

CHRIST'S METHOD OF EXEGESIS

SENEX

THIS is no learned dissertation, in spite of the appearance in the title of the word 'exegesis' which is so often associated with the *minutiae* of textual and historical criticism. The word in question, however, seems properly to bear no less restricted a meaning than that of interpretation, and in that wide sense it is here employed. The paragraphs which follow reflect merely the attitude of a life-long reader of the inspired volume who has never been unconscious of 'Scripture difficulties' or of the main results and findings of modern research, but in the light of papal admonitions and with the aid of such theological authors as he was able to consult, has arrived at certain conclusions which he thought might be worth passing on to others, at least for their consideration. Here one point only is dealt with.

The Angelic Doctor in a magisterial passage has told us that the 'literal' sense of Holy Scripture is the 'sense intended by God', who is the real Author of the inspired texts. Inevitably we ask ourselves how this divinely-intended sense is to be discovered? One answer only is here attempted, but it seems to cover a good deal of ground. Obviously, there can be no possibility of mistake when the Incarnate Son of God explains to us the significance of the words of the Holy Spirit.

No one, of course, who reads the Gospels can fail to notice the supreme reverence for the Scriptures which our Lord invariably displays; how he cites their authority as conclusive; and how he sometimes speaks as if his own actions on earth were even dictated and necessitated by the Old Testament prophecies. But it seems better to plunge into the heart of our present subject by quoting his own words.

'Beginning at Moses and the prophets, he expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things that were concerning him' (Luke 22, 27).

'Thus it is written, and thus it behoved Christ to suffer and to rise again from the dead, the third day' (id., 46).

'O foolish and slow of heart to believe in all things which the prophets have spoken' (id. 25).

Do not these words indicate clearly not only that abundant evidence for the Passion and Resurrection of Christ is to be found in the Old Testament, but that failure to discover such evidence is in some sense blameworthy, and further that such evidence does not consist merely in certain passages of the writings of the prophets but goes back to the Pentateuch and the Law? Yet is it not the case with us moderns both that scholarly exegesis has whittled away the predictive content of most of the passages which used to be referred to in this connection, and that many devout believers find it rather difficult to put this scholarship out of court? Where is the source of the trouble to be found?

We, the present-day children of the Church, are deprived of the inestimable privilege of hearing with our own ears the divine elucidations which were vouchsafed to the two disciples who journeyed towards Emmaus on the evening of the first Easter Day, and so we are left to infer from other passages in the gospels what the principles of this exegesis may have been. It seems to me certain that we shall not be far wrong if we say that everywhere the Incarnate Word of God teaches us to *look below the surface* of the text and to discover as the true meaning of the sacred writings what is unobvious, and yet to understand that this unobvious meaning is the literal meaning—that is, the meaning intended by God. The tender rebuke administered to the two pilgrims seems further to suggest that the discovery of this true meaning is the fruit of devout meditation rather than of exotic erudition. Ought we not to—must we not—say that any kind of arbitrary 'mystical' interpretation is excluded no less? Before leaving the specific subject of the Old Testament and the resurrection of our Lord we may well remember the words of the Apostle John relative to his first visit to the empty tomb at the conclusion of his wonderful race with St Peter: 'As yet they knew not the scriptures that he must rise again from the dead'. The question here is not of any imported, but of the real, meaning of the sacred writings.

In connection with this mysterious subject of our Lord's

own exegesis there is one passage especially in the gospel narrative which has, if I may say so, haunted me (and, I might say, fascinated me) for a great part of my life on account of the wonderful light which is there thrown upon this underlying sense of the inspired words. We read in St Matthew's account of the vehement attempts of our Lord's enemies to catch him out in his words and so to provide them with some excuse for the arrest of this disturbing Prophet; that arrest which in fact they had already planned and which was imminent. The Sadducees, it will be remembered, brought to him a trumped-up difficulty concerning the resurrection of the body; and our Lord, having dealt with that, went on to enunciate spontaneously to them and to the other bystanders a wider and more general principle (so it would seem). 'Concerning the resurrection of the dead', he proclaims, 'have you not read that which was spoken to you by God: I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Israel, and the God of Jacob. He is not the God of the dead but of the living.' These words were a rebuke to the Jews; but do they not come almost as a rebuke to some of us? Should not we, but for the authoritative explanation of them then given, have been content to refer them to their historical context (of which our Lord could not have been ignorant even if he had been only man) and immediate relevance? They would be the ratification of the mission of Moses and encouragement of the Hebrew people to make the supreme effort needed for flight from Egypt and taking possession of the Promised Land. But what vistas do these words of the Redeemer open up! And how utterly do they negative the suitability of any law of parsimony in the exegesis of the inspired writings! Are they not a challenge to us to seek everywhere in the Scriptures, not for arbitrary and fanciful applications of the words, but for a plenitude and hierarchy of meanings, all intended by the true Author of Holy Scripture, God, and all belonging to the literal sense?

