

BOOK REVIEW

FULFILLED IN OUR HEARING: HISTORY AND METHOD OF CHRISTIAN PREACHING.

By Gueric De Bona, OSB. New York: Paulist Press, 2005. ISBN 0-8091-4359-3
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This book lives up to its title, it is both a history of Christian preaching and proposes a method for contemporary preaching. The last three decades of the 20th century saw an explosion of writings and interest in both Protestant and Catholic preaching. Rapid shifts took place and it has been difficult for even professionals to keep up with the development of homiletical theories and practices. This book makes an excellent contribution for anyone who wants to catch up on what has been happening in the field of homiletics. It also addresses current issues in preaching and makes suggestions for how to address them.

De Bona begins with a brief overview of preaching. The preaching of the prophets and Jesus had a delicate balance of three crucial elements: preacher, text and hearer. These three elements have been the marks of good preaching throughout the ages. But they haven't always been present. For example, in the patristic period, under the influence of the Greco-Roman style, early preaching's emphasis on the Word was silenced and replaced with teaching and ethical admonition. The Middle Ages continued the stress on rhetorical style and, as a result, the sacred text got swallowed up by structure and stylistic display. Hence, doctrine and a great deal of catechesis characterized liturgical preaching during these periods.

The Reformation and Counter-Reformation continued a doctrinal preaching that relied heavily on theological argumentation based on a deductive model: a teaching or scriptural quote was stated, followed by points, which in turn were backed up by other scriptural references. Scripture may have been present in the preaching, but it was used as a way of proving a point or for illustrative purposes. In the 18th century, under the influence of the confessional traditions and theologians like Friederich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), there was a move in preaching from the objectivity of dogma to a focus on the importance of the character and faith of the preacher (Aristotle's "ethos") and the life situation of the hearers.

The 20th century brought an even greater turn towards the hearer. Modern biblical scholarship helped reclaim the more ancient form of preaching with its New Testament roots and emphasis on the kerygma. In the 1970's there was a more

profound shift towards a hearer-oriented preaching through inductive preaching, first introduced by Fred Craddock. This method put less emphasis on the authority of the speaker and more on the “movement” or form of the preaching. Inductive preaching relies on narrative and so arranges ideas in the form of a “plot,” as narratives do, to engage the listener and to slowly reveal the preacher’s meaning and intention. Thus, the receivers of the message are co-participants in the preaching. In this section De Bona devotes a good amount of time to explaining the methods of Eugene Lowry and Charles Buttrick.

Lowry called for a “revolution of sermonic shape,” and offered a narrative method based on the specifics of plot dynamics. Buttrick, also assailed the deductive, rationalistic model of preaching and developed a phenomenological method based on the plot designs of the scriptures. The Second Vatican Council reinvigorated Catholic preaching and helped move it away from its former doctrinal emphasis. The Council, in “*Dei Verbum*,” made an important turn towards the hearers of the Word. The homily, it instructed, was to draw its content mainly from the scriptures and liturgical sources and be characterized by a joyful proclamation of what God has done for us. The United States’ Catholic bishops issued their reflections on the homily in their well-received document, “*Fulfilled in Your Hearing*” (1982). The document is divided into three parts: the assembly, the preacher and the homily. Note that the hearers are given a primacy and addressed first. The bishops envisioned that the work of sanctification happens in the grace-filled encounter among preacher, text and the people of God. The priority of FIYH is the congregation and its needs. The preacher is to be a mediator making connections between people’s concrete lives, their issues and doubts and the God who calls them to deeper communion.

A modern Catholic theology of preaching has been formulated by Mary Catherine Hilker, OP, who uses the theology of Karl Rahner, Edward Schillebeeckx and liberation theologians like Gustavo Gutierrez. She articulates how preaching communicates the active and graced love of God. For her, preaching is “the art of naming grace,” and is always rooted in scripture and related to human life. De Bona uses Hilker’s theology of preaching as a lens to examine issues in liturgical preaching, especially the role of lay preachers. Here he quotes Hilker, “Regardless of the reasons given for the authorization to preach, the charism to preach is grounded in baptism and confirmation—the source of all ministry” (page 116).

Chapter four is devoted to multicultural preaching and once again we are challenged to be hear-oriented. African American preaching is often characterized by intense

emotional expression with a full range of idiomatic and vernacular expressions. Black churchgoers prefer a manner of speech that is less discursive and more “human.” The hearers want a word that speaks to the concrete and often hard realities of their lives. In this kind of preaching the preacher and hearers are both fully engaged in bringing the word to life. The assembly is honored as a constitutive part of the preaching.

In recent years there has been an enormous amount of research on the Hispanic or Latino community in the North American setting. As diverse as this community is, a common denominator for many is the immigration experience. The preacher then must communicate an atmosphere of “welcome” to the Hispanic community and de Bona proposes Leonora Tubbs Tisdale’s guidelines articulated, in what she calls, “preaching as local theology.” Once again, the emphasis is on a hearer-oriented preaching.

The book ends with a brief overview of other issues in contemporary preaching: the problem of post-modernity, feminist preaching and preaching and the media. When De Bona addresses the future of preaching he repeats a theme he has been tracing in the book: it must be “oriented toward the listener; be biblical and ‘attend to the signs of the times’” (page 204). Preachers, he reminds us, need a sense of awe and reverence for the Word of God and its ability to speak to people in every generation.

And so, after many side trips, Christian preaching comes back to its origins in the preacher from Nazareth who addressed the urgent needs of hearers who felt cut off from God and alienated from one another. In Christ, the Word was proclaimed with the hearers in mind. Modern preachers must do the same by using the biblical word in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures as a lens for a new world view. “The preaching of the future is a turn toward the hearer, the Word and finally the cultural milieu in which these are discovered” (page 207).

I have a slight reservation about this book. I wish the author had included a subject index along with the index of names. Otherwise, I recommend this book highly, both for preachers and those involved in liturgical ministry in parishes and retreat centers. De Bona has rendered an excellent service for those wishing to get an overview of the development of preaching and some help in dealing with the unique challenges preachers are facing in the twenty first century.