

THE FIRST AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BIBLICAL CONGRESS

The Congress has come and gone. After such a long period of waiting and planning it passed altogether too quickly. The first tentative suggestions made a couple of years ago at a meeting of the Catholic Biblical Association here in Sydney seemed almost presumptuous. As for inviting to Australia a prominent biblical scholar from abroad, such a plan seemed hardly realistic. Who were we to embark on such great undertakings? The first moves, the renewal of initiative, the general organisation and the final day-to-day management, all this we owe to our secretary, Dr H. Davis. As the plan unfolded various committees were formed to help the work—there is no need to enter into detail—but as secretary of the Association and general organiser Dr Davis took upon himself the chief burden and responsibility.

It was certainly a very happy moment when the name of Fr Alexander Jones was first mentioned in our discussions. We already knew him through his writings, above all the delightfully written *Unless Some Man Show Me*, and his stimulating work on St Matthew in the *Catholic Commentary*. Further discreet investigation pointed more and more definitively to him as the man we were looking for. To our delight he was able and willing to come.

In our early deliberations we were much helped by discussions with representatives from the various congregations of teaching brothers and nuns. I think it was one of the brothers who suggested that Fr Jones should be asked to give all the talks; he pointed out, a little bluntly, that we, the local experts, could be heard at any time: there was no point in listening to us as long as Fr Jones could be heard. Our guest speaker generously took on this heavy task.

Another very useful suggestion came from our religious teachers, one which showed that they were taking the Congress very seriously. It was that summaries of each talk with a select bibliography be prepared well before the Congress. This was done and, through the generosity of a good Catholic layman, vast numbers were printed and distributed before and during the Congress.

It might be useful at this point to outline the actual programme of the Congress. It was to begin with High Mass on Sunday, 23rd August, and to extend over the following four days. Each day was to have three sessions, morning, afternoon and evening, with the exception of the last day which would have no evening session.

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The morning session was to cater for those who could be supposed to know something of the Scriptures already, representatives from the teaching congregations and other religious lay people from various Catholic organisations, priests and seminary students. A number of Protestant ministers were also invited to this and the other sessions. Admission to the morning talks, which were intended to be more specialised in their approach, was by invitation. The response, as it turned out, was excellent. Each morning the Empress Ballroom of Mark Foy's was full to capacity with well over a thousand people.

The afternoon sessions were directed to the general public, with no limitation of number. Rather ambitiously, the Sydney Town Hall was hired. While on no occasion was it packed to overflowing the attendance was always good, and on the last afternoon there were over two thousand there.

The three evening sessions were designed above all for the laity. There was a lecture on the first night, but the other evenings presented some combined dramatic or choral work. Here the response of the people was magnificent. The vast hall of the Trocadero was full to capacity on the last night with an audience approaching the two thousand mark.

The following programme gives an idea of the scope and variety of the topics :

Morning Sessions

- (1) Towards Understanding the Bible.
- (2) The Bible : History or Theology ?
- (3) The Gospel and the Gospels.
- (4) John the Theologian.

Afternoon Sessions

- (1) The Expanding Word.
- (2) The Unity of the Testaments.
- (3) God's Choice : its Nature and Consequences.
- (4) The Mother of the Word : Mary's Vocation and Ours.

Evening Sessions

- (1) The Bible, God's Word : His Precious Gift to His Church.
- (2) The Psalms, the Living Prayer of the Church : Presented in Song and Mime.
- (3) The Bible Presents Christ, Fulfilment of Our Hope.

As a practical means of getting the most out of the talks, it was decided that at the morning and afternoon sessions there should be a special panel formed to organise the questions the audience wanted to put to the speaker. After each talk a group of young people roamed through the hall with pencils and slips of paper. The questions were written out and brought up to the panel, who ordered them according to their topics, and then passed them on to the speaker or, in some cases, to the chairman of the session who read them aloud. The various panels were formed by very willing representatives of the brothers and nuns and a number of Catholic lay organisations. These were asked to study beforehand the topic of the talk, and so were in a position to put some intelligent questions themselves and to order the other questions correctly, selecting those which would be more valuable or interesting.

Another point of practical interest is this: despite the heavy expenses involved in the Congress, it was decided that no charge should be made for admission to any of the sessions. The whole affair was financed by voluntary donations.

Enough has been said on the generalities of organisation. They may be of interest to those who intend to run similar congresses in the future. It is time now to give a few more personal impressions of the events of the Congress. Even before it began, Fr Jones had won a great number of friends. Outstanding, I think, was his appearance in the television session, 'Meet the Press,' where the questions ranged from Dr Graham to the biblical persuasion of the inferiority of women to men. His tact and dexterity in dealing with the queries of the friendly but 'tough' newspaper men convinced many on the spot that the right man had been chosen to speak to Australians. Another television appearance, a number of radio talks, articles and interviews published in the daily newspapers, all this made it practically impossible for the general public to ignore the existence or importance of the coming Congress. Catholics received special treatment in the publishing of a considerable and well-presented supplement to the *Catholic Weekly* on biblical topics.

The actual opening of the Congress was a splendid affair. Providence so arranged that Cardinal Agagianian was coming to Australia to preside at the centenary celebrations of the archdiocese of Brisbane. By a slight deflection of route he very kindly consented to open the Biblical Congress. Two cardinals, the Apostolic Delegate and fifteen bishops were present on the sanctuary of St Mary's Cathedral for the liturgical reception and solemn High Mass. Fr Jones preached the sermon.

The bishops moved on to Queensland and the work of the Congress

began. Now it is quite impossible to give here anything like an adequate resumé of all the talks. Besides, it is hoped that they will be published before long and made available to all. All that can be attempted here is to record some impressions, some aspects of the talks which appealed to the writer and which others may find interesting.

It became evident very quickly that the speaker did not come to present a sort of panacea for all modern spiritual ills in organised Bible reading. He saw the Bible in the wider context of the Word of God living in the Church, active in the sacraments and apprehended in them. He had a very realistic appreciation of what modern life is, both inside and outside the religious or priestly vocation. To live the life of the Word of God is obviously more important than reading the word in the pages of the Bible. Of course such reading has its true place ; but there was in all the talks a complete absence of fanatical insistence (which people seem to expect from biblical scholars !) on Bible reading as the one thing necessary for salvation.

But *how* read the Bible? Here again there was a wholesome reaction against the system of biblical information, which still masquerades often enough as formation in the Scriptures. The Catholic reads the Bible conscious of the fact that both he and the book belong to the Church. His reading is a theological experience, it is an implicit prayer, where the son of God contemplates the history of the expanding Word, of the only-begotten Son of God in promise, in mortal flesh and in glory as Head of the Church.

Hence, when the speaker asked himself the question, 'Is the Bible history or theology?' he explained at once that the question had no real meaning, being merely a device to initiate discussion. For in the Bible history is intensely theological because it reveals God, not in a series of neatly worded theses, but in His great acts. And at the same time the theology of the Bible is revealed in historical progression. One must enter into this vital movement and refuse to be scandalised by the ignorance and occasional crudities of the Old Testament, Sacred history presents God's education of His people. Education, which in the Hebrew mind means 'correction,' presupposes ignorance and undesirable habits of behaviour. The Bible does not give us principles of education, but shows the education taking place, step by step, until the time was ripe for God to speak to us in His Son.

It can be seen at once how far-reaching are the consequences of these fundamental thoughts. There is no place for those picturesque Bible histories which forget the profound religious message of the Scriptures. At the same time those who fail to see progress in the historical revelation of the Old Testament are scandalised by its defects, and so tempted to draw up unreal summaries of Old Testament

doctrine where all is reduced to the same level, where in fact the men of the Old Testament, contrary to what the text says, are forced to think and behave as good Christians.

This concept of religious history was applied to the gospels. The differences of course between New Testament and Old Testament history were noted, but the same warning was given : not to be so preoccupied with marginal factual elements, as to obscure or forget the great religious message of good news. Correct interpretation of the gospels requires some appreciation of how they were written and what the writers had in mind. The early *kerygma* found in the sermons of Acts and the letters of St Paul is expanded through recollection of our Lord's words and deeds. But the expansion can take quite an artificial form as in the case of St Matthew, where the theological purpose of the writer dominates his handling of the historical matter at his disposal. Given the different approach of the various evangelists and their different emphasis in proclaiming the good news, the whole question of 'harmonisation' of the gospels proves a vexed one. Often it is better to admit slight factual inconsistencies (which do not bear on the writer's purpose and therefore do not touch biblical inerrancy) than insist on an uneasy and artificial solution.

