

Reviews

JESUS by Lucas Grollenberg, trans. by John Bowden SCM, 1978
pp. 125 £1.95

PAUL by Lucas Grollenberg, trans. by John Bowden SCM, 1978
pp. 176 £1.95

Fr Grollenberg is the Dutch Dominican biblical scholar who produced one of the best atlases of the bible there are about 20 years ago. Here we have from his pen in an excellent translation two beautifully produced paperbacks; the pictures on the covers are details from an eleventh century mosaic in a church of St Luke somewhere in Greece—a nice touch of filial piety towards the writer's patron saint, and a bow towards ecclesiastical tradition which is not entirely consonant with his approach to his subjects inside the covers.

But don't believe everything you read in the blurb on the back cover of *Paul*: "Was Paul married? 'No doubt about it', says the author, and to those who might raise their eye-brows gives utterly convincing reasons for such judgment". Fr Grollenberg is indeed convinced that Paul was married, and argues in support of his contention. But he does *not* say there is no doubt about it; he says "It is difficult to doubt that Paul was married" (p. 50). And at the end of his argument and his suggestions about how the marriage possibly broke up, he says, "All this is pure hypothesis". The blurb is unfair to the soundness; the delicacy of the author's instincts as a scholar and a historian.

In these two books the biblical scholar is engaged in the biblical apostolate, writing unpretentiously as a populariser of modern New Testament scholarship. In fact, he is here simply writing up things he has said many times in talks to various groups, including 'young couples at their marriage interviews'. He does it supremely well, and although I myself would not be quite so certain as he is about a number of his hypotheses and historical reconstructions, that is really beside the point. What

matters is that he helps the ordinary reader of the gospels and St Paul's letters to make the necessary leap in imagination across 2,000 years to a very different world and very different cultures, and so presents both Jesus and Paul in a fresh and stimulating light.

Where I find myself, I regret to say, rather less in sympathy with Fr Grollenberg is in the matter of his theological approach (it would be fair, indeed, to say his anti-theological approach) to his subject. About this too, of course, he is perfectly honest, and so I in turn can be completely frank about my objections. They concern his *Jesus*, naturally enough, rather than his *Paul*, since Jesus, but not Paul, is the subject of dogmatic and theological questions and statements as well as of historical ones. It has been a reasonable complaint against many dogmatic theologians in the not so distant past—especially the scholastic variety—that they were biblically illiterate. Fr Grollenberg, I'm afraid, belongs to that all too numerous band of biblical scholars who are theologically illiterate—and, I cannot help feeling in this case, wilfully so.

At least wilfully so in this sense, that Fr Grollenberg in his introductory 'Apology' to *Jesus* (he really is such a charming man, which is a pity, because otherwise I could be rude about him with fewer inhibitions) appears to present his aversion to dogmatic theology as a kind of spiritual and intellectual emancipation from the narrow-minded, triumphalist, uncritical, dogmatic certainties of pre-council, pre-war Dutch Catholicism. "I would like to assure these people (whom I may have surprised or annoyed in this book) that I too have lived in the world of sacred customs

and sacred institutions, of unassailable certainties. I did so for years, and I enjoyed it very much, but I think I have grown out of it now". (Perhaps *not* a very charming remark, at least not to those whom the apology is addressed to). And then, a few paragraphs further on, he continues: "I have been increasingly pre-occupied with Jesus, and as a result I have gradually become less concerned about all kinds of 'truths' from the past: doctrines of God and the Trinity, of Christ as the God-man, of the means of grace, the infallibility of Christian dogma, and so on. It is not that these things are no longer true for me: they are no longer relevant, and do not fit in with the rest of my thinking".

I suppose I am quite out of sympathy with Fr Grollenberg here because my odyssey has taken me in the diametrically opposite direction. What he was growing out of, I was growing into—at about the same time, I imagine, the war years; and I was finding these 'truths' from the past to be like fresh sea breezes dispersing the fog of muddled and superficial and sentimental thinking about religion in which, as an average English youth, I had hitherto been floundering. I fear it is at least into muddled thinking that Fr Grollenberg has been intellectually liberated.

Thus he presents us with a picture of *Jesus* who wanted people 'to pay attention to God not to him' (p. 51). So speaks the historian. But Grollenberg the anti-theologian has grown out of doctrines of God, and prefers to pay attention to Jesus, not to God.

On p. 59 he begins a chapter with what is in fact a caricature, though a mild one, of the traditional doctrine of Christ's atoning death. Then he continues: "Christians ought to have some awareness of the great objections which thoughtful and sensitive people have to this way of thinking (a way of thinking, incidentally, summed up in Jn 3:16, 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son . . .' EH). These objections are by no means new but go back over a century or more. Many people believe that the belief outlined in the previous paragraph attributes an immoral action to God". I would only add that Fr Grollenberg ought to have some awareness—and pass it on to his readers—of the

answers to these objections which thoughtful and sensitive theologians have been proposing for a millenium or more.

