

Divine Correction and Pierre Viret¹

Do Christians really have any *theological* inkling as to what happened in the dramatic events on and following September 11, 2001²? Not much it would appear. We have been subjected to vague humanistic waffle, spoken and written, in and out of the Church, along the lines of « innocent victims », « vile terrorism », « just war », « eradication of evil », « the world is not the same »...

The latter in particular is a load of baloney, as Ecclesiastes tells us there is nothing new under the sun and that what is has been. Time and chance happen to all indiscriminately as the preacher says. (Ecc 9.11)

However, anyone with an ounce of theological acumen knows that we cannot divide world powers into good and evil in black and white Manichean fashion. The only righteous empire, according to the eschatology of the New Testament is the world reign of Christ in the new creation. But how do we interpret specific events in the light of faith in divine providence?

The first precept is that specific events of world history are like minnows that slip through the large mesh of our broad theological principles, with the exception, of course, of events which are interpreted by God himself in the history of revelation. From a human perspective, however, our interpretation is limited by the fact that our knowledge of the meaning of any particular event is restricted both with reference to the past, the present and future. We are like workers on a building site putting in a pipe without knowledge of the architect's overall plan, or what the final construction will look like. In the *mystery* of providence, the « secret things belong to the Lord our God. » The things that have been revealed, which « belong to us and to our children » are « all the words of this Law ». (Dt 29.29)

But how does this revealed Law help us with regard to dramas like the events of September 11th? Surprisingly, insights can be found in Pierre Viret, born nearly five hundred years ago. Viret was a Swiss reformer who joined Farel in Geneva in 1534, later working in collaboration with Calvin from Lausanne, before transferring his activities to France, where he presided a synod of the Reformed church at Lyon in 1563. His major work in three volumes, *Christian Instruction in the Doctrine of the Law and the Gospel* (1564), is only now being prepared for republication.

¹ Article published in the Dutch daily *Reformatorsch Dagblad* in 2002.

² September 11 2001 is the date of terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Virginia. It is remembered in the USA by Patriot day.

Viret was an effective preacher whose writing is often in dialogue form. His tract *The Christian empire. A dialogue on world empire* presents a debate between a Roman catholic and a Reformer. The title is untranslatable, as it is a play on words in French (empire/en pire) indicating things « getting worse ». What can we hope for in a world getting worse is the subject under discussion. Nothing good is Viret's answer, because Christians, whether Roman or Reformed, are also getting worse by not amending their lives according to divine Law. Where then can true reformation come from? Not from men, who are disqualifying themselves by sin, but only from heaven, sent by God himself.

But how does God accomplish this? First of all, proposes Viret, when the righteous in society do not correct evil, or when they are too weak to do so, God himself chastises the wicked by the wicked themselves, although not always in the same way. When rule is abandoned by the just to the wicked in a country or a city, God uses wickedness to judge wickedness. So civil strife occurs, in forms ranging from disputes to sedition and revolution. The evil enter on self-destructive courses, which themselves call for change and social renewal.

But what about evil in a nation when it goes unbridled and unpunished? In that case, correction is done by foreigners. « I don't doubt that every war which has ever been, or will be, is a scourge and a punishment by which God continually chastises and corrects nations by others ». The witness of Scripture and experience, proposes Viret, is that corruption and strife are called to account by strife and disasters.

It is however, important to see that what constitutes « troubles » and disorder for men, is not such for God, but the « order by which he exercises his righteous judgement. » As Luther said, the wrath of God is not *in* God, it is revealed *in* sinful man. Just as God draws light out of darkness, he produces order out of disorder by correction. We might hope and pray that God would use mercy out of pity for man, but normally he uses « whips against those who are rebels and incorrigible ». This is not only the case for collectivities, but also for individuals. However, only those with renewed minds have the spiritual discernment to be able to profit from affliction.

Where do we find all this in Scripture? Viret points to Isaiah 3.8-15, 5.7-9, 21-23 Micah 2.1-2,8, 3.9-12, Amos 8.2-8, Jeremiah 6.6, 10-14, Ezechiel 22.6-7, 12-15, 29-31. Look them up, all these passages, quoted by Viret, are worth reading and meditating.

Some will be tempted to say that these instances are all from the Old Testament and are not applicable outside the context of God's people, Israel. Or that the God of the New Testament is unilaterally a God of love. However these arguments are impossible, as the verdict of the prophets is simply an application of God's *universal* Law to specific cases. And God's Law, being an expression of his divine character, is unchangeable.

The sins which provoke divine wrath in these prophetic passages all involve infractions of the Decalogue: moral perversity, injustices, covetousness, oppression of the poor, exploitation, inordinate wealth by fraud or pillage, and enslavement for gain. Because « Zion has been built with bloodshed and Jerusalem with wickedness... Zion will become like a ploughed field and Jerusalem a heap of rubble. » (Micah 3.9-12) So, « Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes and clever in their own sight... who acquit the guilty with a bribe, but deny justice to the innocent ». (Isaiah 5.21-23)

What a condemnation these words contain, not first of all against terrorism or even against Islam, which will, in time, know their own judgements, but against the so-called Christian nations of the West. Let's not doubt that what has fallen on our sophisticated culture in terms of war, destruction and the core-rottenness of our social institutions has done so, and will do so, because of sins of unbridled exploitation and unrighteousness, in other words injustices. God's wrath judges sins by sins.

Can it be that God is sending us the scourges of insecurity to our doorsteps, in all its forms including climate dysphoria, and a war without end in sight, even if its sphere is limited and it is fought by professionals, in order to press home the need for reformation of the injustices of colonialism and capitalist world empire building? Didn't the 11th September blow the idealist « one world » rhetoric to smithereens? What other religion remains now in the « first world » but individualistic hedonism and what other god but money? It's those gods that allow the industrial military complex to go on churning out arms with the complicity of political notions of necessary war.

How long will the darkness of the alienated mind-set of our culture and above all its' élites, go on before light dawns through the realisation of our iniquity? How long before a return to God? Is there a third way between the corruption of western « democracy » and the oppression of Islamic republics? « Righteousness exalts a nation ; but sin is a disgrace to any people » (Pro 14.34) *is a universal truth*. And justice is defined in terms of God's Law and not by man's.

In divine providence the eastern block crumbled and fell because of its inner corruption. Nothing says that the pack of cards that the West represents may not, without amendment, suffer a similar fate. It is time to start sweeping in front of our own door.

