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BOOK REVIEW

SUNDAY'S SERMON FOR MONDAY'S WORLD. PREACHING TO SHAPE DARING WITNESS

Brown, S.A. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans, 2020), 224pp. Price: R513. ISBN: 978-0-8028-7112-1

The latest (and already the fifteenth!) volume to the "Gospel and our culture series" (since 1996) makes a valuable contribution to various discourses within more than one context. Most of all to homiletics, because it is after all about *Sunday's sermon*! But that is only half of the title, as Sunday's sermon can no longer be taken for granted to be *for Monday's world*. Obviously, we would like that, and most of the time assume this, but now we actually have an excellent resource to question and answer this assumption even more thoroughly. Sally Brown, homiletician from Princeton Theological Seminary, thoroughly succeeds in this book to add to the state of scholarship in homiletics, *and* theological discourses such as public witness, missional theology, faithful Christian practices, and post-liberal biblical hermeneutics. Although there has been, within homiletics, various constructive encounters between preaching and each of these different discourses on their own the past two decades, this is the first attempt (of which I am aware of) that tries to reflect on the gaps and overlaps between these different discourses, and

how homiletics may actually learn from, and add to this ongoing conversation. In bringing all of these different fields in a critical conversation, she succeeds in a more nuanced evaluation of the respective strengths and weaknesses within each discourse. Lastly, be way of introducing *Sunday's sermon for Monday's world*, I may add that the latter is not only confined to the North American context. In South Africa, the themes of daring Christian witness in public and the emergence of a missional theological discourse have had some noteworthy traction the past two decades. There is much to notice and ponder from Sally Brown's latest book.

The central focus and research problem of this work is the following:

> If the credibility of Christian faith no longer depends on the sermons we preach in our 'public' worship services, on what *does* the credibility of Christian faith depend? (p. 4).

This is only a part of the problem, because, as the plot and problem thickens, she mentions her contention that "the emphasis in missional theology falls on the congregation as the basic unit of public Christian witness" (p. 5). In other words, although we appreciate and see this corporate and communal emphasis of missional theology – especially against the backdrop of hyper individualisation and privatisation of faith – it understressed to date the credibility of individual Christians in those everyday ordinary spaces (p. 5). One of the main blind spots she discovers in missional theology to date, and with which preaching may make a valuable correction, is:

> We can't afford to underestimate the capacity of strategically planned preaching to shape the weekday choices that our listeners will make (p. 6).

Deeper into the discussion, towards the end of the second chapter, Brown delicately adds more nuance to the problem:

> Perhaps missing, though, have been sermons that present models of inventive Christian faithfulness, at the individual level, adequate to social complexities of real-world situations like this one (p. 38).

Other significant limitations we recognise in her reflection on the state of missional theology at present, are its seeming "too White, too male, and too mainline" representations (pp. 9, 29). This has also been raised in South Africa as one of the sensitive Achilles heels of the movement that struggles to move beyond the above characteristics. Without church unification and the acceptance of the *Belhar Confession* in the Dutch Reformed Family of Churches (DRC) – still mostly divided according to the racial dogma of apartheid – the credibility and effect of missional theology will continue to

struggle to reach its full potential, despite all the traction and endorsement it has in suburbia's White and more affluent congregations. The acid test of two decades ago is still with us nowadays. Just as an embrace of living public witness to unification, reconciliation and justice was the sign for whether there has been some deep change within the DRC, so too the flourishing of missional theology is closely related to living the *Belhar Confession*. The fibre and nuance *Belhar* provides for a credible and authentic public witness is something which missional theology and, in particular, preaching interested in shaping daring public witness currently in the South African context, barely cannot do without. Without *Belhar* and the people it represents and the world it imagines, the so-called counter testimony and witness of missional communities will be very limited, and suffer to convince and inspire.

As is frequently the case, due to its popularity, missional theology often lacks clarity and such self-critical awareness, despite all its good intentions. That is why Brown's argument to introduce some other significant key concepts and themes such as "divine promise", "word and world", "hybrid practices", "social body and moral formation", "story and rehearsal", "imagination and improvisation", and "new metaphors" help thicken the discourse and take us perhaps forward. Besides crisp insights into missional theology's numerous strengths and some current weaknesses, Brown also provides us with many other valuable articulations for consideration.

First, any talk of "pure Christian practices" is not honest and helpful. We need to become more self-critical of the fact that we find ourselves in "hybrid spaces", in order to recognise what is "obviously Christian",

> may have more to do with the unconscious assumptions about what is 'appropriate' in the eyes of a dominant class, ethnicity, or cultural group" (p. 17).

These practices are always "only partly", because "No congregation's practices are 'pure' embodiments of conscious theological convictions" (p. 26). This is also no different from the "average person's everyday life [that] is made up of all sorts of hybrid zones" (p. 35).

