed