

Your Responses to recent ThTh Postings

Colleagues, **PERSONAL ITEM**

This week's ThTh is the last one for a while that I'll be confecting in St. Louis. After that, God willing, Marie and I will be 10 thousand miles away on the equator working with the Lutheran Church of Singapore. But I do have a couple ThTh postings already in the hopper to bridge the gap. I hope. Just what's the LCS task? "Continuing education" they call it. The actual agreement will get worked out when we arrive, but here is a first proposal that was forwarded to us from the ELCA area exec in southeast Asia. It does not look like merely lollygagging with fellow-Lutherans.

Dear Rev. Dr Peter Shen,

I met with Rev. Soh and planned Dr. Schroeder's visit to Singapore. We planned for the 3 months he will be with us and as Bishop said we could extend it to 4 months. It is from 1st March to 31st May. Each LCS congregation will be having him for two weeks to do teaching and preaching. A congregation would also like him to do lenten devotions on Wednesdays for 5 weeks. We have planned a LCS combined Holy Communion service for Maundy Thursday. He will preach on "The Wonder of His Presence". He will be doing two teaching sessions on "The Cross for a Modern world" and another two sessions on "The Song of Songs." For the Pastors, He will be teaching every Monday morning from 9.30 to 12 noon. There will be 5 lectures on Lutheran hermeneutics and 5 on the Book of Concord. We would also like him to take a day retreat with the pastors on "Practicing Lutheran Spirituality."

Pastor Nick Singh

The remainder of ThTh 297 consists of samplings from responses to recent ThTh postings.

FIRST ONE,

though not intended so, is now an “In Memoriam” for John Tietjen. John died this past Sunday (Feb. 15) at his home in Fort Worth, Texas. The funeral is today. Bryden Black did not intend his response as a post-mortem for John. He was responding to John “live.” Namely, to John’s Sermon on the Confession of St. Peter preached in his home congregation on January 18. We posted it to you three weeks ago as ThTh 294. It was the last sermon John preached.

Bryden’s an extraordinary tent-maker-minister-preacher himself. He’s both an Anglican priest (cum Ph.D., Oxford) and also runs the family sheep-and-cattle ranch in New Zealand. It’s a huge operation—“we put through some 20,000 – yes, that is the figure! – lambs for fattening each year now. ” His own self-descript: “This Anglican does both bovines and ovines, as well as some distance theological teaching plus being one of the bishop’s Examining Chaplains – who too has had a bit of a brush with the cancer scene.”

Dear Ed, It seems that you all are living and reliving some momentous moments ... I sense too that lest one desecrate the significance of the likes of John’s Confessionary Sermon, you need a health warning in the subject line of the email: “take off your shoes ...!!” And of course, that is exactly what John’s own bon mot is: God’s health warning. No cures this side of Caesarea Philippi: only pilgrimages of faith and therefore hope – and evident love as he gathers up his life of witness centred upon that Messiah’s Cross. Thank you for sharing this precious cargo.

When confronted with the likes of John’s Confession, I can only

regurgitate my own musings upon the topic of the Big C. For while “cured” according to medical science, according to the stats of my surgeon (a Mayo Clinic trained fellow), what has really been healed – for me at least – is the sheer awareness of my creaturehood, on the one hand (vs. that big Pauline and Israelite sin of idolatry, Rom 1), and on the other, the graced awareness that the Creator himself is the One who redeems the likes of me on My Cross—which can ever only be henceforth His Cross! Such is the white-heat intensity of imminent mortality and demise True; we both probably know others who have reacted to such in bitterness and horrid denial. But that too was sheer grace: that it was not the path/Way/“hodos” (cf. Mark 8-10) that I took upon encountering this ‘business’”

*Shalom! As ever,
Bryden*

SECOND ONE

is a response to ThTh 295: “Your God is Too Small – Coping with spina bifida and the wrath of God.” It comes from Jerome Burce, one time Papua New Guinea missionary, now ELCA pastor in suburban Cleveland, Ohio.

*Ed,
Concerning the wrath of God—
I chanced by accident last fall across a superb book entitled “Evil in Modern Thought” by one Susan Neimann, Harvard-trained philosopher, ex-philosophy prof at Yale and Tel Aviv U., currently Director of the Einstein Forum in Potsdam. Under the sub-title “An Alternative History of Philosophy” she proposes that the problem of evil, not epistemology, has been the real issue at the core of Western philosophy, and not only for the ancients and medievals but also—especially—for moderns from the likes of Leibniz to the present. Of course the problem of evil*

emerges as a problem with God, as she makes plain; and her tale can be described as an account of the philosophical tradition's Jacob-at-the-Jabbok struggle with deus absconditus, now defending him (Leibniz, Kant), now attacking him (Voltaire, Hume), now re-defining him (Hegel et al.), now trying furiously (Freud, Nietzsche) to dismiss him. And at the end of the 20th century day, there he is, still lurking in the shadows.

One of Neimann's own final-page observations: "...One of [Kant's] greater arguments [was that] if we knew that God existed, freedom and virtue would disappear. It's an act of Providence that the nature of Providence will forever remain uncertain. Einstein said the Creator was subtle. Kant's thought showed Him brilliant. Our very skepticism is a providential gift. What binds the real and the rational together must be so fragile that it will seem miraculous—and on occasion the miracle occurs. As with any other miracle, it takes something like faith to perceive it."

God hangeth on, in other words. We don't know what to make of him, yet we can't get rid of him, not if we insist as philosophers must, even in a post-Auschwitz, terror-ridden world, on believing in reason. What the book adds up to is, first, an enormously useful illumination of where and how American culture has gotten many of its central ideas about God (among them some of those you address in this current ThTheol), and second, a lot of powerful prolegomena for the argument that necessitates Christ.

THIRD ONE comes from Neal Nuske in Australia.

Neal's biog: "1963 Life-changing experience with cancer as a 12 year old child-amputee. Parish pastor in the Luth. Church of Australia 1978-1991. Since 1991, Christian Studies and Study of Religion teacher, St Peters Lutheran College [=High School in

Aussie English]. SPLC is a Co-educational boarding school, c.1800 students. Brisbane. Graduate research thesis: A Curriculum Design for adolescents to integrate tragedy in their world-views. This year I am teaching around 160 students from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds, ranging from age 13 to 16. On average there are around 3 Lutheran students in each class of 30. So, as Head of Department and Teacher of Study of Religion, I have had to shape the courses in ways that are mindful of religious diversity as well as ecumenical sensitivities.”

Greetings Ed, I did appreciate your reflections about a theological setting for reflecting upon spina bifida et alia kinds of disease.

This year is the fortieth anniversary of my own encounter with cancer as a child aged twelve in 1963. The encounter resulted in a hemipelvectomy -one of the radical forms of surgery which resulted in the complete removal of my right hip and hip joint- plus a separation of the pelvic bones beneath the scrotum.

Last year was the 25th anniversary of my ordination.

My own reflections about suffering have guided my theological interests. In reference to the question concerning the spina bifida child, I concur with your comments: “If God didn’t, who did?”

As an integral part of a creation that waits with eager longing to be set free from its bondage to decay I also participate in that creation under bondage -as do we all- by the very fact that life is given by the Creator in a context, in a cosmos that is already groaning. The life given to me did not come from outside this broken creation, nor did it come from heaven or any other universe for that matter, that has been untouched by the judgment of the Creator.

I believe Gustaf Wingren put his finger on it when he wrote about the law (judgement) being experienced in and through creation itself.

The life given to us does not come as a pure and untouched gift but is a gift of life given in, with and under all the existential conditions that prevail for a creation under judgment.

Hence the life-death paradox -the paradox strikes in every dimension. We are born in sin and groan with creation.

My body bears the marks of the encounter with judgment.

If we stopped moralising about sin and saw it as it really is we would not deal with the theological aspects of suffering as if suffering itself had some kind of explanation, or moral role in the universe.

Your comment:

We are committed as Christians to monotheism. There is no second "evil" deity onto whom we can shove such things. We are "stuck" with having to bring it all together, "all that exists," as the catechism says, under one roof labelled "God at work."

My encounter with cancer was, and is in itself a constant encounter with the inscrutibility of God.

It was the beginning of an energetic and at times vitriolic relationship with a divine being expressed in prayers that were filled with the constant paradox of gratitude and unrelenting cursing -and I mean unrelenting cursing that would break out decades after the 1963 event! The silences were also there but that didn't bother me because I felt no compulsion to pray. In any case, for myself, prayer is not necessarily the mark of a

healthy relationship with God. I had the confidence that when I could not pray the Spirit would take over.

Much better it was in my mind to fire the curses at the God who gave life in the midst of death, rather than begin a battle with some other entity outside of God deemed responsible for evil. The 'bastardus absconditus' would be 'left off the hook' if a monotheistic perspective succumbed to the inability of theology to endure the paradoxes.

Your comment:

Why God plays the hiding game is itself shrouded.

It is indeed. And theology is not the means by which one is able to peek under the shroud to fathom the mind of God.

I wish we would respect the shroud more. And, mystery itself is part of the shroud. Theology does not take away the mystery. Rather, it is meant to tell one when and where the boundaries of the mystery begin.

I learnt early in theological studies that Lutheran theology was not a discipline of study that set out to provide answers or explanations. However I also saw that this was one of the great needs theological students had, namely to solve the riddles, to dissolve the paradoxes, and believe that comfort to sufferers could come through explanations.

Most of these explanations were designed to gloss over the gruesome reality that the Creator could speak and act in ways that were simply horrific and ugly.

I don't know why I still believe -perhaps it is the result of that Spirit who continues to pray pro me.

Keep as well as is possible.

Neal Nuske
St Peters Lutheran College
Brisbane

FOURTH ONE. The spina bifida baby elicited this sort of response from several of you:

Why should we blame God for the effect of human sin on the world of God's creation?

Here's the gist of my answer to these colleagues:

The key word in your sentence is "blame" which I never used in TTh 295. And you probably wouldn't want to either—for very long. "Blame" sounds too much like Adam & Eve in Gen. 3, doesn't it? I.e., switching the roles of who is the Evaluator and who is being Evaluated.

My rhetoric in ThTh 295 said in effect: "It too, yes spina bifida, came from the same Creator who created the rest of the baby." That's not a statement of blame. It's a claim of creation theology, an affirmation about a creature, yes, a wounded creature, and the creator. For "if not from God, then from whom?" One of you mentioned that you appreciate Elert. I can still hear him (Summer Semester '53 in Erlangen): "Die monotheistische Verpflichtung laesst keine andere Konsequenz ziehen." [Our commitment to monotheism allows us to draw no other conclusion.]

Instead of blame, there is another "bl-" word that, crazy as it sounds, is the Biblical recommendation: "The Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away. BLESSED be the name of the Lord." Even for the spina bifida baby with, as I understand it, spinal bone "taken away" from its spinal nerve.

"Blaming" God for anything is itself always blameworthy. Even

thinking about doing so, as Adam and Eve learned, can only lead to trouble. Even so, exile was not God's last word for our primal parents. To say: "Even this came from God's hand" has better faith-marks than sentiments that seek to get God off the hook. As one of you said, "not God is in the mix here," but "fouled up genetics or some faulty DNA or other consequences of human sin" in the spina bifida baby. Yet, isn't that still working the blame-agenda, but then stopping short of passing the buck back all the way to God? Does God need us as defense attorneys? Who's in the dock, who's on the bench?

Methinks Blessing or Blaming really is the core issue. How do we respond to God when tragedy strikes? Finally there are only two options, aren't there: faith or unfaith, trust or distrust? And it ALWAYS takes the insertion—the explicit and palpable insertion—of the Crucified and Risen One (via Word and sacrament) into the tragedy—not as explanation, but as an "other" word from the same God—to make the faith/trust option possible at all.

Isn't that what Bryden and Neal are testifying above? I think so. And note where they are "coming from." Down under. In more ways than one. "Sub cruce tecta" as Luther liked to say. And that too is a pun: "covered under A cross" and/or "covered under THE cross."

Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder