

Aidan Breen's new edition of Ailerán's *Interpretatio Mystica et Moralis Progenitorum Domini Iesu Christi* serves this end too. This seventh century monk and scholar, wrote a commentary on Matthew's genealogy of Christ. Written in two parts, it treats first of the mystical meaning of the names of his ancestors, showing how the meanings of the Hebrew names point towards Christ and his saving work, and secondly how these same names also embody moral demands on the followers of Christ.

In addition to the text and translation (the latter of which is sometimes a little weak: surely *dii fieri ... possimus* could have been translated "we may become gods", rather than "as gods" (p.56), which would have been a perfectly acceptable idea to anyone familiar with Augustine on the Psalms or with his *De Civitate Dei*), Breen lists and discusses some of the sources used by Ailerán.

Both these volumes, then, take the reader into the literary world of the early medieval Irish theologian. Among the many good ends that they will serve is the hammering of another nail or two into the coffin of a popular and highly romanticised "Celtic Christianity", conceived of as a distinct Christian order and culture which self-consciously distanced itself from the faith and literary creativity of continental Christians.

GILBERT MÁRKUS O.P.

**STRANGERS AND FRIENDS: A NEW EXPLORATION OF HOMOSEXUALITY AND THE BIBLE** by Michael Vasey. *Hodder and Stoughton*. Pp xli + 276. £9.99.

Late one night I was in hospital, and the very ill young man across the ward was visited by his friend, who drew the curtains around his bed, and for a while I could hear them kissing. Were those embraces sexual? I do not know if you have ever been very ill and possibly close to death, but at such times sexuality does not figure very largely in one's thoughts. Those embraces certainly represented comfort and reassurance in the face of the young man's coming death. But does a moral stance require a judgement also on whether those embraces were sexual?

Questions such as this are posed by Michael Vasey's book. Michael Vasey is tutor in liturgy at St John's College, Durham and is a leading figure on the evangelical wing of the Church of England. The considerable importance of his book lies in the breadth and sureness with which he has drawn on the extensive research of the last twenty years on the social expression of homosexuality in disciplines as diverse as philosophy, history, anthropology, and cultural studies. Some of this has found its way into the columns of *New Blackfriars* (volume 67 pages 538–544 and volume 75 pages 52–64 and 476–488). As my own work is part of this research, perhaps I may say without sounding too grand that to my mind Michael Vasey has grasped aright the implications for theology of this often difficult body of work.

His argument falls into three steps. The first is that bodily actions, sexual acts included, derive their meaning from the symbolic systems in

which they are embedded. This is the origin of the extreme cultural diversity these studies reveal. Thus there are cultures in which homosexual relations are assumed to be universal. There are also cultures in which sexual relations that a European might regard as normal are seen as eccentric. One also sees gestures that to a contemporary European have a sexual meaning but which clearly do not in the culture in which they are viewed.

Michael Vasey's second step is to draw the implications for Biblical theology: that this diversity ought to make us wary of any simple use of apparent Biblical prohibitions of homosexuality. What the text is directed to will inevitably differ in some respects from what we might address it to. The question is whether these differences are material. This is particularly true of Paul and the forms of male homosexuality in the Roman Empire, strongly marked as they were by relations of social dominance sustaining the perceived manliness of a dominant male. Would Paul would have made the same judgement on the relationship of a contemporary gay couple that he made on the homosexual relations institutionalised in Imperial Corinth?

The answer of course is that we do not know, and the logic of Michael Vasey's approach is to direct the reader rather towards the process of ethical judgement set out in the Pauline writings, where he dwells persuasively on Paul's pastoral pragmatism. In Michael Vasey's view this is the pastoral working out of the radical gestures of Jesus, and such a gesture is present in the one incident we have which sets out Jesus's response to an apparently homosexual relationship, in the account in Matthew 8:5–13 and Luke 7:1–10 of the healing of the Centurion's beloved servant. In the first-century Empire a relationship of this kind would easily have been assumed to have been homosexual, much as we might assume today (perhaps wrongly) that a married couple would have sexual relations. Jesus's gesture is to ignore that fact and to respond on an altogether different level: "In truth I tell you, not even in Israel have I found faith as great as this".

In making such pastoral judgements there is a further move made easier by the scholarship Michael Vasey draws on, and this is the third step in his argument: that the widely encompassing notion of sexuality that European culture has acquired since the eighteenth century is not the only or necessarily the best framework in which to address ethical questions about physical and emotional relationships, a recognition that opens up other elements in the scriptures and the Christian tradition that could bear on the acceptance or otherwise of gay relationships. It is to these elements that Michael Vasey then turns.

One is the part played by friendship in the lives of Jesus and Paul and which in the fourth Gospel is used as the expression of the intimate relationship with God to which He calls us (John 15:14–15). A potent influence in modern European culture has been the assumption that bodily desire arises from a biological imperative to procreate (and is therefore intrinsically heterosexual). To put this assumption aside clears a

space for the repeated Biblical claim that at root all desire is a longing for God. Is the sanctifying power of human friendship that it prepares us for that friendship with God to which it is so much akin? Certainly heterosexual people are quick to see in the love and intimacy they experience a pale reflection of divine love. As Michael Vasey puts it, why is it that gay people should not be allowed the same freedom?

The approach set out in Michael Vasey's book could produce a genuine development in doctrine that is not set in advance by either side in this debate, by drawing us back to the appropriateness of the questions asked. In a collegial spirit there are though two lines of questioning I would raise. One is that he deals almost exclusively with male homosexuality, as does much of the research he draws on. The most recent historical work has provided a powerful corrective to this exclusion of female homosexuality, especially in the writings of Valerie Traub; and I suspect that the book was substantially completed before this work appeared.

The second line lies in his handling of the history of friendship between people of the same sex. This is not to deny the imaginative shock of grasping the weight that has been given to such friendship in the past, but his suggestion that we might in some measure return to these forms overlooks the extent to which they were posited on a sharp social division between male and female spheres and the extent to which they expressed relations of social dominance as well as egalitarian relationships. Rather to my mind the point is that the strangeness of the past in this respect is a measure of how different again the future might be.

The style of the book is lucid and direct and is brought to life with wit and good humour. The reader should though take seriously the author's recommendation to look up the scriptural references. Without this much of the detail in the argument will be lost. When this fine, touching, and unfailingly intelligent work goes into a further edition the publisher could usefully add an index of scriptural references.

ALAN BRAY

**THE BIBLICAL DRAMA OF MEDIEVAL EUROPE** by Lynette R. Muir, Pp xix + 301. *Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995. £40.*

In her preface Muir states her purpose in writing:

The aim of the present study is to make available to the increasing number of scholars working in the field of medieval drama, and to the even larger number of people who attend performances of such plays, a detailed survey and analysis of the surviving corpus of biblical drama from all parts of medieval Christian Europe. The number of plays is very considerable, their variety and quality remarkable and the history of their development and evolution fascinating. (p xiii)

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