

Reviews & Resources

Preaching on the Common Lectionary: A Resource Book

by Joyce Critchlow
(SPCK; ISBN 0-281-05256-5;
162pp + xviii; £9.99)

Reaching for the Infinite: A Collection of Meditations and Prayers based on the Revised Common Lectionary

by Edmund Banyard
(NCEC; ISBN 0-7197-0969-5;
186pp + vi)

The Ministry of the Word: A Handbook for Preachers on the Common Worship Lectionary

edited by Naomi Starkey, contributors include Gill Sumner, John Proctor and Dom Henry Wansborough OSB
(BRF; ISBN 1-84101-117-7;
442pp; h/b; £20.00)

Writing in one of the earlier editions of this journal, Professor David Ford expressed the hope that those us who preach regularly will “see the sermon as a major art-form, to be given the sort of dedicated and even obsessive attention that we find in serious artists”. It was a hope rooted in a belief that such preaching enables a community to be comprehensively, imaginatively and intelligently shaped by the ideas, images and stories of the Bible. It was a hope further amplified by Professor Susan White in subsequent editions. On the evidence of these three books, it seems that this is not a hope shared by the commissioning editors of Christian publishing houses. Since the introduction of the *Revised Common Lectionary*, a deluge of “essential” or

“ideal” (sic) books has been unleashed upon us, with the aim of aiding us in the preparation of our sermons.

For a context of mission, this has been a largely irresponsible undertaking. I dare say they have found a ready market, but will they help the Church to urgently recover preaching as a vehicle for the gift of prophetic imagination? Not from what I’ve seen.

Both Critchlow and the BRF volume take the appointed readings for each Sunday and comment on them. Critchlow’s method is to provide a “focus verse” and then link the three readings. Already, the discerning reader will have anticipated the warning signs. The distinctive theological identity and emphasis of the individual readings are wedged into a predetermined framework. It also harks back to a tired, 1960s-inspired theme-based approach. There’s scant evidence of a serious and passionate wrestling with the biblical text, and some of the illustrations verge on the cringe-inducing. Critchlow also provides an introduction to the approach and technique of preaching that is both patronising and embarrassing in its superficiality.

The BRF collection, by contrast, takes all three readings appointed for each Sunday and comments on them in their own right. The quality of exegesis is, on the whole, good. True, there’s not much here that you wouldn’t find in a good commentary – or in the recesses of your memory and imagination. In places there are some refreshing insights on the biblical text. I agree wholeheartedly with the Bishop of Salisbury’s commendation of the book as a tool for those preparing to worship: it would certainly equip lay people to be more expectant and informed about the scriptures they will hear.

Finally, the Banyard volume is not a collection of preaching notes. It simply uses the lectionary as a starting point for originally composed prayers and meditations. Again, they may prove useful to worshipers in a

way that the BRF volume might, but with a different emphasis.

None of these books helps us to understand that preaching needs to begin with a patient and attentive listening to Scripture, as well as present urgent realities, in the hope that we may be confronted by the call of God. Preaching is an event, as opposed to a few notes scribbled down on paper. It should open up a new world of possibilities: a world we haven’t yet begun to imagine. And, in a missionary context, it should (to paraphrase Walter Brueggemann), become a moment when the gift of God’s life is disclosed to those who are tired, alienated, and dominated by the world’s ideology.

Where might we begin to find help in this task? Two books immediately spring to mind. They both contain examples of preached sermons. Don’t try to reproduce them yourself, because you can’t! They are too distinctive and individual. But they do show you how two people have wrestled with the biblical text, listened deeply and patiently to their context, and opened up a previously unimagined world. Both also provide illuminating introductions to the practice and purpose of preaching. The first is *Open To Judgement: Sermons and Addresses by Rowan Williams* (DLT 1994); and the second is *Limping Towards the Sunrise: Sermons in Season* by Richard Holloway (St Andrew’s Press 1995). Here you will find the serious even obsessive attention of two sensitive artists, by whom we all need to be nourished in a world of tiredness and alienation.

Simon Reynolds

The Revd Simon Reynolds is Assistant Curate of St Thomas with Emmanuel, Exeter.

Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement

by Rowan Williams
(T&T Clark 2000; ISBN 0-567-08722-0;
190 pp; £12.95)

This beautiful essay by Rowan Williams offers a penetrating insight into what he describes as our “cultural bereavement” – the loss of patterns in our imagination which have profoundly affected our ability to understand ourselves in relation to a divine Other. Through a balanced yet pacy argument, Williams identifies

benevolent influences on North Atlantic culture that have become unrecognisable to us, and therefore lost to our sensibilities – influences that have traditionally helped us form our sense of value of ourselves and of each other. Without these positive influences the soul becomes lost to the self, culturally expressed through the pursuit of violence and consumerism.

Williams identifies these losses by encouraging the reader to imagine certain crucial areas of human and social development as cultural icons. The images of childhood and choice, of charity and of remorse are constructed as icons through which the reader might gaze to discover the effect that a bereft culture has on its own development and sense of self. By examining the image of childhood, it becomes clear that in our culture the child is a consumer and therefore an economic subject; one targeted by advertising to make immature choices and to take uninformed risks. The loss of childhood years, when freedom was available to make wrong choices without responsibility, also represents a loss to our culture in that the wisdom of the grown adult is one whose value as a choosing agent has been impaired.

The second chapter looks at the issue of rivalry in our society and the apparent loss of skills to individuals to manage conflicts of interest or desire. The ease with which these differences are resolved through violence is a ready indication of the loss of another cultural icon – charity. In order to rediscover the negotiating skills necessary to address this competitiveness, there is a need for charity, a need to be present for and in another.

As the theme of the third chapter evolves, a rather depressing picture emerges and any sense of an icon as a vehicle of hope diminishes. Williams effectively describes a profound loss of identity of the self and a lack of remorse for the fact that its presence negatively impacts the lives of others. However, this loss of hope is more than adequately addressed in the final chapter, when Archbishop Williams shares his theological interpretation of some fourteenth-century Christian iconography. These beautiful and inspiring icons do not “look like” anything; the divine reality can never be rendered in material terms “for the truth is not in the icon but in what is not seen, only in what is imagined”. This truth is not lost at all, and indeed,

never can be. It is found in the presence of the ever-present "Other" – the Other who does not compete or bargain, the Other who is beyond violence and seeks no advantage – the Other who is so recognisable in our cultural losses.

This gifted master of contemporary Christian thought has succeeded in drawing his wide audience into a deeper understanding of the society in which it lives. I believe his book is immensely important to any agent that seeks to reawaken the Christian soul and restore the image of a divine influence upon our culture.

Linsi Simmons

Linsi Simmons is Mission & Theology Development Manager at Bible Society.

Politics, Prayer and Parliament

by **David Rogers**

(Continuum, 2000; ISBN 0-8264-5156-X; p/b, 166pp; £12.99)

For thousands of Church of England members who have campaigned for Jubilee 2000, this book could prove a very good guide and spur to continuing political involvement. Rogers makes the case, rather gently, that Christians who pray in church on pressing political issues should also campaign for what they ask in prayer. He then explains straightforwardly how to do so.

In a sense, his aim is to demystify. He describes decision-making processes in both state and the Church of England, and so how to influence these. They are, he suggests, more readily accessed than many people would suppose.

It is a book born of decades of close observation of both Westminster politics and the Church of England. Rogers is an Anglican layman and a longstanding parliamentary adviser, mainly to Conservatives – from Macleod to Major. The book is written specifically from a Church of England perspective and for Anglicans.

Rogers brings out the similarities between the ways of working of parish clergy and constituency politicians. He devotes a chapter to the dependence of those in both spheres on the spoken word. He addresses how to speak in public, and to illustrate this he reproduces lengthy passages from four very different "political speeches by religious leaders". These are by Bishop George Bell (1944), Archbishop Robert Runcie

(1982), the Revd Martin Luther King (1963), and Pope John Paul II (1983) – all excellent choices.

With its many other shorter quotations and anecdotes, the book is testimony to decades of noting and keeping these. Most work well, with some supplemented by Rogers' wry remarks. All this makes the book very readable. But it is also often unsatisfying, as large issues receive only cursory discussion and a thought-provoking quotation or two.

Rogers comments, "[In] most discussions in public life there are masses of hidden agendas" (p.132). His own only half-hidden agenda is the cause of the Church of England's disestablishment, to which he gives more than cursory treatment. The book as a whole may even be seen as an argument that, for the sake of both the Church and what they pray for week by week, CofE members should campaign urgently for its freedom from centuries of state control.

In a book with a generally conservative flavour, this stance is surprising, and welcome – this reviewer for one does not need persuading. But could we imagine the Anglican Jubilee 2000 supporters going on to work for disestablishment? Possibly so, if they could see that their cause of justice for the poor and the oppressed could be pursued much more effectively by a liberated Church. The instance of which the book reminds us of Bishop George Bell, who scuppered his chance of Church leadership by speaking out for justice at one moment when this was urgently needed, is itself enough to prove the case that Rogers makes here very moderately.

Nicholas Townsend

Nicholas Townsend is Course Director of the Faith, Politics & Policy distance learning course at Sarum College, Salisbury. For information on this, contact nnt@sarum.ac.uk.

Dread and Pentecostal: a Political Theology for the Black Church in Britain

by **Robert Beckford**

(SPCK, 2000; ISBN 0-281-05136-4; 224pp; £15.99)

In his latest book Robert Beckford makes an impassioned argument for the development of a political

theology for the Black Pentecostal Church in Britain, a theology which reflects on the Bible in the light of Black experience and socio-political issues, and leads to liberating and reconciling action (emancipation-fulfilment) in the world: a Dread Pentecostal Theology.

Beckford quotes Joseph Owens' definition of "dread". "Dread is an experience: it is the awesome, fearful confrontation of a person with a primordial but historically denied racial selfhood." "Dread", adds Beckford, "is the Black experience of finding one's 'true' identity, consciousness and place in the world." Originating within Rastafari(anism) the concept of dread has moved into Black British culture and the Black Church. Dread is a multifaceted phenomenon that includes: the encounter of Black experience with the divine; a critique of racial subordination and capitalist exploitation; cultural resistance to oppression; psychological emancipation and Black advancement. For Beckford, dread is also a theological construct, drawn from the Black experience but having a universal dimension.

