

THE WORLD, THE CHURCH AND PREACHING: THE BEST OF GOOD NEWS COMMENTARY

by Rev. Joseph T. Nolan. New Berlin, Wisconsin: Liturgical Publications Inc., 1996. (138 pages, \$19.95)

For twenty-five years Rev. Joseph T. Nolan has provided a homily service that includes a commentary on preaching, worship, justice, theology and parish life. These additional pastoral reflections have come to be called the “green sheets”. The author has vast pastoral experience and is now teaching Theology at Boston College. He has also preached for Protestant and Jewish congregations. The largest section of these writings deals with preaching in a liturgical setting. His purpose for writing, he says, is to contribute to the dialogue about what we do. He thinks we do not talk to each other as professional people do. This is his attempt to further the conversation.

I like this book. I realized I was reading essays written during an important period of liturgical and preaching renewal at a time when the Lectionary was making a home for itself in our liturgical gatherings. A few sections are a bit dated, but for the most part, what *was* an issue is *still* an issue. What concerned him early in these writings continues to concern him and us--preaching that speaks to our time and is integrated into well prepared liturgical celebrations.

This is a practical book written for those immersed in ministry; he is realistic in his expectations of the busy pastoral person. But he is also insistent that we have a sense of priorities that help focus what truly nourishes and tends to people's needs. So, for example, when discussing funerals, he suggests ways to both include the family in the planning process as well as having materials planned beforehand. He says, “I can think of no other part of ministry that needs more advance preparations than a funeral. We get ready for Sunday, but we *know* Sunday is coming. Death simply drops in and wrecks that best-planned week.” Whether it is a discussion of funerals, weddings, preaching or issues in Church practice, Nolan includes the comments of other pastors in his dialogue. Thus, we get the fruit of experienced pastoral people from many denominational backgrounds and settings.

The substantial part of this collection deals with preaching. He is insistent on the importance of preaching and just as insistent that preachers have to work hard and early in their preparation. He emphasizes the importance of both remote and proximate preaching preparation. The first step in the preparation process is that preachers be out among the people listening to their stories. But Nolan sees remote

preparation as a still broader listening to the Word through the preacher's disciplined life of listening to "biographies as well as plays, films and newspapers, to art and whatever reveals the human condition." (p. 113)

He calls this kind of preaching "incarnational", a way of being a preacher that "pushes you out among people". "I know that preachers are effective when they give personal witness and share their own life story. But I urge the point that this witness and the listeners' spiritual growth can be enlarged by sharing the life-story of others....I would exclude nothing, no place or person where the Spirit has touched the earth." (p. 113) This kind of "incarnational preacher" speaks to the "human condition". What are the contents of this kind of preaching? He gives some examples: "everyone needs to be told (and much more, to believe) that he or she is important; belongs to others and is needed; is loved and esteemed for his or her own sake; is forgiven, can always 'come home'; and has reason to go through life with hope." (p. 110)

He expects preachers to live disciplined lives of reading and writing. He wants preachers to hone their verbal skills, to read and learn from great writers; to study the spoken and printed preaching of notable preachers and in particular, to study both in prayer and through commentaries, the biblical word. He advises that an "enlightened" preacher listening to the faithful, will discover as much fundamentalism in the Catholic Church as in the fundamentalistic churches. He challenges both Protestant and Catholic preachers to have within their grasp a sound biblical scholarship and to use this discipline to underpin their preaching. Preaching requires a pattern of life that supports the preacher's task of listening to and proclaiming the Word. His comments on remote preparation challenge me to a more deliberate hearing of the Word in its infinite manifestations.

When it comes to the immediate preparation for a particular preaching, Nolan has more sound advice. He does not mince words in what is wrong with preaching and what we should do about it. Deliberate and thorough preparation is the key to good preaching. He insists, as do all homiletics, that preparation for weekend preaching must begin early in the week, despite the other preaching the preacher may do during the week.. He finds it hard to understand why the scriptures we are to preach from are not "the scriptures we meditate, memorize, pray over and wrestle with all week long, replacing, if necessary, other forms of so-called spiritual reading." (p. 90) He expects the preacher to write out the preaching; whether a full manuscript will be used in the actual preaching is not the point. Writing, he insists, will discipline us and teach us to be careful over words, helping us be more precise in putting our thoughts into words. "...the ability to write clear,

compelling prose in the service of the word is the greatest help to good preaching.” (p. 124) He makes many specific recommendations for the preacher during the immediate preparation process concerning: oral communication skills, using or not using manuscripts, designing the outline, sources and uses of illustrations, getting feedback, etc.

I found his reactions at the time of the publication of the N.C.C.B. document, *Fulfilled in Your Hearing, particularly interesting*. This short 47-page booklet was published in 1982, and Nolan’s summary and emphasis on its key points is a valuable overview and a reminder of its high quality. His enthusiasm for it might encourage us who have not read it to do so.

He stresses the importance of preaching the Word in our liturgical celebrations and adamantly insists that we should never substitute preaching with some “talk”, no matter how much we think people need to be taught. Sound doctrine is always present in any good preaching, and appropriate applications to sacramental life and moral behavior are bound to be part of our preaching. But he agrees with such liturgists as Gerard Sloyan, when he insists, we not give in to replacing preaching at our liturgical celebrations with a “schema of doctrine”, some imposed preaching plan or list of topics-to-be-covered.” The homily, he says, is “primarily for edification [i.e. building up the Church] and only secondarily and derivatively didactic.” (p. 74) He sums it up--we should preach and not lecture; give homilies, not talks.

It’s dismaying that the homily still appears to some as a disposable item. Those who wish to bring in a lecture series don’t propose replacing the Eucharistic Prayer or the Communion. Somehow the Service of the Word is not a sufficient “presence” to them. (P. 75)

Most of the subscribers to *The Good News Commentary* seem to have been ordained clergy, mostly Roman Catholic priests. And so, Nolan has been almost exclusively addressing this readership over these years. The lay preacher needs to be aware of this primary audience, but his original focus group need not get in the way of the reader’s hearing some excellent and practical preaching advice. He certainly is aware of an emerging (emerged?) lay preaching and in the 80's called it “an idea whose time has come”. (p. 120) He frequently invites his readers to comment on various pastoral issues. I would have liked some firmer statements expressing the reasons for, what seems to be, his positive position on lay preaching. Perhaps he expresses these in the other “green pages” not included in this collection. If so, too bad--we needed more of this intelligent pastor’s reflections on the subject.

This collection shows the author's love of liturgy and his concern that God's people get to hear preaching that is thoughtful, well prepared and preached with passion and love for our listeners. He ends with a tale of a Protestant minister visiting a village in Luxemburg and hearing a Catholic priest's powerful preaching. The minister gives his impressions, "He is a powerful preacher and is loved by his congregation. I visit his church for his sermon and the great music from the organ. I find God here in an overflowing way." That is what Nolan wishes could be said about our liturgical preaching, that a visitor would find, "Not just great music, or an organ recital, or a good sermon, but making it possible to 'find God here in an overflowing way'". (p. 138.)

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