

John F. O'Grady. *Preaching the Gospel of John*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2009. 176 pages. \$16.96.

This aid for preachers is in two halves. The first half offers a succinct review of three contexts out of which preaching on particular selections from the Gospel of John arise: the Word of God, the preacher and the Word of God, and a comprehensive immersion in the Gospel of John. The Parts I and II of this first half are clearly articulated in terms of the author's experience within the Roman Catholic Church in the United States but surely speak to preachers of any Christian tradition.

Part I of the first half invites the reader first to meditate upon and renew appreciation and deep respect for words, by bearing witness to the Word of God mediated through the Bible and enfleshed in Jesus of Nazareth. From there O'Grady moves to a brief review of the many facets of the work of interpreting an ancient Biblical text, including both "advocacy hermeneutics" and "postmodernism," as well as the various "criticisms" focused on text, content, and experience of the original community. Interpretation is in fact a complex business, even when a preacher works out of a tradition absorbed in the course of living but not subjected to reflection. This brief review invites preachers to recognize the many ingredients of the interpretive work that comes naturally to them, perhaps to discover new dimensions of meaning, and most importantly to hold their interpretations with a lightness that keeps them open to the insights of others and through others to the living Word of God.

Part II reviews the congregational and liturgical context of the sermon and the nature and function of the sermon within those contexts. These are basics that even seasoned preachers do well to review and ponder on a regular basis.

Part III gives us first a glimpse of the diverse world of other religions, other Jews, and other Christians as the context within which the Evangelist and his community struggled to live out their faith and mission. He spends time describing the rather distinctive emphasis of this Gospel on the personal relationship with Jesus that draws the believer out of the dominant Jewish community into a sect of "true Jews" (66) and the love that is the foundation of a new community.

O'Grady devotes the final section of this first half of his book to the difficult problem of the term "the Jews" in the Fourth Gospel. He advocates the view that the Evangelist's use of "the Jews" for those who respond to Jesus adversely is ironic: they have no right to decide the criteria of Jewish identity. (67) These studies unfold from the deceptively simple sounding text of this Gospel an intellectual and experiential background from which the Evangelist and his community begin to emerge as people of flesh and blood with a particularity that is distinctive and suggestive of a richness of new dimensions of understanding.

The second half of this book contains brief treatments of the selections from the Gospel of John in all three years of the lectionary cycle. For each passage O'Grady first comments on the text from a loosely exegetical perspective, mindful chiefly of what might be significant for present-day liturgy and life. For example, the comment on John 3:14-21 is an extended reflection on the nature of a gift and the role of choice in receiving it. The comment on John 12:20-33 describes three aids for discovering the self through the giving of the self. The comment on John 6:1-15 takes up the question: What is a miracle? And: How is the feeding of the multitude a "miracle." He follows these comments on and in response to the text with a section entitled "Preacher's Preparation." In these sections O'Grady names one or more themes or directions for a sermon that flow from what he identified in the preceding comment on the text. Preachers

should find O'Grady's suggestions very helpful in preaching on these texts from John. They stem primarily from details in the texts that touch everyday life of modern American church members.

What I miss in these comments and suggestions for preaching is any real sense of the Evangelist's own world that O'Grady described in the first half of the book, which was a world in which being a Christian meant struggle against forces that competed with the faith the Evangelist is seeking to cultivate. Neither the modern methods of "advocacy hermeneutics" and "postmodernism" nor social criticism nor the contemporary historical background O'Grady describes appear to have been much of a source of new insight and challenge in these expository reflections.

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