

Book Review

Sermons on Difficult Subjects

Background Information, Sermon Ideas, Stories and Thoughts to Take Away

Claire Benton-Evans *et al.*

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Thirteen contributors from around the UK, and drawn from a broad ecumenical range of backgrounds, bring together 59 different thematic contributions to an interesting kind of 'handbook' to preaching. The title might suggest that the reader will find sermons here, but the subtitle clarifies that what we have are 59 sets of notes on a range of pastorally pressing and difficult topics which can serve to inspire and shape a sermon that might need to confront a particular issue at hand. The book does not list an editor, although a brief editorial does offer some opening orientation. There it is noted that the lectionary has the great merit of bringing the preacher face to face with passages they might have preferred to avoid if left to their own devices. This book serves as something of a complement to that point, suggesting ways to address thematic concerns one might have wished to avoid.

The categories included are drawn from contemporary concerns: ranging from the personal (bullying – in various categories – alcohol addiction, worry) to the more widely inter-personal (divorce, domestic violence, sexism); through to broader social and political concerns (celebrity-obsessed culture, global warming, terrorism). They are presented straightforwardly in A-Z order, running from two to four large pages in length. Each entry falls into the same five parts: a brief biblical text (reproduced usually from either the NIV or NRSV); background information (sometimes statistical in nature); sermon ideas (which often touch on the selected verse or passage but also range more widely); a story (usually narrating one embodied example of the issue at hand); and finally a 'thought to take away' (usually brief and to the point). The style is clear and constructive throughout, with minimal footnoting – often no footnotes at all – and helpfully suggestive of lines to pursue rather than being didactic. There are no indices, which makes little difference in locating a topic (since they are in alphabetical order) but would have been helpful with regard to (a) a listing of which topics are covered by each of the thirteen authors and, especially, (b) an index of the biblical passages used, which would have facilitated the combination of this resource with a more lectionary or passage-driven routine of preaching.

It is not of course possible to review all 59 contributions, but here are a few impressions. Some entries offer perceptive challenges to the categories being discussed, whether today or in biblical times. The entry on 'Cancer', for example, makes the point that all the statistical evidence should suggest that cancer was prominent in biblical times too, and then looks at some biblical passages which might have been referring to it without having it as a category. Likewise the study of 'Theft' ranges over a wide range of situations which could be construed as theft. The handling of Scripture is in general fairly brief, but equally the verse or passage chosen is often just right. In one case, on 'Vandalism', there is a creative and engaging use of the story of Belshazzar's feast and the writing on the wall in Daniel 5 in the context of thinking about vandalism. Sometimes, though, there is a somewhat loose use of a vaguely moralising sense of the passage, such as a repeated tendency to misunderstand 'Love your neighbour as yourself' as encouraging some kind of practice of self-love, which was surely not in view in biblical times.

Theologically and practically there is much wisdom here, especially on a cluster of topics relating to being at peace, or being satisfied, with what God has given, and not relentlessly striving after more or better or bigger. Many of the illustrative stories are excellent ways of drawing out helpful perspectives – even if fascinatingly some authors tend to offer up-beat responses to the problems being addressed while others focus on telling stories depicting just how grim the situation is. Nevertheless I suspect that the main way in which this collection will impact sermons is not through the handing over of specific stories or 'thoughts to take away', but through the revitalisation of the preacher's imagination, which will then in turn come to texts and contexts with a renewed energy. There *are* plenty of stories and illustrations here which will doubtless stay in the mind long enough to get an outing, but the real achievement of the book is in opening the preacher's eyes in a range of new ways to God and God's work and God's world today.

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