

This series is designed primarily to provide visual aids for the teaching of the Christian faith in schools; it is also fascinating material as art and as history. The pictures have been chosen partly for their subjects and vividness of presentation, but above all for their sense of the reality of the spiritual.

*Jacob's Ladder* Filmstrips should be applied for either from Kay Carlton Hill Film Studios, 72a Carlton Hill, London, W.8., or from the Editor, 9 Essex Villas, London, W.8.

## EXTRACTS

### *The Passion narrative in the late Middle Ages*

All students of late medieval spiritual writings are already much in the debt of Professor F. P. Pickering, particularly for the account which he published in 1938 in the John Rylands Bulletin of a Middle High German version of the tale, *The Pious Beguine*, one of the most charming and illuminating examples we possess of the literature of *docta ignorantia*, and, more recently, for his new edition of *Christi Leiden in einer Vision geschaut* (Manchester University Press, 1952). Now, as an appendix to this edition and as a preliminary sketch for the critical work on the history of such Passion narratives as *Christi Leiden* which he promises us, he has published in volume 7 of *Euphorion* (Heidelberg 1953, pp. 16-37) a long article, *Das gotische Christusbild: Zu den Quellen mittelalterlicher Passionsdarstellungen*.

He begins with a passage in *Christi Leiden* which describes in painful detail the ferocity with which our Lord was taken prisoner in the garden, '... with heavy blows from hands and fists grasping weapons, aimed at his nape and between his shoulders, upon his back, at his head, against his cheeks, towards his throat and breast. . . . They tore the hair from his head so that locks of it lay strewn upon the ground: one dragged him along by the hair of the head, another pulled him back by the beard . . .', and he contrasts this with the reticence and austerity of the Gospel narratives. The title of the article perfectly describes its content: here we have, not the awful, remote, hieratic figure of the East, reigning in triumph from the tree, wearing the Precious Blood as a Royal robe, but a late and Western Christ, tormented, lacerated, dying a death horrible in itself and most horrible in its sufferer's Divinity: and the author seeks to discover where the painters and sculptors, the visionaries and preachers of late Western Christendom found the lineaments of the 'Gothic Christ'.

As we should today expect, he turns first to medieval Old Testament exegesis, and suggests that in the fuller work which he has in hand he will examine the contributions of the prophetic writers to the evolution of the various scenes of the Passion: here he confines himself to consideration of

the Crucifixion itself, and of later, specifically Christian sources for the additions. He looks at the influence upon these later writers of the 'typology' of the Fathers: how, for example, such Old Testament scenes as Isaac bearing the wood for his own sacrifice and Moses lifting up the serpent in the desert were held to prefigure our Lord carrying the Cross and hanging from it (and we are at once reminded that Bede tells us that Benedict Biscop brought from Rome a series of paintings for his church at Jarrow to illustrate this 'typology', and that two of these paintings conjoined precisely these Old and New Testament scenes). Professor Pickering also gives several arresting instances where later writers are so much under the influence of such exegetical traditions that they achieve positive Gordian knots of imagery, as when the author of *Unum ex quatuor*, paraphrasing St John 16, 32, made our Lord speak of himself as the wine-press which should be trodden out: and he shows how easily such interpretations of Old Testament images could lead to an accumulation of detail in the Passion narrative. Then, using as one of his demonstrations a most interesting account of the equation 'harp' = Cross in medieval interpretation of the Old Testament, he proposes a theory of 'de-symbolisation', by which he seeks to explain the very common medieval detail of the tormenting of Christ by tugging at his limbs with cords as a literal application of originally figurative language. (The analogies between this theory, and that of the 'figured history' sometimes advanced among historians of the plastic arts, deserve pursuit by Professor Pickering.)

Very briefly, he suggests answers to several highly controversial questions: did European anti-Semitism colour the Passion narratives, or vice versa: are some of the details of these narratives borrowed from accounts of later martyrdoms written by eye-witnesses? In these matters, one looks forward to a detailed presentation of the evidence which leads the author to the conclusions he indicates. But even at this stage, one can wholeheartedly agree with some of his contentions: the present writer's eye was caught by the place where Professor Pickering writes of the increasingly marked influence towards the end of the Middle Ages upon popular devotional literature of representational art, since he has himself made precisely this point (in *Blackfriars*, July-August, 1953) in connection with the *Revelations* of Mechtild of Magdeburg. A comparable case is to be found in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, where she, in her description of her vision of our Lord's betrayal and arrest, gives us a vivid and detailed account of how the Jews fell to the ground at his reply, *Ego sum*, which, closely though it corresponds to St John's narrative, was most probably impressed upon her mind, Latin text and all, by the many *Quem queritis* ceremonies, with their pantomimic illustrations of the story being sung, which she must have witnessed during Holy Week rites. In this country

we are only beginning to understand the importance as sources for every form of popular literature of the things which medieval men and women could see and hear, as against the texts which a few of them could read. Professor Pickering is much to be congratulated upon the enterprise which has led him to undertake such a survey of the Latin and vernacular devotional writings of Northern Europe in his period, and to check his findings against the evidence of the other arts, of which scriptural interpretation may justly be reckoned the most influential.

Two points may be mentioned here in which, even in such a short preliminary sketch as this, the author invites criticism. One is that he nowhere acknowledges the immense emotional force which his many Old Testament quotations from the prophecies gathered from their annual recitation in the Holy Week liturgies, and that in general he seems not yet to have approached the many liturgical studies which could so greatly contribute to his subject. The other is that place might have been found to show that in the fifteenth century some of the ecstatic visionaries, St Birgitta above all, had for their devotees acquired a prestige little short of the authority of Holy Writ. Johann Brugmann, the early fifteenth-century Dutch writer who forms so important a link between the Friends of God and the *Devotio Moderna*, when he writes of the incidents of the Flagellation in his *Life of Christ*, says 'This is not in the Gospels, but it is in the *Revelations*, so I put it down as well'.

Professor Pickering is completely justified in rejecting any mere appeal to 'the spirit of the age' as an adequate explanation of such phenomena. It is the spirit itself of the age which needs explanation: and we may eagerly await the work which he promises us.

ERIC COLLEDGE

The problem of the relation between the Flesh and the Spirit in Christian Asceticism is very well discussed in an article entitled 'The ennobling of the bodily life through grace' in the June-July issue of *Tijdschrift voor Geestelijk Leven*. Often enough love of God has led people to a practice of asceticism that did not take into account the physical and psychological strength of the person, with the result that the sense life has been suppressed and a process set in motion which sometimes ended with the cooling of charity. So the important question is 'what is the function of the body in the growth of the spiritual life'.

The writer's central point is that 'man is not so much a body and soul, as an embodied spirit. Our growth in the spiritual life is, too often, hindered through not realising that man is a unity.' And though the Church has always insisted on the primacy of the spirit, it does not mean that it is in a state of enmity with the flesh. In the article the writer spends some time on the question of married life and its place in Christian asceticism.