

Reviews

JESUS AND THE GOSPEL: Volume Two, by Pierre Benoit OP, Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 1974. 185 pp. £4.

In 1961, Fr P. Benoit of the Ecole Biblique of Jerusalem published in two volumes a collection of 48 articles under the title *Exégèse et Théologie*. The articles were grouped under nine subject headings, discussed from the point of view of biblical hermeneutics, historical criticism, exegesis in the narrow sense of the word (as much literary as theological), and of textual criticism. Most of these articles had already been published between the years 1938 and 1956. And now in 1974 a selection of the second volume of this collection has been published in English under the title: *Jesus and the Gospel: Volume Two*. Only two of the four subject headings have been retained, *The theology of St Paul* and *Primitive Christianity*. And of the 18 articles gathered under these headings in the original, only 8 have been translated. The indices of the biblical texts and of the authors consulted have not been drawn up for the English version. In fact, *Jesus and the Gospel* is not so much a translation of the original as a selection, in which the English reader is given a brief anthology of some of the studies of the Dominican 'maitre'. Even so, it is difficult to explain the choice of the new title. As a title, of course, it is modish. The French title suggested a methodological rigour and a programme of synthesis, which can be verified in every paper. The English title sounds almost like a slogan. And what are we to gather from the addition of 'and the Gospel'? It suggests a polarity between Jesus and the Gospel, which Fr Benoit has no intention at all of stressing in these articles. In the case of this second volume, the title relates only very analogically to the real content of the book.

In spite of these surprises, of which the English reader ought to be forewarned, the small selection of texts which are presented in this volume remain of real interest. A brief glance ought to convince anyone. The first, 'Law and the Cross according to St Paul', is a basically theological study of one of the fundamental axes of the apostle's thought, starting from Rom. 7.7-8.4. The next, "'We groan inwardly . . .'" is a brilliant refutation of a bad reading of Rom. 8.23. The third, 'Body, Head and Pleroma in the Epistles of the Captivity', attempts to achieve a synthetic understanding of these three notions in the ecclesial theology of the apostle. The one following this, 'Some notes on the Summaries in

Acts 2, 4 and 5', is an explanation of the composition and distribution of the summaries in the first chapters of Acts depicting the life of the Jerusalem church. Fifth comes 'The origins of the Apostles' Creed', an examination of the kerygmatic formulae and the professions of faith found in the various New Testament traditions. Finally, there are three studies of historical, theological and (because of the dialogue undertaken with Dr Cullmann) ecumenical interest—'The Primacy of St Peter', 'St Peter according to Oscar Cullmann' and 'Tradition according to Oscar Cullmann'.

Now, certainly these articles do not derive their interest from being of recent publication: all date from some twenty years ago. And for every interpretation that is proposed, one could refer to subsequent and divergent opinions and positions. But in Benoit's approach to the texts there is a particular quality which allows him to transcend any too ephemeral topicality. His language and also his intellectual bent have always made him anxious to carry on his investigation until he arrives at a synthesis. Even where an analytical approach dominates from beginning to end, the very form of the exposition itself directs the reader towards a moment of synthesis. Indeed, in his discourse as in his thought the unity is antecedent, irresistibly anterior to any investigation, however technical it may be, and the clarity of his exposition allows one to glimpse at every moment the profound initial unity which derives more from a harmony than from a rigorous system. But this quality is also a limitation: just when the author believes that he has seized and presented the Pauline synthesis (e.g. on p. 92), it sometimes becomes difficult for the reader to recapture, behind the brilliance of the modern theologian's exposition, the individual thought and language of the apostle Paul. His demand for doctrinal clarity, stronger than his strictly literary sensibility, leads him to articulate the theological content of the texts in a way which manifestly exaggerates their original significance. It is the price to pay for a synthetic mind—a worthwhile price, above all in comparison with that lamentable fragmentation of so much of our modern exegetical criticism. Whatever might be the divergence from the authentic meaning of the scriptures studied, the very effort to achieve a synthetic interpretation

demonstrates the fertility of such an approach, and in the history of interpretations the syntheses are the only ones which are remembered. So the studies of Fr Benoit are in some ways exemplary: if they date, they are not for that reason out of date. They even represent, from this point of view, a challenge to all those who attempt to re-read and to comment on the written witnesses to our christian origins.

