

OF BOOKS AND PREPARATION

Review and Reflection by R. B. Williams, O.P.

It is not often that I am able to use the genre of a book review as the basis of reflecting on preparation for preaching. However, Jude Siciliano, OP, opened the door of opportunity with an invitation to do both. I chose two books that exemplify the thoughts I have whirling around in my mind and heart and I hope these words will spark some comment or discussion.

First things first. The two books are: *THE SPIRITUALITY OF THE PSALMS* by Carroll Stuhlmueller, CP (Liturgical Press, 2002) [edited by C. Dempsey, OP and T. Lenchak, SVD] and *BETWEEN SUNDAYS – DAILY GOSPEL REFLECTIONS AND PRAYERS* by Paul Boudreau (Twenty-third Pub. 2001). The Stuhlmueller work is based on a draft manuscript found after his death in 1994. He taught Old Testament at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago from 1968 to 1994 and was certainly well-known to my generation as one of the best Old Testament scholars in the world. He also, like Raymond Brown, S.S., had the ability to write about his subject clearly and wonderfully!

Fr. Paul Boudreau is a priest of the Norwich, CT, diocese. His book represents a collection of daily homilies on the gospel scripture of the day. There is a selection for each weekday of the liturgical year as well as for some prominent feastdays. Each selection begins with a sentence or two from the particular gospel, followed by a three part response: reflection, prayer, action. The reflection portion shows that Fr. Boudreau is a talented story teller with a very good knack for relating scripture to ordinary life. Both preacher and pewperson would enjoy this book. It reminded me in some ways of Stuhlmueller's well known series of reflections on all the lectionary scripture selections, but Boudreau's work is more concise and perhaps more emotionally accessible. This may be both blessing and curse for a preacher, as we'll see in a moment.

The book on the psalms will offer the reader (in chapter two) "Methods for Studying and Praying the Psalms." The succeeding chapters examine the various types of psalms and how they were meant to be used in their original context. It is profound scholarship and extremely informative. My own initial theological formation did not include a course on the psalms and this book certainly fills that gap admirably. It will make a difference not only in how I preach on the psalms (not a frequent occasion) but perhaps more importantly, on how I pray the psalms (an everyday occurrence). Because this book was "put together" by two dedicated colleagues from an initial draft after the death of the author, there is a certain

"unevenness" in the style that one does not find in works published during the lifetime of Fr. Stuhlmüller. Indeed the final two chapters are taken from another commentary by the author. Nevertheless, the efforts of those colleagues have made this valuable work available to all and for this we owe them a debt of thanks!

How one prepares for pulpit preaching depends greatly on the attitude of the preacher toward the preaching! Is this simply one task among many for the day? Is it an expression of the very identity of the preacher? Is it a prayerful and contemplative action? Is it an occasion for fear – given the well-known general fear of public speaking in the general population – a fear that many ordained preachers seem to share?

The two books represent to me two important aspects of preparation for preaching: proximate and remote. The proximate aspect relates to preparation for a given homily on a particular occasion. One hopes that every preacher will prepare well for each of these occasions, whether it be a Sunday or daily Eucharist or a wedding or funeral, etc. However, my experience in preaching priests' retreats suggests to me that the nature of parochial and academic ministry nowadays has become such that preachers find it difficult to give sufficient time to proximate preparation, let alone remote preparation. The two books each offer a challenge in regard to preparation. The book on the psalms is mainly a form of remote preparation which could aid a preacher in integrating the much abused Responsorial Psalm into the overall scriptural vision of the readings. If the psalm is simply ignored, then part of God's Word is being ignored! But, is the preacher willing to give "space" in his or her life to remote preparation? [For Dominican preachers, the obligation to lifelong study is part of our vocation. The idea of remote preparation may come as an occasion for examination of conscience!]

The book of daily homilies offers the temptation simply to "borrow" the material instead of uniting the person and faith of the preacher with the scripture to be proclaimed and preached. The former way is like serving "ready-made" pie from the grocery store freezer. It may be tasty but it lacks the flavor and authenticity of the homemade variety. Authentic preparation has to be more than semi-plagiarism! I say this while fully acknowledging with gratitude the kind compliments I receive from other preachers who visit my website and Jude's [www.rbwords.com and www.judeop.org] to read the daily preaching that I post there. My hope is that it serves as a stimulant to their own faith and imagination and not as a substitute.

THE SPIRITUALITY OF THE PSALMS and BETWEEN SUNDAYS remind us of the value of both remote and proximate resources in preparing to preach. Both

books are well worth the money.