Secondly, the reason why this is so important is that it might caution us into a hasty and oversimplified counter-cultural talk we sense in many of these discussions from time to time. We simply can no longer do without critical consideration of

> the lived realities of congregational life and individual Christian experience amid the complexities of multicultural and religiously diverse Western and westernized societies (p. 21).[1]

Thirdly, key references and use of key concepts such as "improvisation", "imagination", "participation", and "rehearsing", I find extremely helpful, stimulating and creative. Continuing further with Campbell & Cilliers' phrase of "agency of [redemptive] interruption", Brown draws upon some of Samuel Wells' work and states that

> the art of improvisation builds, both in theater and in music, out of the wisdom of past performance to create fresh performative possibilities in response to new contexts (p. 57).

In a beautiful articulation on how this art of improvisation testifies to a living tradition, she states:

> Every artful improvisationist is the embodiment not only of innovation at the forefront of a tradition's development, but also the keeper of the tradition's past (p. 58).

The place where such improvisation is first "rehearsed" is, of course, – drawing on the work of Paul Ricoeur – in our "imaginations" (p. 83), which is – "far from being an escape from the real-world action" – "an essential role in producing real-world action" (p. 85). She fortunately explains the significant point at stake, in this instance, in an important formulation:

> Preachers assume – erroneously! – that the more general their recommendations, the more people will be able to identify with them and fill in the blanks. Actually, the opposite is true. The truth is that sketching a *particular* scene of human action in a recognizable setting is always more deeply engaging, persuasive, and imagination-stimulating than dealing in global, general concepts. This skill, usually referred to *as trusting the power of the particular*, can make the difference between sermons that instigate creative action and sermons that only elicit guilt (p. 98).

What is thus also not assumed or implied in the above line of thought is the caution against being tempted into "explaining" (p. 149). Instead of presenting

> a series of principles at the sermon's close [that is] meant to instigate courageously faithful action on the part of the listeners when they step into Monday's world,

1 For interest's sake: Alhough Brown does not refer to Jamie Smith's recent trilogy in *Cultural Liturgics*, it was interesting to note how this sensitivity and critical awareness also evolved in Smith's own work from volume 1 in 2009 to the third volume in 2017.

we are rather called to "invite listeners into a narrative's world" and, being intrigued and captivated, start "'rehearsing' possible courses of action in those everyday settings" (p. 136). The deep driving force and motivation is, of course, "*to transfer the work of imagination from the preacher to the listener*" (p. 136).

> [I]t is isn't our job to 'explain' stories, but to allow our listeners to experience them as *spaces of imaginative rehearsal for action in the world* (p. 138).

Thus, it absolutely makes sense when the book closes in a last chapter on the significance of crafting metaphor (from time to time) anew in our sermons. "[M]etaphors *are not only memorable for listeners; they are also portable*" (p. 167), because of their ability (when rightly used) of two fields of experience that "produces [an intriguing, memorable and portable] *productive tension*" (p. 177). The power of a metaphor rightly employed in sermons is that it has this creative power that continues to stay with us.

Fourthly, the by now familiar and very important theme of proclaiming "divine promise", which was also at the fore front in *Ways of the Word – Preaching for your time and place* (co-authored with Luke Powery in 2016), also echoes loud and clear in this work. Over against the choruses of cautions and protests against moralism in preaching, she states:

> Preachers do well to spend less time tacking to-do lists on the end of their sermons, and more time undertaking in the pulpit vivid, realistic acts of imagination that portray faith-driven, risk taking, improvisational action that shifts the balance of power toward grace and hope (p. 63).

On more than one occasion, she comments in her reading of a particular sermon example that, fortunately, these preacher(s) does not "resort to language of 'must', 'ought', and 'should'" (p. 125). Rhetorically, it makes, of course, a massive difference if the announcement is on divine action, agency and promise, instead of searching for some momentum in a moralistic "must", "ought" and/or "should" (p. 93). The wonder of the Biblical text is thus not so much

> the realism with which they portray human experience, but what they indicate about perduring redemptive intentions of God, enacted on the human stage" (p. 142).

Brown's sensitive feel for the significance of divine character and agency within the practice of preaching nowadays – and not merely as a mere façade that is always that self-evident and taken for granted – is a recognisable

characteristic of her work, and valuable contribution to the field of homiletics and preaching at present.

In short, although she writes within and for the (missional) church in the North American context, it speaks and resonates with us in South Africa. Perhaps our immediate interest and association with her work does reveal something extremely problematic – the so-called Trojan horse effect – about South African ecclesiology and our apparent "contextual" theology within DRC circles. If so, then at least *Sunday's sermon for Monday's world* helps us with its honest, in-depth evaluation of the blind spots and resources we encounter in this (and other) discourses. In fact, in this context, we are too well aware of these nuances for some time, and even have some resources – such as the confession of *Belhar* – to offer that may help us all in our "improvised" and newly "imagined" (missional) church struggle. Highly recommended, especially to my colleagues in the South African context.