

Reviews

THE POWER OF THE POWERLESS by Jürgen Moltmann,
SCM Press, 1983. pp 166 £5.95.

GOD AMONG US: THE GOSPEL PROCLAIMED by Edward Schillebeeckx,
SCM Press, 1983. pp 258 £6.50.

There is always a certain amount of interest in discovering how a theologian will treat his material when he comes to the pulpit. In these collections of sermons Moltmann and Schillebeeckx give us an opportunity of observing the process in contemporary authors, ecumenical in spirit, yet coming from two different Christian traditions. The sermons of Moltmann, first published in German in 1981, and given within the last ten years, were for the most part preached before a university audience of the *Stifteskirche* in Tübingen. The sermons follow the half-cycle of the liturgical year from Advent to Pentecost, with two essays added to bring out Moltmann's point that sermons always should be seen as belonging within the congregation that shares a common life.

In his preface, Moltmann notes that "sermons mediate between the text of the biblical testimonies and the poor and helpless people of today". But in fact they always do something more. They mediate those testimonies through the peculiar viewpoint of the preacher. In this case the preacher is a theologian who has specialised in showing how the cross is the very foundation of Christian theology, and how the "crucifixion of God" has formed and shaped the character of the hope and liberation that Christianity promises. These sermons tell us that God is the God who is known in brokenness and suffering. 'Experiences of suffering are now the order of the day'. This will be the "contextuality" of our theology. The crisis of our time is the fate of the powerless in society. These include those actively undergoing persecution, like the "campesinos" in Central America, the Christians in Korea (to whom this book was dedicated), the star-

ving in Africa, those living under economic privation, like the unemployed in western industrialised cities, or those experiencing physical helplessness, like the handicapped.

These sermons were delivered before a bourgeois audience, and a privileged bourgeois audience at that, living in the *First World*. It is Moltmann's view that this world is imbued with a vision of a God who is essentially authoritarian, unmoving and unemotional. It is this God, or this image of God, which has dominated the bourgeois religions of particular societies; a God from which Christianity must always distance itself. To do this, a follower of Christ must enter the stream of human life, which will include most especially the sufferings and deprivation experienced by one's neighbour. "We must not seek to escape from the pressures of life, to be released from the problems and pains of this world. . . . (We) are called . . . to live in the midst of this world, in its pains and problems, beneath the Cross" (p 66). On the Mount of the Transfiguration, when Peter, James and John are shown their Christian vocation, they see that to follow Jesus means to follow on a road that leads to the cross. "When we take up our cross, when we descend and enter into the world's sufferings, here we are brought into harmony with the will of God" (p 70). Serving the poor and the suffering is the Christian vocation, none other will do. For Moltmann, bourgeois society fails to do this since it is self-centred and individualistic. It has in fact often made the situation of the poor worse by exploitation: imposed limits rather than liberated. The message of these sermons is an unremitting call for transformations of life, openness towards others outside one's own circle, for free-

dom to move outside narrow church convention, for courage to oppose governments that practise oppression. Churches which simply provide moral glue for national establishments, or those which exist to serve the personal spiritual needs of the individuals who elect to join them, and even those which provide a place for open dialogues about religion do not know what the goals of a Christian community really are. They do not fathom the type of commitment which is required. In the sermon for Easter Moltmann says: "faith does not simply mean considering Christ's resurrection to be true and hoping for a life after death. . . . It is proved here and now by courage for revolt, the protest against deadly powers, the self-giving of men and women for the victory of life" (p 124).

The preacher always has a responsibility, of course, for alerting his people to their sins, as he sees them. This Moltmann does with wearying insistency. But a preacher must also illumine and suggest solutions for the situations which he condemns, or else he simply burdens his congregation with guilt. Exhortations, given in very general terms 'to be open', 'to oppose injustice and oppression', 'to choose peace', 'to liberate the victims of every exploitation', coupled in the same breath with sweeping complaints that members of the audience do not do these things, or that they embrace institutions that are incapable of doing these good things, produce little more than feelings of unspecified guilt in the congregation, or attitudes of apathy towards its institutions or both. To this reviewer's mind, a deeper political analysis would have helped these sermons.

