

Jesus and the Prodigal Son: The God of Radical Mercy. By Brian J. Pierce, OP. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016. xi + 219 pages. \$25.00 (paper).

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The most important thing to know about this exemplary set of homiletical meditations by Fr. Brian Pierce that follow the life of Jesus from the Incarnation to the Resurrection is that although Pierce belongs to what is commonly referred to as the Dominican Order, this book reveals that his true religious identity lies in the official name that Saint Dominic gave to his new group in the early part of the thirteenth century, the Order of Preachers. At its heart this book is nothing more and nothing less than an authentic expression of the Dominican charism to preach the Good News of Jesus Christ.

But what is the nature of the Good News as preached by Pierce? That brings me to the second most important aspect of the book, its fundamental or controlling idea. As a book in the genre of Christian spirituality in a particularly pronounced homiletical mode, it has no systematic argument or doctrinal point to make; however, it does have a center or “beating heart.” As the title suggests, it has to do with Luke’s Parable of the Prodigal Son as a reflection of divine mercy. Here, Pierce takes the rather radical idea put forth by one of the greatest English-speaking spiritual writers of our time, Henry Nouwen, in his own book, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (1992). Nouwen suggests in that book that Jesus, the Beloved Son of God, also takes on the identity of the Prodigal Son on our behalf, for our salvation. In other words, echoing 2 Corinthians 5:21, “For our sake he made him to be sin who did not know sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him.” Pierce (*pace* Nouwen) puts forth the notion that in the paschal mystery “Jesus *becomes the sinner* in his trial and crucifixion, giving away his very life in solidarity with the poor, the condemned and with sinners of all ages. ... Jesus, the prodigal Son, journeys to the distant country of brokenness and sin precisely to rescue and bring home both victim and victimizer” (85). For Pierce *that* is Good News, that is genuine divine mercy, and that is what he “preaches” time and time again in his book.

The third aspect of this book worth mentioning is the wide range of voices Pierce brings to bear on what is more or less a series of homiletical reflections and personal stories on this theme of mercy. Besides fellow Dominicans like Timothy Radcliff and Albert Nolan, we hear from many (too many to name here), ranging from the scholarly, like Balthasar, Barth, Gutiérrez, and Pagola, to the pastoral and poetic, like Pope Francis, Julia Esquivel, Elie Wiesel, and Martin Luther King Jr., to those persons known personally to Pierce, like Roger, Mel, and Louis. This plethora of perspectives that Pierce

engages grounds his reflections, builds sound connections to the reader, and authenticates his insights. This makes the book not merely an autobiographical exercise, which would have been problematic on a variety of levels, but a communal and ecclesial one that is enriching and profound.

While I cannot recommend the book for typical undergraduate or graduate courses on Christology or the Synoptic Gospels, I truly believe it would be put to good use in a specialized class in contemporary Christian spirituality, or better yet, a homiletics class in a seminary or in the graduate setting. At the same time I think it would work wonderfully in an adult Christian formation group/bible study in a parish or simply for one's own theo-spiritual edification. While very few of us will actually get to hear Pierce preach the Good News of Jesus the Beloved/Prodigal Son from the pews, this book gives splendid access to what it would be like if we could actually be there.

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The Paul Debate: Critical Questions for Understanding the Apostle. By N. T. Wright. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2015. xi + 110 pages. \$34.95.
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This deceptively slim volume not only introduces the reader to a clear and succinct summary of the major themes of N. T. Wright's substantial contribution to Pauline scholarship, but also exposes the reader to the questions that have informed Wright's arguments and continue to be debated in contemporary studies of Paul. In the preface, Wright makes it clear that he has written this volume as a response to critics of his magnum opus, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God (PFG)*. Wright explains, "Those who have ears will hear my critics and their specific criticism on every single page that follows. The chapters of this book are steeped in and shaped by the reviews" (ix). While this is true to the extent that the themes Wright addresses are chosen because they are questioned by critics of *PFG*, the shaping remains only at the level of organization. Wright responds to his critics by restating and clarifying his thought rather than altering his positions.

Each chapter of the book explores a major component of Wright's understanding of Paul's worldview that is questioned in reviews of *PFG*. Wright's scholarship is oriented toward an overarching understanding of Paul's thinking, drawn from reading Paul's letters collectively (an abductive approach). He argues that this abductive approach functions as a necessary corrective to the inductive approach that marks most Pauline scholarship, a method that begins with detailed exegesis of passages and from that detail moves to construct