



BOOK REVIEW

Ruthanna B. Hooke, *Sacramental Presence: An Embodied Theology of Preaching*

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In the places in the world where ‘post-Christian’ now best describes the dynamics at work, doubts about the efficacy and value of preaching regularly arise, sometimes most keenly among those who practice it. To those who find themselves part of that discouraged company of proclaimers, Ruthanna Hooke’s book is a gift. For Hooke, preaching is indispensable, a sacramental activity, ‘an event within the ongoing relationship of humanity to the triune God’ (p. 1). The embodied presence and activity of the preacher ‘becomes an icon through which the community is also drawn into the divine life’ (p. 7). There are, of course, other ‘high’ theological accounts of the relationship between divine and human action in the preaching event. What is unique here is Hooke’s claim that it is primarily the bodily experience of the preacher that generates reliable theological knowledge of what preaching is, how God is involved and why we preach. Drawing on Gregory Dix’s fourfold account of the actions of the Eucharist (take, bless, break, give) and various theological interlocutors, the book offers a phenomenological account of the preaching event (informed by Kristin Linklater’s *Freeing the Natural Voice*), ultimately arguing that embracing this normative theological understanding will lead preachers to more faithful practice.

Chapter 1 surveys some of the historical and contemporary ways that the relationship between preaching and the sacraments has been understood, particularly in late twentieth-century liturgical theology. Chapter 2 explores the preacher’s physical stance before hearers and the silence that precedes speech, providing theological interpretations of each. Chapter 3 considers breathing, or as Hooke puts it, being breathed, in both physical and pneumatological terms, using resources from liturgical theology. Chapter 4 offers a thick description of speaking as a kind of ‘breaking’ and ‘breaking open’, again, in both physical and theological terms. Chapter 5 brings all the preceding elements to bear in considering the experiential, physical and theological dimensions of the actual preaching of a sermon, using the metaphor of preaching as an eschatological meal and culminating in some of the ethical implications of preaching ‘with free voices in free bodies’ (p. 181). The book concludes with a summative discussion of potential practical implications of preaching as sacramental crisis in relation to the environmental crisis and the inhumanity of racism.

Sacramental Presence is a rich, thoughtful and encouraging exploration of oft-neglected dimensions of the preacher’s experience, with an admirable theological depth and breadth. While the brief discussions of practical implications regarding environmental concern and anti-racism are illuminating, I think the book may be at

its most practical when seen as the starting place for a spirituality of preaching. It is moving to consider the potential grace in a habit of prayerful silence before the sermon begins, in the awareness that one is breathed by the Spirit (rather than breathing), and in the beautiful account of the preacher as one who is broken open in speaking, to name a few. This is a homiletical spirituality that might fortify the discouraged and even prompt new expressions of sacramental testimony in church and world.

Of course, there are many theological and philosophical questions that arise: Are bodies always trustworthy sources of knowledge of God? If not, by what criteria do we discern true from less true? Since brains are a part of bodies, on what grounds do we differentiate between doing and thinking, experiencing and reflecting? Is preaching inherently sacramental, or is it only sacramental when a given preacher thinks about it in the right way, that is, when the preacher views it as sacramental? Does any interpretation of what preaching is and does need to be tempered by the particularity of context and confirmed by the other participants in each preaching event (e.g. hearers)? And to draw on language from Lauren Winner's book *The Dangers of Christian Practice: On Wayward Gifts, Characteristic Damage, and Sin*, what 'characteristic damage' might distort God's good gift of sacramental preaching as Hooke understands it, since human beings can and do distort the gifts God gives?

That such questions arise and linger is by no means a limitation of the book but a testimony to its strength. These are the kind of theological issues that warrant sustained discussion among preachers and homiletical scholars in post-Christian contexts, issues that can easily get lost in the press of practical, tactical concerns. As Hooke writes in the preface, the goal of the book is to deepen the mystery and to prompt wonder and gratitude that God chooses embodied practices like preaching to communicate Godself. In relation to that goal, for this reader, mission accomplished.

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