God Among Us: The Gospel Proclaimed also includes a series of sermons preached in the last ten to twelve years, but in a more informal setting, such as a daily Eucharist at the community of the Albertinum in Nijmegen where Fr Schillebeeckx lives. Two lectures and a number of articles "which often go back to sermons", first published in journals of spirituality, are included as well. The point of departure in this sermon collection is the telling of the *story* which is imbedded in the fabric of the Scriptures. "For the most part,

people live by stories", Schillebeeckx observes in the course of a brief personal insight given at the beginning of his chapter on Dominican spirituality (p 232). Stories provide us with models for the way in which we can live. They are the means by which we form community. They enable us to unite with our family and friends, and our tribe or city, and ultimately with God. Our human story, which begins with creation, is an *on-going* story, Schillebeeckx insists, precisely because it is a *creation* story. In creation finite beings, men and women, are not made replicas of God who are then charged with the task of re-enacting, reproducing some ideal order of things. Human beings are not imperfect creatures asked to imitate the perfect God in so far as they are able. On the contrary, "God creates man to develop in freedom his own human future, to realise it in contingent situations by virtue of his finite human free will which can choose between different alternatives, even between good and evil" (p 95). The stories which we tell each other, then, do not simply talk about a past religious history – although they will include that activity, since this is the way in which we form our community solidarity. They also talk about the future with its new possibilities, for our human story is not yet ended. What we should make of these possibilities, what the future can and *should* be (because freedom, for Schillebeeckx, is not simply indulging irrational human whims) is taught to Christians through their experience of God's creative love. This comes to them through the story of Jesus of Nazareth. "Christology is therefore 'intensified', concentrated creation: belief in creation as God wants it. . . . God . . . is love that liberates men and women in a way that fulfills all human, personal, social and political expectations and indeed transcends them". God's love is taught to us through "our experience of the life of Jesus, on the basis of his message and the life-style that went with it, the specific circumstances of his death, and finally the apostolic witness of his resurrection from the dead" (pp 105-106). Schillebeeckx's methods, then, is to communicate parts of *that* story in his sermons

and sermon-articles.

The sermon for Christmas (1970) exemplifies the method. Schillebeeckx first draws his hearers aside from an over-material and image dominated approach to Jesus' birth. The shepherds, the crib, the stars, the Magi can all come later, when we know what the Incarnation is all about. The point of Christmas is that Jesus appears in the middle of Israel's story. It is a story of God's concern for mankind. In his life, Jesus takes up the thread of that story in such a way that his disciples can see in him a visitation of God. His invisible splendour shines visibly on Jesus' countenance for everyone to see: i.e. for all who open themselves to his love. By his life and actions, Jesus upon his death had given the story of Israel such "an unexpected and incalculable twist" that those who believed in him were able to appreciate anew God's love for man, and able to re-orientate their own lives. It is through our understanding of their encounters with

Jesus that the church is empowered to say in its creed: "I believe in Jesus"; 'I believe in Jesus as the Christ, as the only begotten Son, as the Lord'" (p 12). The Creed may judge the story, "open our eyes" to their meaning, but it is the stories, the encounters with Jesus, that men for the most part live by.

The telling of stories is the theme which unites the diverse material found in this book. It contains an interesting chapter on Dominican spirituality where Schillebeeckx tells the story of his own Order's still continuing career in Christian history. Near the end of the volume the story of St Albert the Great, told with spare words, a few facts, a couple of insights from the saint's own writings, but with such loving familiarity, is a high point not to be missed. It shows Schillebeeckx's method at its best, bringing the story of a great and complex Christian life into focus.

JOHN HILARY MARTIN O P

REVELATION AND ITS INTERPRETATION by Aylward Shorter. *Geoffrey Chapman, London, 1983. 277 p., paperback. Price not stated.*

This is the first volume in a new series, 'Introducing Catholic Theology,' under the general editorship of Michael Richards of Heythrop College. The author has taught in Kenya and Uganda, and his intimate acquaintance with African religion has had considerable influence on his writing of this book.

There are two obvious ways in which one could go about writing a book on revelation. One way would be to examine the concept of revelation, to uncover its assumptions about God's communication on the one side and human receptivity on the other, to list and compare the modes of revelation, to ask about the affinities of revelation to other forms of experience, and so on. That might be called the 'formal approach', and it has obvious justification as clarifying and justifying a fundamental theological concept. However, a purely or predominantly formal approach runs the risk of becoming too abstract. What is

important for faith is not the concept of revelation as such, but the content of revelation. So one may also expound revelation by recounting its content. It is this second, more concrete and experiential way of proceeding, that is adopted by Father Shorter, so that his book turns out to be not so much a study of the concept of revelation as a handbook of the revealed truths of Christian faith. His own claim is that he has 'tried to eschew altogether the *a priori* or definitional textbook style, and to offer an experiential theology with arguments of a more inductive nature'.

The book begins with a quotation from Cardinal Newman, in which it is asserted that there is no 'unaided' knowledge of God. We can have knowledge of him only on the basis of his own self-communication. This, of course, sets up a tension with the modern mentality, which accepts as the paradigm of knowledge the empirical knowledge of