

BOOK REVIEW

PREACHING ON DEATH: AN ECUMENICAL RESOURCE

Virginia Sloyan, Blair Gilmer Meeks and Hilary Hayden, eds. (Silver Spring, Md.: The Liturgical Conference 1997.)

Most of us have faced the difficulty of having to say a meaningful word that touches faith and comforts those at a vigil service, funeral liturgy or rite of committal. We want the words we say to speak from faith to faith. We want them to be human words charged with the presence of the One who assures us that he is the Resurrection and the Life. Most frequently death catches us by surprise and the preacher must gather thoughts without a lot of preparation time. What is most useful at these times is the “remote preparation” the preacher has already done in prayer and reflection. Having taken the time to reflect on the mystery of death as seen through Christian eyes, the preacher will be better prepared to quickly assemble the right words, words that will speak comfort and stir faith in those grieving the loss of a loved one.

This book is a valuable ecumenical tool and will be of great help to the preacher who takes time out to read it, not immediately before the preaching, but as a background, a “remote preparation” for such preaching. This is not simply a preaching manual, a “how-to-book”. The writers who contributed to this book approach their subject from many reflective and practical perspectives: biblical, sociological, theological, cultural, and liturgical. It is both a book for meditation to help the preacher think out some of her/his attitudes towards death, and a book of practical advice concerning pastoral guidelines.

There are two parts to the structure of this book. The first revolves around four sets of scriptural readings drawn from several Christian traditions. With each set of readings is a scriptural commentary to help the preacher see how the readings may open up a biblical perspective on death and resurrection. Following these biblical commentaries is a reflection called, “the Healing Word”, which is based on the death of a specific person, e.g. one who has died of AIDS, had an untimely death, died after a long illness or committed suicide.

Each section includes an essay called, “Ideas and Illustrations.” These contain four or five vignettes, poems and reflections appropriate to the selected scriptures. Finally, each section has a sample homily (“Serving the Word”) based on the readings and a specific context. I liked the way these four major sections were

presented. Even if I were to preach from other scriptural passages, and certainly in other contexts, the reflections demonstrate a fertile and creative method for preaching on death and our Christian response.

Hilary Hayden, in one of the essays (“Preaching in the Context of God’s Loving Plan”), says the challenge to the preacher is to bring two stories together. First there is the story of the deceased and then the story drawn from a Christian perspective of God’s loving plan for us. But I think the essays’ reflections on our cultural attitudes towards death, also challenge the preacher’s own perspective. How have we dealt with death? Have we too been guilty of avoidance, of covering up its reality with “cosmetic thinking and language”? If we have, then our own fears and escape mechanisms will influence our preaching. For there is a third story that always enters a preaching and that is the story of the preacher. Whether we do it consciously or not, the preacher’s own faith and fears will speak and declare just how deeply we have prayed and thought through the reality of our own mortality and what lies ahead for each of us.

Besides the four major sections, each with its cluster of reflections, there are also some wonderful additional essays in this book. These include reflections on the value of an appropriate pastoral word in time of grief, images of death and rebirth and eschatology. There are also practical essays on preaching at wakes, resources for music and environment, pastoral guidelines for vigils and funerals and preaching at a Latino funeral.

Twenty eight authors have approached this subject from a diversity of Christian faith perspectives. They bring a lot of thought and pastoral experience to this book. They do not claim to write as “experts in the field” but, like us, to bring their faith and experience to the task of helping us preach words that will enlighten and comfort.

Whatever our Christian tradition, this is a fine resource for the preacher in an area on which little is written. There are few resources in one volume that provide such a broad spectrum on this subject. Taking some time away from the immediate press of ministry to read this book will provide us preachers an opportunity to do some reflection on our theology of death and its effects on our social, emotional, psychological and spiritual lives. Getting more deeply in touch with these realities will not only help the preacher’s life but will help others be comforted in their faith when the preacher is called upon “to speak a word from the Lord”

----reviewed by Jude Siciliano, O.P.