The English translation is successful: accurate, while managing to preserve the limpid and fresh style of the original. Even so, it is worth knowing that 'en effet' in French does not mean 'in fact' but 'for, indeed' (cf. e.g. p. 23, n. 3). Moreover, it is regrettable that so many of the passages in Greek have been inaccurately reproduced (there are at least 7 mistakes on page 94).

BENOIT STANDAERT OSB

BUILT AS A CITY: God and the Urban World Today, by David Sheppard. Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1974. 380 pp. £3.25.

The Church of England has never had all that much impact in the working class areas of inner London. David Sheppard's concern is with why this should be so, and what should be done about it.

First he describes the development of inner London, particularly West Ham, which he knows, and the inequalities and insecurity in income, housing, education and employment involved. Against this he sets the history of the Church's concern. In the country and the suburbs it cultivated its own garden. In the city it ran Sunday schools, provided debilitating charity for the poor, and backed Sunday Observance and Temperance campaigns. Only the middle classes were considered capable of leadership. (Still the case—many parishes rely on middle class people even after they have moved out of the district.) Always, too, there were the bogies of socialism and communism.

Though the Church's efforts are not to be dismissed, the devastating comment of a letter written in 1859 from the Victoria Docks is inescapable: 'If those kindly disposed gentlemen who are trying to civilise us barbarians by means of schools and missionaries will assist us to get the drainage to which we are entitled, I think we could almost civilise ourselves'. It's a remark that explains well enough from one point of view why the working class has generally found something better to do than get involved with the Church.

The problem of a gospel 'wrapped up in a middle class ethic' is a problem for all the Churches, and not just in London. (The phrase itself is taken from a description of French Catholicism). It isn't only the Church of England that attracts the 'nicer' kind of people who are improving themselves. ('As a Christian you lose your identity', one reluctant working class lad is quoted as saying). As Sheppard points out, Methodism abandoned the working class long ago, when it deliberately went respectable—and Wesley himself never had any great following in London. Nor has the Catholic Church ever had much effect on the indigenous population.

What is to be done? Sheppard has his dream of equality and of the city being everyone's community. He argues that all schooling should

be embraced in one comprehensive system run by the state. He almost makes this the solution, but not quite. In fact on solving the problems of the city he is rather muddled. He cannot reconcile his talk of participation and partnership with his observation of the facts. So at one moment he is saying some people are powerless and others must lose some of their power. At another he calls on 'sectional interests' to take each other's insights seriously as partners, as if they were after all equally powerful. 'Attitudes are more important than structures', he says and in the end his proposal is for 'sacrificial political change' on the part of the better off.

The book is muddled because of its considerable length and discursiveness. It could well have been pruned. The author is a bishop of evangelical tendencies—he preaches somewhat and goes in for being understanding. (If people are frustrated he knows they lash out.) He rather goes in for jargon too. People are constantly doing such things as being stretched to think about their experience (with the right sort of enabling support) until ultimately they achieve the stretching experience of being bridge people.

Sheppard has his dream for the Church in the city too. Each local church should put its resources at the disposal of the district it is in (whether or not there is a church-going response) and match itself to the local culture and needs. This means team ministry and ordaining local people without imposing the present stereotype of clerical training. It also means people must refuse to give too much time to internal church activities and those who move away from an area should leave things to those who remain. The wider Church, for its part, is to see the urban areas as its priority and use its influence on their behalf—here are the beginnings of sacrificial change on the part of the better off.

However it is just a dream, both for the city and the Church. 'We are meanwhile to set ourselves limited aims. . .'. It's all safe enough after all. But until the Churches actually do something to show that they mean to make their dreams come true it is difficult to see why the majority of people should not continue to regard them as irrelevant.

ANTONY ARCHER OP