Immediately following upon this incident I find another indication of our Lord's manner of dealing with the inspired text. Having so answered the questions of his adversaries as to put them to silence, he then poses them with a question

of his own: 'Whose son is the Messiah?' 'The son of David', correctly answer the Jewish leaders. 'How then is it', replies our Lord, 'that in the inspired writings we find David represented as speaking of the Messiah as his Lord: The Lord said unto my Lord?' (Ps. 109); 'how can the promised Saviour be both the son and the Lord of David?' The Pharisees, we are told, were silenced; but would not some modern critical scholars find more than one glib answer to make? We would not here raise the question of the Davidic authorship of the Psalm, any more than would the Jews of A.D. 30 have raised such a question. But apart from that, cannot the words be quite easily explained in a sense far other than that assigned to them by our Lord? Does not the divine teacher here dig down far beneath the obvious? Is it not evident that in adding those words 'in spirit' to the name David he is insisting that here, as always in the Old Testament Scriptures, we must pass behind the human writer and ask what the Spirit of God is proclaiming to us? The question is not what David as David said, but what the Holy Ghost says by the mouth of, or in the person of, David.

How significant again are our Lord's words about Elias and St John the Baptist, though here he would seem to be dealing not precisely with Holy Scripture itself but with a Jewish tradition based upon the scriptures. Yes, he says, Elias will come again, but if only you will understand the deep truth, Elias has come already—and the disciples knew that he meant in the person of St John the Baptist. Here again we see that it is the spirit that matters; the mere letter is nothing, or only a pointer.

While we are on the subject of St John the Baptist, how can we fail to realize that when in St Matthew 11 our Lord attributes to himself and to the Baptist the words of Isaiah's prophecies concerning the future glory of Israel, here also he teaches us that the very truth of inspired words is never merely literal? (we may compare St Luke 4). The obvious, the surface meaning, of those words, surely, is the appearance of a King, no doubt supernatural in character, yet an earthly leader and ruler, who will break the doors of Gentile prisons and establish an impregnable Kingdom on Mount Zion? But no, says our Lord, the prisoners whom I shall set

free will be those who are spiritually under the power of the devil or bound by habits of sin; the lame whom I shall make to walk will be (at least in the main) those who cannot act in matters moral as they would because they are suffering from the unalleviated effects of the primeval fall of man.

It is not my intention here and now to go through, one by one, the entire number of our Lord's references to Holy Scripture as in the Gospels, but it may perhaps be deemed not inappropriate here to interpose a suggestion as to our Lord's usage in this matter which may obviate certain difficulties. Did not our Lord in speaking to the Jews accept as a basis of his teaching and argumentation all the views then current as to the authorship and composition of the inspired writings, passing over and ignoring the questions which have been raised in modern times concerning these matters? Was not this precisely because such details were entirely irrelevant to the deeper views which he was urging upon his hearers, though also, surely, because to have made use of his supernatural knowledge in this matter would have been contrary to the whole economy of the incarnation, wherein the Son of God exhibited himself to the world as a servant and in the likeness of man? Indeed, would not the introduction by the divine teacher of superior historical knowledge have savoured (if we may use such language) of the trivial and the bizarre? We have been taught by supreme ecclesiastical authority that the writers of the inspired books were divinely guided to speak of secular matters in accordance with the ideas of the times in which they wrote, and if the Divine Spirit so acted in regard to the written word of God, why should the Incarnate Word of God have acted otherwise?

It may well be said that this brief note of ours raises more questions than it answers, and indeed its author feels that himself; but he thought that for this very reason it might be worth while putting down his reflections on paper and offering them to others for their consideration. Perhaps he should at the beginning have emphasized his full acceptance of the teaching of St Thomas as to the wide comprehensiveness which is to be attributed to the phrase 'literal sense' as applied to Holy Scripture. Because to God the true Author

of the inspired writings all things are present, therefore in the literal sense of their text several meanings may be included; and especially an immediate and an ultimate sense; a chronologically first sense which is less important perhaps than a fuller sense only to be verified in the course of time.

Now to the present writer it seems that in our own time controversy is so predominant that even we, the children of the Church, have almost been led into thinking that the obvious and immediate sense of the written word of God, which alone can be adduced in controversy, is the chief or only real sense; and that what is unobvious and deeper is mere 'adaptation' or man-made 'mysticism'—which word, unless clearly defined, introduces confusion into the whole question. Not only is the rich treasury of patristic and other traditional Catholic comment belittled or thrown aside, but at least indirectly, a slur is cast upon the interpretation of the Old Testament as exercised by the Apostles and Evangelists, and even (though of course unconsciously) upon the words of our Lord himself. We have only touched in these paragraphs upon this last, crucial point (to be approached only with the utmost reverence), but we cannot see why the children of the Church should not be able to combine meeting the learned people of the world on their own ground with nourishing among themselves a wisdom which belongs to them only; a wisdom which is perhaps 'foolishness to the Greeks' and at any rate is 'not of this world', but is a 'wisdom of God'.

I hope that what I have written will not seem either to be a belittlement of critical work or in any sense an attack.