

vol. 2, No 2, December 2008

BOOK-REVIEW

Saviour Menachery, CMI, "Remembering the Poor "(Gal 2:10:) Pauline Preaching ofan Integral Gospel (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2008), pp. xix + 219, ISBN 987-88-209-8153-2.

The interpretation of any written text should take into account the context. This is especially important for the interpretation of biblical texts, which can have normative value in the life of believers. "Context" here is to be taken primarily in the sense of the words in which the biblical text is found. But context also includes many other factors which influenced the shaping of the original meaning of the text and the shaping of the attempts to come to grips with the relevance of that original meaning in the milieu of any given reader.

Father Saviour Menachery's book has as its goal the interpretation of the phrase "remembering the poor" in Galatians 2,10. Well aware of the need to interpret this text in its many contexts he dedicates two preliminary parts of his book to preparation for his actual discussion of the text in question.

In Part One Fr. Saviour outlines "The Socio-Theological Setting of Pauline Apostolic Preaching". Here he goes into a thorough discussion of various external and internal factors which influenced the shaping of Paul's original meaning in Galatians. Factors such as the makeup of the Greco-Roman society of Paul's time, Paul's concept of being an "apostle," the dynamics of preaching, and Paul's internalization of what the word "gospel" means.

Then, in Part II, Father Saviour, a true son of the Pontifical Biblical Institute that he is (before doing doctoral studies at Saint Thomas he had acquired a Licentiate in Sacred Scripture at Biblicum), makes a detailed analysis of key Greek words which bear on the text. There is no substitute for consultation of the original language in which the biblical text was written. By exploring the meaning of these Greek words Father Saviour gives a good approximation of the mind of Saint Paul, a mind which was determinative for the writing of Galatians 2,10 as nothing else was, for it was Paul's understanding of himself and of his role in the Christianity of the first-century Mediterranean

world which framed the text in question. And it is in and through the language Paul used that one best arrives at this understanding.

Only after this elaborate but indispensable preparation does Father Saviour address the text itself. He situates briefly some past and present interpretations of Galatians 2,10 against their historical backgrounds. Then he gives a detailed explanation of how he views Paul's words in the immediate context.

This is a work of biblical theology. That is to it focuses on the religious meaning of the text in question. This religious meaning is the bridge which makes possible the discerning of the relevance of Galatians 2,10 in the world of today. Here is where the context grows more complicated. Not only to identify the poor of today, but how to help them. There is no particular difficulty in deciding how to come to the aid of those who are in danger of dying from hunger from one day to the next: supply what is needed as quickly as possible. Much more challenging is how to come to the aid of the economically poor on a long-term basis.

Father Saviour keeps referring to the need of coming to the assistance of the poor as part of the "integral gospel". The choice of "integral" is significant. Not "essential". By implication one can be a follower of Christ in essentials even if one does not come to the aid of the poor. Should there ever be a day when there are no really poor persons, would it therefore be impossible to be a Christian?

Worship of the Father as revealed by his Son and worship as intended by the Son would seem to be at the essence of what it is to be a Christian. That means worship of the Father in the context of fellow worshippers, and one's worship of the Father dictates an attitude to one's fellows. Be they poor or not, there is an obligation to a more fundamental approach to others than just thinking about their poverty. Father Saviour touches on this more fundamental approach at the end of his study of Galatians 2,10 when he notes that being a slave meant not being a human person. Here is being hinted at the deepest level of a Christian attitude to one's fellows, Christian and nonChristian alike—the attitude that each one is a person. This is the distinctive gift of Christianity to the world: the development under the guidance of the Spirit to the realization of the implications of the terms "Father", "Son" and "Spirit" in the preaching of Christ, and the beginning of the realization of what that means for living as a Christian in all the worlds which followed, temporally and geographically, on that preaching. Living with persons as persons in the context of Father, Son and Spirit

in the way revealed by the Son. Here is Christianity at its deepest level. Here is the essence of what it is to be a Christian.

Father Saviour's book is explicitly about a text dealing with the poor in the context of one of the writings of one of Christianity's most dedicated believers. It is the merit of the book that it helps the reader get to the underlying theology of this dedicated believer's attitude to the poor. And in so doing Father Saviour has suggested further depths in which Christian dedication should be framed.

James Swetnam, S.J.

Professor Emeritus

Pontifical Biblical Institute

Rome