

Welcome Address

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It was a most pleasant surprise, when I was told on my return from Europe just a few days ago, that the Society for Biblical Studies was to have its third conference in Poona, here at De Nobili College. It is a privilege for us all, both staff and students, to welcome you in our midst.

The institution has little to compare with the fame and tradition of Serampore College, where we met two years ago. It is as it were only in its teens: the buildings were put up in 1948 and it was only in 1951 that we became independent from the other faculty of theology, that of Kurseong. But very soon, it was decided to transfer the pontifical seminary of Kandy from Ceylon to Poona. The Kandian Seminary had been inaugurated in 1893 and Valerian Gracias, now Cardinal and Archbishop of Bombay, was the first student to take a doctorate in divinity. Eleven years ago, the institution was transferred to the Indian subcontinent and amalgamated with De Nobili College. Other Roman Catholic religious societies sent their scholastics as well, and at present we have over 500 students, of whom 256 are in the faculty of theology.

At the instance of Father J. Neuner, our expert at the Vatican Council, and of Fathers Travers-Ball and Th. Bowling, the director of the correspondence course, Institute for Home Studies, we already had several ecumenical contacts: lectures, seminars, common worship, etc. But it is the first time that an interconfessional conference of such importance is taking place at De Nobili College. I sincerely hope that we will be able to make it most fruitful.

Looking at the programme, we cannot but congratulate the organizers, Prof. M. P. John and Rev. R. A. Martin, for having carried out the wishes of the Serampore meeting: to have at the same time a central theme being treated in several papers, and also to allow members of the Society to present the results of their own individual research, even if they are not directly connected with the central theme of the conference.

This main topic, 'The Significance of the Historical in the New Testament', could not be more apposite. In fact, it was one of the most thorny points of the Vatican Council and the difference of opinions regarding this doctrine was the reason why the constitution on divine revelation had to be redrafted

several times. The ultimate result was a kind of compromise: the term 'historical truth' was prudently (and fortunately) avoided, but even a more suitable expression 'salvific truth' was paraphrased as follows:

'The books of Sacred Scriptures teach firmly, faithfully and without error, that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings *for the sake of our salvation.*'

The Latin text gave rise to a misunderstanding which some die-hards of the old school inevitably made use of: for them '*veritatem, quam Deus nostrae salutis causa . . . consignari voluit*' could not mean 'the truth which God, *because of our salvation* (or in view of our salvation), wanted . . .' Obviously, it meant 'the truth which God—(who is) the *cause of our salvation*—wanted . . .' Hence, Scripture contains the whole truth; whether others call it historical, poetical, rhetorical or legal, mythical or symbolic, there is only one truth, the one they know from their childhood, i.e. Gospel Truth!

This is but an example of a bad dialogue. Yet, let us not be rash in judging these old people: they have been accustomed to well-defined doctrines proposed by the teaching authority of their Church and thus often remained blissfully ignorant of many of our modern problems. My point in mentioning this anecdote is to stress the importance of open-mindedness if we want to make a real dialogue possible. Let us be prepared to listen to each other and be convinced from the start that each one can learn something from every other person. A quiet and dispassionate exposition is by far more persuasive than the excited shouting of someone who is all worked-up and tries to pour his slogans down the throat of his hearers. But the experience of Serampore is a guarantee that we have the right dispositions and the programme itself assures us that we can expect much from the papers and discussions.

We have the introduction to the theme in the presidential address of Prof. M. P. John and then several concrete applications to the infancy, the passion and the resurrection of Christ respectively by Dr. J. N. Wijngaards, D. H. Milling and J. A. Bergquist. Another most promising paper is that of Dr. S. J. Samartha, who will help us a great deal in viewing the historical problem in an Indian context.

History is not an offset print of what actually happened and we cannot ask for absolute impartiality in historical narrations, except if they were computed by a robot or in the case of the last judgement. There is always a judicious setting of the stage which need not always be conscious but which is, especially in the case of Sacred Scriptures, of the greatest importance to understand the mind of the author and the meaning of the Word of God.

Before concluding, may I request your attention for a few moments while I quote some pertinent extracts from the in-

struction on the historical truth of the Gospels, given by the Pontifical Biblical Commission of Rome on 21st April, 1964. This document was the result of the controversy which took place during the Vatican Council and it will go down in history as the first official statement which openly approves the method of form-criticism and that of redactional history. It frankly admits the so-called three stages of tradition in the Gospel material as it emerged from the form-critical studies. They are the three levels of comprehension according to which the Gospel material was understood and they might be regarded, though not technically, as the three 'vital contexts' of the Gospels:

- (a) The *Sitz im Leben Jesu*: the vital context in the ministry of Jesus in which the saying or event might have its origin (*ipsissima verba*, the very words of Jesus).
- (b) The *Sitz im Leben der Kirche*: the setting in the life of the early Church, the classic 'vital context' which explains the creation or rather the formation of the story or doctrine.
- (c) The *Sitz im Evangelium*: the Gospel context or the inner sequence of the sacred book in which the saying or event is related or inserted.

