

C is for Coming

Well-versed in the Socratic method, Bob Bertram would often ask questions to get us to a deeper truth about the gospel. Some time ago, Cathy Lessmann happened upon a collection of questions and answers from an Advent Hymn Festival in Bob's honor. They are really a collection of snippets from Bob's writings in other places—articles, sermons, presentations. But they were blended together to give everyone a taste of Bob's Advent/Gospel reflection on the meaning of the coming of our Lord, Jesus the Christ. We thought that these were worth a replay. More than nostalgic, they are timely messages and meditations for today as well.

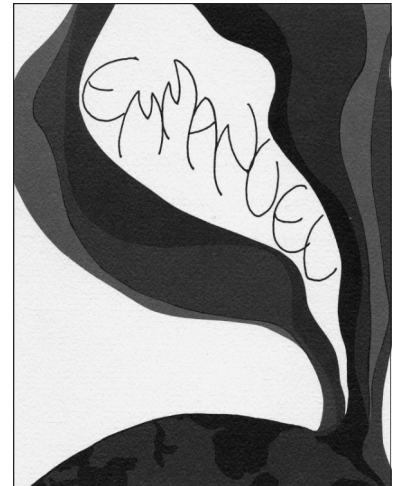
The Advent Hymn Festival of which they were a part came months before Bob's final crossing from death to life. We are all blessed by his final homily which is included here. The greatest honoring of our Lord Jesus the Christ is to see how he takes all of our world, in all its "clutter" of sin, sickness, self-absorption and complaint—this dirty stall we have given Him to find birth—all of that he takes to himself, and counts it all as honor for the sheer joy of having us as his own, even giving to us the final honor of being God's own children. Enjoy Advent, with all its questions and most especially, its final Answer!

mho

Question: Who Comes?

What does God see in this Jew [Jesus]? Not just: what do we see in him? Or even: what do we see of God in him? But first: what does God see in Jesus – of himself and of us, together? The thing about Jesus which made such a difference to God is that it was

Design by Carol Ballenthin



“the sinners” who made such a difference to Jesus. Anyone who meant so much to him as the sinners did, he was entitled to and was authorized to bring them home with him to his Father's party. That about Jesus is the long-awaited Jewishness which proved him to be his Father's Son: his Davidic, shepherdly compassion for the strays.

Advent is adventure. The church ought to caution people about that. We could issue bumper stickers: “If you like bungee-jumping, you'll love Advent.” Or: “Advent is getting what you have coming to you, Jesus Christ.” Or: “The Lamb is coming – sooner better than later.” I don't mean that Advent is for thrill-seekers. It is for God-seekers. Better, it is for a God who is a sinner-seeker. And that is thrilling.

R is for Rising

Question: Why does He come, bearing His Cross?

When our Lord does appear to Thomas He presents him with – of all things! – the death-marks. You would think Christ might have said instead, “Why are you so hung up on My death? That's past now, over and gone; forget it.” But no, He makes a deliberate point of these signs of defeat, as though He is anything but embarrassed by them, as though they are essential to His very lordship. As though that is the only way to be “Lord and God” for sinners like Thomas, namely, by dying and then first rising. As

though that was what He had been sent for, “as the Father has sent Me.” As though that kind of sending of His Son, namely, sending Him to die and then raising Him, is what makes God a “Father” at all, rather than only a sender of law and judgment and death. As though it was only through death that the now risen Jesus could meaningfully greet the disciples with “Peace,” *Shalom a’lechem*. As though only this kind of Jesus could be “the Christ, the Son of God.” And as though the only proper “use” of Him and His history is to believe for one purpose and one purpose alone, namely, that “believing, you may have life in his name.” And that, come to think of it, is the one reason this history was (as John says) “written” into Scripture in the first place. Hallelujah, indeed!

O is for Ovation (by Faith)

Question: How do we get to enjoy His coming?

What makes faith so great? Is it the fact that our faith is not our own doing but God’s, by grace alone? But that is not unique with faith; that much is true of our loving, our forgiving and all the other gifts of the Spirit we receive. Is it because faith believes what God says and that way is sure of being right? Of course, that is what faith believes, God’s Word, and His Word is always right. But merely agreeing with Him does not make us right. But there is one thing which God says, one Word of His, which is different: not His Word as law but His Word as promise. That promissory Word does change us from wrong to right if and as we believe it.

That, finally, is what is great about faith: in our faith God’s promise comes true. He promises to forgive us, but only in trusting that promise do we get forgiven. If His promise goes unbelieved, it goes unfulfilled. A man can promise with all his heart that he loves his wife, but if she disbelieves him, she is not getting loved; his promise is thwarted. Still, its original purpose is the promise, and the promise is meant to be enjoyed. That is what faith is, enjoying the promise.