On p. 97 the author, aligning himself with 'modern men' (those imperious patrons of so much sloppy thinking), informs us that "We can no longer summon up much interest in the question whether a statement about God and Jesus and the Church and the Bible is 'true' . . ." Once again those derogatory apostrophes round 'true'; and all I can say is, that if we can't summon up much interest in this question, we ought to. Of course, there have been many people, perhaps a majority in all ages, who have not been able to summon up much interest in the question whether statements are 'true', but only in 'What do they mean for us?' They have been, and are, the great army of con men and liars that have always been muddying the waters of the world from the beginning.

Surely, Fr Grollenberg is not really doing himself justice here. He *is* interested in truth; but I rather think that for him, as for 'modern men' there is only one kind of truth, the historical and the factual, and it is entirely unproblematical. Everything else is merely a 'truth'.

So far I have been merely disagreeing with Fr Grollenberg, albeit vehemently. But as he develops his attack on 'truth', I find myself getting angry, and tempted to send him my seconds to offer him a choice of weapons. For he proceeds immediately, on the same page, to associate a concern for dogmatic and theological truth with the reactionary attitudes of Bishop Gijsen of Limburg. Now I fully share Fr Grollenberg's evident disapproval of Bishop Gijsen, and I thought his appointment to that see by the late Pope was a most lamentable error of judgment, to put it no more strongly. Therefore I resent being bracketed with Bishop Gijsen and all he stands for, simply because unlike Fr Grollenberg and his merry modern men I continue to be very interested in whether statements about God etc. are true.

One last instance of the author's uncritical subjection to the contemporary *zeitgeist*, even where his biblical acumen should warn him against it—this time from *Paul*. He is discussing I Cor. 15, where the apostle is insisting on the doctrine of the

resurrection of the dead. As Fr Grollenberg actually remarks, he is doing this in the teeth of the Greek cultural and ideological background of the Corinthians (p. 130 ff.). So evidently Paul did not think that when preaching the gospel we simply have to accept the cultural assumptions of our listeners without question or criticism. And yet this is what the author seems to

me to do when trying to 'make sense' of Paul's teaching for his own readers. At least, that teaching comes across to me in an exceedingly weak solution. I think it would have seemed to Paul remarkably like the Corinthian errors he was so vehemently combating.

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THE YEAR OF THREE POPES by Peter Hebblethwaite. *Collins, London, 1978*
paperback 95p.

This book reads as enthrallingly as a good thriller. While being in no way offensive to pious papists it should also amuse and enlighten others who either suspect their own motives for being interested or else cannot fathom why the papacy remains such a fascinating subject at all.

The most speculative sections are obviously those on how the three men were elected in the first place. Although we shall presumably never know for sure it seems pretty clear that Montini, the obvious candidate to succeed John XXIII in 1963, was blocked until the fifth ballot by a determined group of ultra-conservative cardinals, led by Ottaviani and Siri, who hoped to stop Vatican II from ever being reassembled. Paul VI himself, interestingly enough, probably wanted Lercaro of Bologna, who had turned his archiepiscopal palace into a hostel for homeless boys.

The surprise election in August 1978 of Albino Luciani should not have been such a surprise at all, so Peter Hebblethwaite now concludes, with the benefit of hindsight and some ingenious deduction from unguarded statements by various eminent persons whose lips were of course sealed by terrible oaths. In brief, the theory runs that Cardinal Benelli of Florence, until recently a very powerful figure in the Vatican, either thinking himself too young or too much associated with the Roman Curia or else simply preferring to be *éminence grise*, had the bright idea that an Italian would be acceptable to the majority of the electors if he could be found among the cardinal archbishops of the major Italian cities. What with age, sickness, provincialism, or the hopelessly unacceptable conservatism of Siri of Genoa, the list soon reduced itself to one plaus-

ible name, that of the Patriarch of Venice: a popular bishop with a flair for communication, who was in the Lercaro mould and had just happened to have visited Brazil. On the day, Siri probably topped the list at the first ballot, but with Luciani close behind. On the second ballot Benelli's plan began to work, and on the third Luciani had picked up most of the votes except for a hard core of ultra-conservatives. He was elected, then "by a grand and spontaneous coalition of third world cardinals, moderates, progressives, and flexible conservatives", and "the irreducible opposition was small and impenitently right-wing" (p. 84). This theory would be confirmed by the obvious euphoria immediately afterwards: God's candidate and all that.

How Karol Wojtyla got elected, in October, has proved much harder to work out. We know that it took much longer – perhaps as many as eight ballots. Peter Hebblethwaite's story is that the first day went in showing that there was now no acceptable Italian. He favours the doomsday 'scenario' according to which it was a contest between Benelli and Siri (again!), thus between the smooth Curial autocrat dedicated to carrying through the reforms of Vatican II and the aging conservative who once described Vatican II as "the greatest disaster in recent ecclesiastical history" – but with about forty electors steadfastly voting for neither of them. Overnight, then, a sleepless night for most of them we may suppose, the cardinals had to face the prospect of electing a non-Italian. It is possible that some thought of Cardinal Koenig of Vienna (capital of a neutral country); and that he may have played a considerable role in gathering