In the introductory part, the instruction has a warning to people who try to impede scientific work in the field of exegesis:

'All other children of the Church should bear in mind that the efforts of these valiant labourers in the vineyard of the Lord have to be judged not only with fairness and justice, but also with the greatest charity, for even interpreters of the greatest reputation, such as Jerome himself, in their endeavours to clear up certain more difficult points, have on occasion arrived at results which were far from happy . . .'

Some paragraphs further on, the green light is given to *Formgeschichte*:

'The interpreter must . . . make judicious inquiry as to how far the form of expression and the type of literature adopted by the sacred writer may help towards the true and genuine interpretation . . . In appropriate cases the interpreter is free to seek out what sound elements there are in the method of form-history, and these he can freely make use of to gain a fuller understanding of the Gospels.'

Thereafter comes the description of the *Redaktionsgeschichte*:

'In order to determine correctly the trustworthiness of what is transmitted in the Gospels, the interpreter must take careful note of the three stages of tradition by which

the teaching and the life of Jesus have come down to us:

- (I) *Christ Our Lord* attached to himself certain chosen disciples who had followed him from the beginning, who had seen his works and heard his words, and thus were qualified to become witnesses of his life and teaching. Our Lord, when *expounding his teaching* by word of mouth, observed the methods of reasoning and of exposition which were in common use at the time . . . He accommodated himself to the mentality of his hearers, and ensured that his teaching would be deeply impressed on their minds and would be easily retained in memory by the disciples . . .
 - (II) *The Apostles*, bearing witness to Jesus, *proclaimed* first and foremost the death and resurrection of the Lord, faithfully recounting his life and words and, as regards the manner of their preaching, taking into account the circumstances of their hearers. After Jesus had risen from the dead, and when his divinity was clearly perceived, the faith of the disciples, far from blotting out the remembrance of the events that had happened, rather consolidated it, since their faith was based on what Jesus had done and taught . . . (Hence there is a real connection and continuity from the Jesus of history to the Christ of faith: cf. the thesis of Xavier Léon-Dufour in his *Les évangiles et l'histoire de Jésus*, Ed. du Seuil, Paris, 1963).
- Yet it need not be denied that the apostles, when handing on to their hearers the things which in actual fact the Lord had said and done, did so in the light of that fuller understanding which they enjoyed as the result of being instructed by the glorious events of the Christ, and illumined by the Spirit of Truth. Thus it came about that, just as Jesus himself, after his resurrection, had interpreted to them . . . the words of the Old Testament, so now they in their turn interpreted his words and deeds according to the needs of their hearers . . . they made use of such various forms of speech as were adapted to their own purposes and to the mentality of their audience . . . These various ways of speaking . . . must be distinguished one from the other and carefully appraised: catecheses, narratives, testimonies, hymns, doxologies, prayers and other such literary forms as were customarily employed in Sacred Scriptures and by people of that time.
- (Jos. A. Fitzmyer, S.J., *Theological Studies*, 25, 1964,

pp. 386-408, comments: One thinks readily of genealogies, parables, miracle stories, midrash, etc. . . .).

(III) *The Sacred Authors* took this earliest body of instruction, which had been handed down orally at first and then in writing, for many soon set their hands to drawing up a narrative of matters concerning the Lord Jesus, and set it down in the four Gospels. In doing this, each of them followed a method suitable to the special purpose which he had in view. They selected things out of the many which had been handed on; some they synthesized, some they explained (expanded) with an eye to the situation of the Churches, painstakingly using every means of bringing home to their readers the solid truth of the things in which they had been instructed. For, out of the material which they had received, the sacred authors selected especially those items which were adapted to the various circumstances of the faithful as well as to the end which they themselves wished to attain; these items they recounted in a manner consonant with those circumstances and with that end . . . The evangelists, in handing on the words and the deeds of our Saviour, explained them for the advantage of their readers, setting them, one evangelist in one context, another in another (cf. Matt. 16: 13 ff. and John 21: 15 ff.).

The truth of the narrative is not affected in the least by the fact that the evangelists report the sayings or doings of Our Lord in a different order and that they used different words to express what he said (not the *ipsissima verba*!), not keeping to the very letter but nevertheless preserving the sense.

The instruction then goes on to state that the exegetes have a duty to carry on their research which is far from being finished. Incidentally the salvific aspect of the Gospel message is once more underlined:

‘Unless the exegete pays attention to all those factors which have a bearing on the origin and composition of the Gospels and makes due use of the acceptable findings of modern research, he will fail in his duty of ascertaining what the intentions of the sacred writer were and what it is that he actually said. The results of recent studies have made it clear that the teachings and the life of Jesus were not simply recounted for the purpose of being kept in remembrance but were “preached” in such a way as to furnish the Church with the foundation on which to build faith and morals.

'There remain many questions, and these of the gravest moment, in the discussion and elucidation of which the exegete can and should freely exercise his intelligence and skill. In this way each can contribute individually to the advantage of all, to the constant advancement of sacred learning, to preparing the ground and providing support for the decisions of the Church's teaching authority, and to . . . the honour of the Church herself . . .'

This last passage expresses very well our common task: to tackle these many questions of the gravest moment, to contribute individually and in groups, by free discussion and investigation, to the constant advancement of sacred learning. I wish you once more a hearty welcome to De Nobili College and express my hope that this third conference of the Society for Biblical Studies be most fruitful and a great success.