Glad about Jesus

Everything depends on whether the individual receives the Christ of the gospel. Therefore when the topic is “Confessing the Faith of the Church,” the implication is not that “the faith” is whatever the church believes and confesses. Churches, including ours, have been known to believe all sorts of nonsense. No, the faith is not the faith because the church believes it. But rather the church believes it because it is The Faith, “the fresh teaching of the holy good news.” Good faith has such a nose for the gospel – the distinctive breath of fresh air – so that faith prizes the gospel even in the Scriptures, namely, their “fresh teaching of the holy good news,” the Baby whom they swaddle.

S is for Satis

Question: And what ought we to do with our faith?

What else is the church but Christ’s body gospelling the world? For the church to stay one and whole, and to stay that way for the world, only one thing suffices, the one Gospel-and-sacraments. *Satis est* [it is enough]. And confessional movements, what are they? What else but the church’s *satis*-sayers trying to drive that same lesson home, to learn it themselves?

For doing that, they too have no other authority than through their Lord’s authorization to do as he did, to live for the world and die for it and to count it all gain – Good News.

S is for Sain

Question: How, then, shall we live, in light of His coming?

“Sain” is the Old English for making the sign of the Cross, like the German *segnen*: to bless, to hallow. Despair is what theology is for, and not just to assuage it but to make use of it against itself, despairing of despair, what the Lukan Jesus calls “repentance for the forgiveness of sin.” Then despair “morphs,” as my students say, into the reverse of despair. For everyone it can, gay and straight alike. If the signs that

presently loom are of despair, anyone's despair, then what that directly suggests to Christians is the counter Sign, the Cross, which is for all.

Despair, in order to be despair, need not be the sweaty, sleepless, suicidal kind that shows up in clinics. It is usually more prosaic and everyday than that. But the stakes are just as high. The despair I have in mind, what the Christian tradition has long known as *desperatio Dei*, is at bottom unbelief. It is our despairing of God's favor toward us and our world. Not that there isn't grim evidence for that. Unbelief feeds on that evidence and, as it does, unbelief itself becomes evidence, feeding still more unbelief. But that very despair, which by itself is terminal, may be entrusted to Christ, who is not – not permanently. He knows something about that despair at firsthand, *coram Deo*, and as his track record shows he knows how to run with it, and leave it in the dust.

Richard Caemmerer was commissioned by Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago to do a painting entitled, "Crossings." This Caemmerer, the son of my old seminary prof and a onetime co-teacher in my Philosophy of Art course at Valpo, went about doing the painting by surrounding himself with LSTC Crossings students. They plied him with suggestions, he complied with his brush. The result is a bold, colorful crucified Christ whose cross extends horizontally and vertically into all the world. Whatever I'd hoped to teach the students at LSTC about Crossings they've more than reciprocated, and improved on.

For where all does the Caemmererian Christ run out to? Answer: Christ runs a-Cross and deep into the **world**. For he loves the world as it is. Why else would he deserve such a death? Good answer. Good question.

I is for "In"

(the very midst of the world, where Christ came)

Question: But what shall we say about His coming?

None of the creatures are so little appreciated, especially by themselves, as are the human creatures. So benumbed are they to enjoying how they resemble their Creator that, as a consequence, they lose that resemblance. Without Christ to restore the divine resemblance they have reason for disbelieving how wondrous they are – and look and sound and feel. Without Christ to re-value them they resort to auto-suggestion and self-flattery.

In the very midst of these dear disbelievers, not off to the side or above them, are Christ's believers, the world's cheering section. And the believers cheer and compliment and approve, not deceitfully but for good reason. And their praise is not only in the dear disbelievers' stead but is directed to the disbelievers themselves, dears that they are. "From now on," as one Christian said for the rest of them, "we regard no one from a human point of view." Neither are believers above being surprised, least of all about their own fate, let alone the fate of others.



"Crossings"
Richard Caemmerer

N is for Name

– The Name of the Great Exchange

At the conclusion of the Advent Hymn festival, Bob Bertram gave his last homily. Impromptu, and by invitation to share a few words of his own, Bob offered this marvelous message:

For an old, brain-damaged Christian, especially someone who has had to learn all over again tonight that Advent is adventure, for such a one, there is really only one thing left to say. And that is simply, Come, Lord Jesus. And when You do come this next time, why not bring along the whole family, all the sisters and brothers? For surely this time when You come, there will be room enough in the inn – in the inn of our hearts – considering all the unfinished business that is still left to be done in those hearts.

For instance, when You come, Lord Jesus, think of what all will be there of ours for You to deal with. There will be all the clutter of what we have left there of ours – our sin, our sickness, our anxieties, our self absorption, our complaints. You are welcome to all of those things. You offered to us that You would assume all this as Your own. We urge You, please to do just that. Make all that is ours Yours. And then what of all that is Yours, that You bring to our hearts? That, we urge You, dear Lord Christ, as You promised, leave that for us to replace what You have taken away of ours. In place of our sin leave Your righteousness. In place of our anxiety and our joylessness, leave Your joy. In place of our dying, leave Your life and Your resurrection.

We know it is not at all fair of us to ask such an exchange. But how did we sing in the hymn a moment ago? “You make for us a great exchange.” “You bear upon Yourself our frame, and in return, give us Your realm, Your glory and Your name.” It is what Martin Luther called, “the delightful exchange.” The Old Testament prophet had said, we receive double for all our iniquities. Sisters and brothers, where can we find a better rate of exchange than that, double for all our iniquities? The great exchange.

And so when we say tonight, as we say in the program, “He’s Coming! - And Aren’t You Glad?” Yes, we are glad, but we are glad not only for His coming as such, we are glad for His takings and His leavings. His taking what is ours and His leaving what is His, in its place. Speak of adventure! So meanwhile, Lord Jesus, fill our hearts with hope and with eagerness for Your coming, for Your takings and Your leavings. And make our hearts ready for Your coming and for the great exchange. Even so, Lord Jesus, quickly come. This we ask in the name of the Great Exchange, the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Robert. W. Bertram

Why Dust Off Elert?

Good question. Must be good reasons. Find out as Elert experts Robert Schultz and Matthew Becker discuss his relevance with you, Ed Schroeder, Steven Kuhl, and Michael Hoy at the pre-conference Monday, January 25, 2010.



Third International Conference

GOD’S PROMISE, OUR MISSION: MAKING THE CRUCIAL LINK

Why Luther’s distinction of Law and Gospel matters more than ever

January 25-27, 2010

St. Louis, Missouri

Keynoters

William Burrows Frederick Danker
Jerome Burce Jukka Kääriäinen

Speakers

Frederick Niedner Robert Kolb
Lori Cornell Arthur Simon
Edward Schroeder Carol Braun
Steven Albertin Richard Gahl
Marcus Lohrmann Marcus Felde
Matthew Becker Robert Schultz

Pre-conference Jan. 25 offers two options:
1) Sweeping through Lent: Programming the Pericopes of Six Sundays, Crossings style
2) Dusting Off Elert

Register at www.crossings.org/conference

G-S is for *Gospel* Scholars

Jukka Kääriäinen and William Burrows

Speaking of coming, we are delighted to introduce two of our keynoters at the upcoming Crossings Third International Conference, Jukka Kääriäinen and William Burrows. Jukka is an Advent missionary of the gospel from the Far East. His delight in the coming of our Lord shows in his hopes for missio (mission) to be rooted in promissio (promise), announcing the coming to a religiously-pluralistic world. William Burrows has a long history of Catholic missionary work and will be presenting on the topic "Participation in and Transformation by the Promise." And speaking further of coming, we hope that you will come to the Conference, too. Consider it a promising adventure!

mhoy

From Jukka Kääriäinen

In sorting through some boxes from our move from the Bronx to Princeton last summer, I came across a prophetic piece from 3rd grade. In answer to the question, "What will you be doing 40 years from now?" I had scribbled as an 8-year old: "I will be living in Hsinchu (Taiwan). I will have a dog. I will be a pastor and tell people about Jesus." In response, my teacher had written, "We'll see if this comes true!" As an MK [missionary kid] who, as of March, 2010, will have spent exactly half his life in Taiwan and half in the US, I continue to be humbled by and deeply grateful for the journey I've been on. I'd like to introduce myself by sharing just a few snippets and highlights of my personal and theological journey thus far.

As with many of you, I wear several hats these days. Professionally, I juggle the roles of pastor, campus chaplain, and PhD student. Personally, I balance the demands of being a husband and father of two small children. My educational journey has taken me from international schools growing up (Taiwan), to Valparaiso University (1992-96), to Concordia Seminary (1996-2000), to Queens/ Brooklyn (district missionary, 2000-02), to Long Island (associate pastor, 2002-

2005), to the Bronx (Ph.D. student, 2005-2008), and finally to Princeton as of July, 2008, with innumerable summers in Finland. Along the way, I've had many teachers who have influenced, encouraged, and guided me: Jim Bachman, Walt Wangerin, and Fred Niedner (Valparaiso), Robert Kolb (Concordia Seminary), David Stechholz (my vicarage supervisor in San Francisco), Ed Schroeder (whose influence upon and continued encouragement of my dissertation work has been invaluable), the late Avery Dulles (who nurtured my interest in theology of revelation), and Brad Hinze (my dissertation advisor at Fordham).



