

FOREWORD



As I read *Who Is Jesus Christ? Unlocking the Mystery in the Gospel of Matthew*, it seemed to me that I was in the presence of someone who was hard at work on the creation of a beautiful mosaic or an exquisite tapestry. In this book, Eric Sammons presents us with a fascinating and truthful picture of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is a picture he fashions for us step by slow step from material found primarily in the Gospel of St. Matthew, but with fitting additions taken from other parts of Holy Scripture, both the Old and New Testaments, and from many writers in the Catholic tradition as well. In my opinion, Sammons' book is an excellent example of canonical exegesis, which Pope Benedict called for in his own book, *Jesus of Nazareth*. The pope tells us:

“Canonical exegesis”—reading the individual texts of the Bible in the context of the whole — is an essential dimension of exegesis. It does not contradict historical-critical interpretation but carries it forward in an organic way toward becoming theology in the proper sense.ⁱ

For the informed and educated reader who wishes the kind of biblical study that opens the door to real theology, Eric Sammons' book is worth the serious effort that is needed to read it.

I suggest that no one read this book quickly, for although it is not lengthy, it contains a great deal of information as well as many opportunities for prayer and meditation. I also suggest that the reader delve into one chapter at a time, preferably with a copy of the Bible on hand. Eric Sammons has not written the kind of book you can pick up and put down, simply picking up where you left off at some later time. He has written instead a careful and

ⁱ Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), p. XIX.

thoughtful study that requires the reader to approach it with the same care with which it was written. If you do this, you will be greatly rewarded. Working through Sammons' book is like taking a course by a well-informed and highly intelligent teacher. At the same time, it is like making a retreat led by a prayerful and spiritual retreat master.

The subject, of course, is of the greatest interest. What can be more important than a deeper understanding of Jesus Christ? Unfortunately, in recent decades, the figure of Our Lord has been blurred and even obscured. This has come about for many reasons, but primary among them is the type of scholarship to which the Gospels were subjected for much of the twentieth century. Again, Pope Benedict has been very clear in his criticism of this type of scholarship, the historical-critical method and other related methods. He points out that alone they are inadequate and likely to produce a figure of Christ that is too remote and unknowable. The pope tells us that this approach to biblical studies has produced the mistaken impression that little certain knowledge of Jesus can be found, and that this impression has wrongly entered the minds of Christians, limiting their understanding of Christ. Concerning this, he writes:

This is a dramatic situation for faith, because its point of reference is being placed in doubt: Intimate friendship with Jesus, on which everything depends, is in danger of clutching at thin air.ⁱⁱ

This is certainly the case. Many Christians today are no longer even sure they know who Jesus of Nazareth really is.

Sammons' work is a very serious and well-thought-out attempt to teach us, once again, just who is being proclaimed in the Gospel of St. Matthew. It is a slow, steady journey through this Gospel, a journey that pauses over and over again to examine, in a thoughtful and prayerful way, the names and titles given to our Lord in this

ⁱⁱ Ibid., p. XII.

Gospel. In each name we find something significant. Every title, we learn, offers us a slightly different way to look at Christ, a new prism through which to see him. What we glean from each name or title contributes to the total picture of our Savior, a picture that gradually becomes clearer and clearer until it is luminous.

Beginning with the pope himself, the effort to present the faithful with an adequate picture of Christ is well underway. It is an effort well supported by Eric Sammons. I hope that in years to come, he will follow this book up with later volumes on the other evangelists. I also hope that we will see more and more books like this, intelligent and erudite, yet accessible, on our Divine Savior and his life and personality. It is time to reject and reverse the influence of writers like Rudolf Bultmann, who dismantled the picture of Christ, leaving us only with remnants. In the place of such destruction we now have books like *Who Is Jesus Christ? Unlocking the Mystery in the Gospel of Matthew* — books that rebuild or, rather, reveal anew the true picture of Christ.

— Fr. Benedict J. Groeschel, C.F.R.