

Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI. *Jesus of Nazareth. Holy Week: From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection*. San Francisco: Ignatius, 2011. 384 pages. \$24.95.

Jesus' eschatological discourse (Mark 13; Matt 24; Luke 21) "could perhaps be described as the most difficult text in the whole of the Gospels." (26-27) Pope Benedict's treatment of it will serve, then, to illustrate his approach to the events of Holy Week and the help it will offer to preachers. Recognizing the complexity of the transmission and redaction history of this discourse, the Pope chooses to focus on three themes: The End of the Temple, The Times of the Gentiles, and Prophecy and Apocalyptic. Here we limit ourselves to the last of these themes, since it is the most baffling for theologically liberal and middle-of-the-road preachers, leaving them with no alternative to dispensationalist interpretations that they find bizarre but that grab media attention and stir up public emotions.

Pope Benedict's opening assessment is that this discourse refers "mainly to a future that lies beyond time and reality as we know it . . . exceeds our categories yet can only be represented using models drawn from our experience, and they are inevitably inadequate." This leads Jesus to present "this material using a tissue of scriptural allusions . . . intended to point us toward realities that defy description." (27) This tissue of scriptural allusion includes the vision of the coming Son of Man from Daniel 7, which opens the way for the new element that Jesus brings to this future-pointing tradition. In this Jesus who is himself this Son of Man, "the future is already here" and "will not place us in any other situation than the one to which our encounter with Jesus has already brought us." (50) The import of this is to undercut reading Jesus' words as "a newly formulated account of the future, such as one might expect from a clairvoyant." Such a reading misses Jesus' call to a "realignment of our perspective on the future within the previously given word of God, manifesting both the perennial validity and the open potentialities of that word. . . . [T]he word of God from the past illumines the essential meaning of the future. . . . [I]t does not offer us a description." Jesus words are in fact "intended to deter us from mere superficial curiosity about observable phenomena . . . and to lead us toward the essential: toward life built upon the word of God that Jesus gives us; towards an encounter with him, the living Word; towards responsibility before the Judge of the living and the dead." (50-51)

The summons to pass from curiosity about external events, from which some Christians are inclined to insulate themselves by means of a belief that they will be among those caught up in the Rapture, to the question of how events reported about or foreseen by Jesus might encourage me to a deep encounter with God is characteristic of the Pope's entire project. His desire is to bring together the fruits of historical-critical study with theology, and particularly the theology of the patristic period. He is not interested in testing whether Jesus really said or did something, although he is quite aware of the variations in the tradition that generate that question. Rather he begins with the Gospel accounts and basically trusts the witness of multiple traditions, drawing them together to illumine the event under consideration. (The term that transforms this harmonization into something with scholarly respectability is "intertextuality.")

The Pope's framework for the order of presentation of the events of Holy Week is a harmonized composite of all four Gospels; but his interest is not testing the chronological accuracy of his ordering of events. He is interested in chronology only when it is important for the meaning of the event, as in the case of the question whether the Last Supper was a Passover supper as in the Synoptics or a pre-Passover supper as in John. In relation to that he argues extensively the view that the Last Supper was not a Passover meal, and indeed that even the Synoptic accounts of the Supper "recount as little of the Passover as John." Rather, as John

Meier proposes, Jesus, anticipating his death, knew he would not eat the Passover on the following evening, and so invited his disciples to a final meal in which he gave them something new: *his* Passover, with himself as the Passover Lamb, (113) which he would become when condemned to death at noon “on the day of Preparation of the Passover.” (John 19:14)

Developing the meaning of the Last Supper further, Pope Benedict next takes up the question of Jesus’ words and actions at the table. He begins addressing the view that the words and actions of Jesus originate with the early Christian community and not with Jesus. He observes that this view is based not on historical argument but on a modern theological struggle. This struggle arises from a perceived contradiction between Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom, in which Jesus replaced the judgment proclaimed by John with God’s goodness and mercy, on the one hand, and a need for atonement, on the other. The perceived contradiction is based on a theology that views atonement as the demand of a cruel God requiring the infinite. (232) The Pope asserts that historically the invention of the Last Supper story by the early Christian community is quite absurd. How could Christians have made up the story without anyone questioning it? (125) Consequently, we need to seek in the texts an understanding of atonement that fits Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom. (119) He offers two proposals. One is that Jesus, like God in the Old Testament, offers a gift to his people. When they use their freedom to refuse it, he finds a new path. (121) Another is that the atonement “is not the case of a cruel God demanding the infinite. It is exactly the opposite: God himself becomes the locus of reconciliation, and in the person of his Son take the suffering upon himself. God grants his infinite purity to the world.” (232)

This entire volume is a rich and judicious discussion of historical issues that have theological consequences. It is written gracefully and with great clarity. Pope Benedict develops his exposition in conversation with contemporary scholars, thus contributing valuably to that ongoing discussion and addressing the questions that are likely to be in the minds of preachers who engage the Biblical texts thoughtfully and who read and consider the work of scholars as they seek their own deeper understanding of the texts as a source of life for their listeners.

What I miss in this volume is any attention to the political, social, and economic import of Jesus’ words and actions and of how the challenge to those powers is taken up by Paul and the early Church, successors of Jesus on whose work the Pope frequently draws. Pope Benedict speaks of how for the early Christians the Temple had ceased to be a place of meaningful between human beings and God long before its outward destruction. (26, 38) He explains this by drawing on Gregory of Nazianzen (d. ca. 390), who viewed history in terms of a succession of phases leading to the climax of the sacrifice of Jesus. Had this nothing to do with the fact that the Temple hierarchy was not only a religious body but a political body that cooperated with the Roman Empire, also a political power to whose health religious sacrifices were essential? Did the loss of meaning have no connection with Jesus’ challenge to the powers of his day as powers of this world that set themselves against the kingdom of God the he was inaugurating? This view of Jesus’ ministry is a major current in modern scholarship. It challenges the view that Jesus was speaking of an otherworldly kingdom that people would enter after death and that he was concerned primarily with individual sin requiring atonement after death, a view that has prevailed in the church since the time the political powers came to be viewed as Christian and off limits to Jesus’ critique. If the Pope disagrees with this point of view, it is difficult to understand why he would not take it on in debate, given its prominence in present-day Jesus scholarship.

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