Missionary of the Promise

Ten years ago, I would never have imagined that I would be pastoring in Princeton and writing a dissertation on Lutheran missiology at Fordham (a Jesuit school) for a Roman Catholic advisor and committee. But it almost didn't happen: Fordham, that is. I initially turned down Fordham's offer, thinking that my alma mater, Concordia St Louis, would be a more suitable place to study.

A few weeks later, the Holy Spirit jolted me to my senses, and I called Fordham back, asking if I could still enroll and whether their generous financial package was still available. Amazingly they said I could still come, and so we packed up and moved to the Bronx in the fall of 2005. In retrospect, my considering doctoral work at Concordia had a very important purpose: it allowed me, through a detour, to become acquainted with Ed Schroeder, who has become a mentor, encourager, and the biggest fan of my doctoral dissertation as I plow toward completion in 2010, Lord willing.

My dissertation, depending on your perspective, can be viewed as a study in the theology of grace, a constructive Lutheran missiology, or a comparative study between Lutheran and contemporary Catholic approaches to world religions, respectively. Like a Rorschach Test, my dissertation title: "Missio Shaped by Promissio: Lutheran Missiology Confronts the Challenge of Religious Pluralism" certainly engages all of those elements. As I engage the mainstream Catholic understanding of grace (from Thomas Aquinas, through Karl Rahner, down to Jacques Dupuis), I am

coming to realize how prevalent the paradigm of grace fulfilling human nature is, not only in Catholic theology, but even in Lutheran circles (as evidenced by the influence of Mannermaa's Finnish school, Robert Jenson, etc.). I believe this is enormously significant, and will be spelling out some of its implications in my January keynote address at the Crossings conference, as well as in my continued work.

As I develop my dissertation and theological thinking, I am increasingly intrigued by the intersection between law/ promise theology and contextual theology. Many contextual theologies seem to be averse, almost hostile, to Lutheran, law-promise theology. That puzzles me greatly. This is an area of further exploration and research that I'm very intrigued to pursue in the future.

In closing, my long-term hope is to one day use my PhD credentials to serve as a missionary professor and theological educator in Asia. Such a role would uniquely combine the different parts of my personal background, interests, and strengths: my love and affinity for Asians (especially the Chinese), my aptitude for teaching and interest in languages, my intellectual bent, my personality, an international, missionary context, and my strong desire to see the Asian church strengthened. I have a strange burden and love for the Chinese people that I can only describe as a desire the Lord has placed on my heart. As various Asian countries officially "closed" to Christianity increasingly become open to the Gospel, I will be intrigued to see how a Valpo/ Concordia/ Fordham alum like myself can possibly serve in helping the "Gospel pebble" ripple and spread into Asia.



Missiologist and editor

Jukka Kääriäinen

From William Burrows

From 1972 to 1977, I worked as a theology teacher and rural pastor in Papua New Guinea. There my work involved helping Melanesians find ways to interpret Christian doctrine for their cultures. I began a

national series of "seminars on ordained ministry" that were aimed at helping the missionary community seek ways to adapt structures of ministry to Melanesian realities. In 1977 I began doctoral studies at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, while working and living in Our Lady of the Gardens from 1979 to 1983, an African American Parish on the far south side of Chicago, the same community where Barack Obama began as a community organizer in 1983. (We never met.)

In 1985 I married Linda W. Fyfe and worked at the American Medical Association in Chicago from 1986 to 1989. I finished my doctorate in 1987 with the thesis entitled, "The Roman Catholic Magisterium on Other Religious Traditions." It was done under the direction of Langdon Gilkey, with Anne Carr, Joseph Kitagawa, and David Tracy as advisors. In 1989, I became managing editor of Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, where I supervised acquisitions in the areas of interfaith dialogue, faith and cultural adaptation, ecology, ecumenism, and Christian mission. I retired from full-time work at Orbis in 2009 (while continuing to work part-time for Orbis). In February 2009, I was appointed Research Professor of Missiology at New York Theological Seminary.

My lifelong scholarly interest has centered on the cultural adaptation of Christianity in non-Western environments and on Christian relations with persons in other faith traditions, particularly on how Christian mission should be understood and carried on in an ecumenical age marked by the attempt to build understanding among world religious traditions. The Faith Meets Faith Series that I edited at Orbis with Professor Paul Knitter has been acclaimed internationally as the most important series of books illuminating interfaith concerns.

William R. Burrows

Printing and mailing this quarterly is paid for by your gifts, thank you. If you are a reader but not yet a giver, we can wait. When you are ready to be both, we won't object.