To judge by the reaction of the audience, I think that the talk on 'John the Theologian' was among those most appreciated. The aim and method of the evangelist were explained with remarkable lucidity. The famous eucharistic chapter received an admirable commentary. Here the Word of God presents Himself as the true Wisdom, echoing the words of Ecclesiasticus : 'Those who eat me shall hunger again ; those who drink me shall thirst again,' or those of Proverbs : 'Come, eat my bread and drink the wine I have mixed for you.' The Word, summing up in Himself the new Wisdom, the new Law, calls for unconditional surrender of mind and heart and person to Himself. This is of course not to deny the sacramental meaning of the passage. No Christian reader, familiar as he was with the central liturgical act of the early Church, could fail to see the eucharistic meaning of the discourse. There is in fact a profound unity between the two ideas : personal acceptance of the Word reaches its climax in the acceptance of the Word's redeeming death. This union with the Crucified is directly achieved by the sacramental means of the Eucharist.

While the emphasis of the morning talks was on the gospels, the first three lectures of the afternoon were devoted to valuable over-all views of the whole Bible. The treatment of the 'expanding Word' was memorable. The Word of God was seen operative in creation first of all and dwelling in the works it produced, then articulate in the Law, then proclaimed with effective blessing and cursing by the

lips of the prophets, then personified in the Wisdom of the scribes—and this Word, which was in the beginning, was finally made flesh. But the gospel story is not the end of the story of the Word of God ; this story continues in the story of the Body of the Word, which is the Church.

This fundamental unity of the Old and the New Testaments was further developed in the following talks, by expounding the concept of covenant and covenant sacrifice, by revealing the common thought-world of both testaments, by seeing the purposeful elective activity of God through all the history of salvation. The point was well made that religion is God's search for man, the making of man in God's image and likeness, not a search of man for God in which he forms God in man's image and likeness.

The final afternoon talk, dealing with the Mother of the Word, set Mary firmly where she belongs, in the heart of Biblical theology.

A word in conclusion on the evenings of the Congress. On the first night Fr Jones gave an introductory talk, reminding Catholics that the Bible was their possession, their treasure. The second night was devoted to the Psalms. All present will long remember the artistic ballet in which three children of the Dominican Nuns' School for the Deaf mimed Psalm 23 (22). The beauty and expressiveness of the children's movements and the courage with which they completely overcame their tremendous natural handicaps made their performance really moving. Then, just to show that the Psalms could be in fact the people's prayer, a number of them, set to the Gelineau melodies, were sung by a select choir, and all the people, the two thousand of them, joined enthusiastically in the antiphons. It was a great experience to hear the triumphant crash of voices and instruments as Psalm 136 (135) reached its climax.

The last night saw the performance of a play specially written for the Congress by a leading Australian playwright Shan Benson. It was entitled 'The Beginning of Time.' Four speakers traced in the words of the Bible itself the great events of creation, fall and redemption, and a Lector fastened all together dramatically by a running commentary. Here the Bible could speak for itself, and its profound religious message was brought out unmistakably by the dramatic ordering of the texts and the Lector's words of comment. The last words rang out in a great peal of praise :

All things are in God,
and of Him, and by Him.
To Him be glory forever.

Amen.

BOOK REVIEWS

No words can express how grateful all of us, priests, religious, people, are to Father Jones for his work among us. We must not allow the fruit of this work to be limited to a general passing interest. All dedicated to the ministry of the Word would do well to ponder St Paul's words to Timothy: 'From childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings which are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus . . . that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.'

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Pymble
N.S.W.

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George H. Tavard, *Holy Writ or Holy Church*. Burns, Oates, London 1959. pp. 250. 30s.

There is a painful tendency of our time to be blind to all progress that cannot be registered on a dial. Its idols must above all be visible. Products must come off the line speedily and in bulk: the world adores triumphant statistics. For the laborious, unseen men who work behind all this, with their many unproductive failures and their rare success, our generation has no thought. They are not the idols, they are the 'boys,' the 'backroom boys.' If this is the way of the world, let the world look to it. Our own worries begin when the attitude threatens to creep into the world of theology; when we judge our investments there by quick returns; when the silence of slow theological thinking is taken for idleness. It is then we must fear.

Goodness knows, we have had lessons enough in the Church's history; and it is not the least merit of the book we are reviewing that it is a sharp reminder of the lesson of the Reformation. Fr Tavard maintains, and the whole book demonstrates his point, that the Reformation caught theology unawares in the matter of Scripture's relationship to the Church's authority. Indeed it is a second but not secondary purpose of the book—for it is a work of historical theology—to show how 'unsound [theological] thinking, when it is not put right in time, can start a decay that may itself gradually lead to a catastrophe.' And the catastrophe was no less than the cleavage of Christendom which men call 'the Reformation.'

But the author's purpose is not negative, and by no means petulant; it is positive and loyal, and above all apostolic. For he holds, and rightly holds, that only by searching back into the long chronicle of theological debate from the Fathers to the Council of Trent (where