



## In memoriam: Professor Petr Pokorný

In the early morning of 18 January 2020, Petr Pokorný, Professor of New Testament Studies at the Protestant Theological Faculty of Charles University, died at the age of 86, surrounded by his family. In him the Faculty has lost an outstanding and popular teacher, a perceptive researcher of international renown, and a tireless organiser of academic work, whose profound erudition in biblical studies, theology, philology, and philosophy was combined with the friendly and open certainty of a witness to the Christian faith.

Petr Pokorný was born in Brno on 21 April 1933. After attending the classical grammar school there, he studied theology at the Comenius Protestant Theological Faculty (today the Protestant Theological Faculty of Charles University). In 1958 he was ordained as a minister of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren, and from then until 1967 he served in this Church, firstly as assistant pastor in the Vinohrady congregation in Prague, and then as pastor in the congregation in Vršovice, also in Prague. During this period he also studied the Coptic language and Greek literature in Prague and Vienna, and spent one term of postgraduate studies under Professor George D. Kilpatrick at Oxford. In 1959 he submitted his doctoral dissertation (*SOMA CHRISTOU in the Epistle to the Ephesians*), which, however, he was not allowed to defend until 1963 by the state authorities. There was a similar forced delay before he could complete his habilitation process in 1967 on the basis of a dissertation submitted five years earlier (*Gnostic Mysteries*). In the same year he was invited to act as Associate Professor of New Testament Studies at the University in Greifswald in what was then East Germany for a year. From 1968 onwards he taught New Testament Biblical Studies as the assistant and later successor of his teacher Josef Bohumil Souček at the Comenius Theological Faculty in Prague (today the Protestant Theological Faculty), being appointed Professor in 1972. In the period 1996–1999 he held the office of Dean. In 1968, on the basis of his dissertation *The Beginnings of Gnosis: The origins of the Gnostic myth of the divinity of man*, he acquired the title of Candidate of Historical Sciences (CSc.) in the field of Greek Literature, and in 1993 he was awarded the title of Doctor of Historical Sciences (DrSc.) in the same field. He spent periods as visiting or guest professor at several foreign universities (Pittsburgh, Tübingen, St Petersburg), and was awarded honorary doctorates by the universities in Bonn (1998), Budapest (2000), and St Petersburg (2015). He was an active member of a number of academic organisations, in particular the Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas, of which he was president in 1994–1995, and also the Wissenschaftliche Gesellschaft für Theologie, the Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen, and the Learned Society of the Czech Republic (president in 2012–2014). A major outcome of his endeavours to achieve cooperation in research is the Centre for Biblical Studies of Charles University and the Czech Academy of Sciences, which he founded in 1998 and was head of in 2001–2010.

Professor Pokorný's research was certainly not confined to a single theme, but certain basic emphases can be traced throughout the wide range of his specialist and popularising work. This is the case already in his methodological approach: with all his linguistic and historical erudition, he firmly understood the work of the biblical scholar to be a theological and thus an interpretative task. This interest pervades the whole of his work and is reflected in the fact that a significant part of that work consists of systematic interpretations of biblical and other texts, including commentaries on the Epistles to the *Colossians* (German 1987 and 1990, English version 1991) and to the *Ephesians* (German 1992 and 2013, an abridged version was published in Czech in 2005 as a pilot volume of the series *Czech Ecumenical Commentary on the New Testament, CECNT*), on the *Gospel of Mark* (in two versions: 1974 and 1982, completely reworked for the CECNT series in 2016), on the *Acts of the Apostles* (to be published in the CECNT series), and on the apocryphal *Gospel of Thomas* (Czech version 1981, 1982, 2001, in revised form as the monograph *A Commentary on the Gospel of Thomas*, 2009, 2012). His emphasis on the theological content and intention of the New Testament writings, which cannot be separated from research into their literary character, is particularly evident in his

analytical survey of those writings, initially published in Czech as *Literární a teologický úvod do Nového zákona* (A Literary and Theological Introduction to the New Testament, 1993), later in collaboration with Ulrich Heckel revised and expanded into the extensive compendium *Einleitung in das Neue Testament: Seine Literatur und Theologie im Überblick* (2007, Czech version 2013, Russian version 2012). He also examined issues relating to interpretation from a theoretical viewpoint: firstly in relation to the problem of translation – he was one of the team involved in the Czech Ecumenical Translation of the Bible, and in 1975–1996 was a member of the translation committee of the United Bible Societies – and later he brought together his reflections on a more general level in the monograph *Hermeneutika jako teorie porozumění* (2006, first volume of English version *Hermeneutics as a Theory of Understanding* 2011).

The concentration of Pokorný's work as a researcher is also represented by the texts he devoted his special attention to. He focused primarily on the synoptic gospels and the Deutero-Pauline epistles. This is already evident in the choice of texts on which he compiled systematic commentaries, but is also reflected in a number of his other studies. He made a substantial contribution to the understanding of the conception of the oldest Gospel, that of Mark, and demonstrated the connection between this conception and the theological emphasis of the Apostle Paul. Through his study *Theologie der lukanischen Schriften* (1998) he made a convincing case for the rehabilitation of the Evangelist Luke as an inventive theologian. His interest in the spiritual setting of the Deutero-Pauline epistles soon led him to the phenomenon of Gnosticism, which he examined in a number of specialist studies and in his monograph aimed at the broader public *Píseň o perle* (*The Song of the Pearl*, 1986, 1998). Within the framework of the Centre for Biblical Studies he set up a Coptological Circle, which produced a series of translations of the Nag Hammádí writings accompanied by commentaries. He also participated in the work of the international group Colloquium oecumenicum Paulinum, which dedicated the volume 2 *Thessalonians and Pauline Eschatology* (2013) to him on his 80th birthday.

However, the centre of focus of Pokorný's work can be seen above all in his interest in the very core of Christian theology – the person and significance of Jesus of Nazareth. An example of his brilliant combination of the historical and interpretational approaches can be found in his work on the origins of Christology (*Die Entstehung der Christologie*, 1985, English version 1987, Czech version 1988), and he was later to use the same method when examining the history of the key concept "gospel" (*From the Gospel to the Gospels*, 2013, Czech version 2016). He studied the historical issues connected with Jesus' ministry over a long period (2005–2017) in the project *Jesus Research*, which he founded and led jointly with James H. Charlesworth from the University of Princeton (USA).

In his teaching and research work Petr Pokorný did not cease to be a practising theologian; he was not only an academic teacher, but also a teacher of the Church. In his hermeneutics he elaborated the concept of witness that Paul Ricoeur had drawn attention to in his philosophical work, and which is at the same time one of the key concepts of the biblical tradition – and Pokorný himself was also a witness. He was a thought-provoking interpreter of biblical texts as a preacher, not only in his own Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren; he lectured on theological, historical, and philosophical questions for church circles and the general public. In his own church he was a member of the theological committee, and he spoke at church synods. He also contributed to his church's hymnbook by composing the texts to several hymns.

When he retired some years ago, he viewed this as retirement from managerial functions, which he gradually handed over to his colleagues, but not retirement from work. Right up to his death he played an active part in Faculty life, giving lectures and supervising several doctoral students; in November 2019 he preached the sermon at the festive service to mark the hundredth anniversary of the foundation of the Faculty; and he brought almost to completion the project *The Biblical Foundations of Christian Culture* of the individual grant *Donatio Universitatis Carolinae*, with which the University honoured him for his life's work.

He understood Christian witness first and foremost as a resolute, non-moralising witness to hope: "Inexorable progress towards good is an illusion. However, we are certainly not heading towards the devil. That famous 'other part', known biblically as the Last Judgement and the Kingdom of God, is coming towards us even in the midst of our failures and is stronger than the catastrophes of history. (...) Above all, however, it is stronger than those clever, realistic, civilised sceptics. (...) Hope comes from the other side, its fundamental shape is not building up, but advent, coming, encounter. But it has to do with history and inspires us to orient ourselves in history." (*The Day Is Near*, 2007)