Previous researchers who wrote about the Black Pentecostal Church in the Britain of the 1970s, '80s and '90s, failed to appreciate its potential for prophetic active radicalism, or perhaps they simply encountered it at an earlier stage in its pilgrimage towards a political theology which takes the incarnation seriously. Either way, Beckford's examples of active radicalism in Black Pentecostal congregations suggest that, at best, there is still a mighty long way to go. The relationship between the spiritual and the socio-political is not yet strong enough for Black Pentecostals to challenge the structural oppression that limits their lives. This book is about raising consciousness and empowering such challenges.

Beckford provides a useful, critical summary of the historical and ideological development of pseudo-scientific racism and he warns of the, much more subtle but equally damaging, new racism in Britain, which no longer talks of race but of culture and is colour-blind in its maintenance of a status quo where Black people remain disadvantaged. Black Pentecostals need a dread theology of resistance, but resistance as a theological category needs to be seen as a temporary state because it must lead ultimately to reconciliation with the former oppressor.

Beckford draws from the painful history of Black religion-inspired attacks on slavery in Jamaica that included violent rebellions, but also less obvious resistance. Behind the persona of the docile, compliant slave was often a skilled saboteur, and elements of African culture and religion went on proving a basis for such resistance which continued into the post-slavery, colonial era. In particular, various forms of Ethiopianism idealised Africa and identified God and Christ with the struggle of the Black oppressed rather than the domination of the white oppressor. Rastafari, in particular, drew heavily from the Ethiopianism of Marcus Garvey. In Rastafari, however, God was not just theologically black in terms of his identification with the oppressed, but physically black in the person of Haile Selassie, emperor of Ethiopia. Perhaps at this juncture we should digress for a moment to reflect on the causes of such a "blasphemous" development. The reader may wish to think about the effect on Black self-worth of racism in the white-dominated church, and the impact of images of God and Christ as remote, transcendent and white.

The birth of the Pentecostal movement at the start of the twentieth century – in the racially and socially inclusive Azusa Street Mission of the Black Holiness minister William Seymour – was itself a response to racism. From the history of Black resistance, Beckford identifies tools for the development of a Black political theology:

- an African-centred epistemology which reflects on the Black experience and the Bible from the perspective of Africa and the African Diaspora, rather than from the hegemony of a European perspective;
- a theo-cultural analysis which identifies those aspects of Black expressive cultures which enable the liberation of Black people in Britain; and
- liberation theological praxis (LTP) – a theological method which purposes to liberate and reconcile oppressed and oppressor. This includes theological reflection on God's self-disclosure in history on behalf of the oppressed, and on the experience of Black people. Such analysis and reflection must, however, lead to action if it is to be more than an intellectual reworking of the limited radicalism of the Black Church.

The range of issues addressed by Beckford is extensive and will

perhaps be a bit over ambitious for some readers. His arguments are clear and critical and he provides helpful definitions of the major theological, philosophical and sociological concepts he uses. Concessions are made for the white reader for whom terms such as overstanding, funky and Ital are explained. Drawing on Black, liberation and womanist theologies, he has produced an impressive seminal work aimed at encouraging the development of a political theology for the Black Pentecostal Church in Britain. The ultimate test of this book and its theological methodology, however, will be in the field. Black Pentecostals, the wider Black community, the wider Church, history and the God of history – not the reviewer – will ultimately be the judge of its success in transforming theological reflection and action in the Black Church.

Iain MacRobert

The Revd Dr Iain MacRobert works for the Scottish Executive and is a non-stipendiary minister of the Priory Scottish Episcopal Church, South Queensferry. He writes in a private capacity which is unconnected with his employment.

RS Thomas reading the poems

(triple CD/Cassette recording;
CD Sain SCD 2209 £19.99 / Cassette
Sain C2209 £14.95; mail order Sain,
LL54 5TG, Wales; 01286 831111)

Starting on the day of his 86th birthday last year, RS Thomas spent four sessions in a recording studio reading 145 of his poems: Just in time, because he died earlier this year.

Issued on three CDs / cassettes, we now have what can truly be called a definitive recording of this great poet who has such a distinctive voice. As his producer Damian Walford Davies says, here "we hear the unique voice of one of

the great poets of the twentieth century speaking directly to us, and to the future".

Selected from his complete works that spanned the 40-year period from his acclaimed first major volume *Song at the Year's Turning*, published in 1955, to *No Truce with the Furies*, that came out in 1995, the poems give a wonderful account of Thomas's struggles with the stuff of life.

Hugely irascible and forbidding, the Reverend Mr Thomas sent many an inquiring journalist packing. He wrote his memoirs in Welsh (calling them *Neb*, meaning Nobody) in order to deter would-be biographers. His poems were to speak for him; and speak eloquently they do.

"Poetry is that which arrives at the intellect by way of the heart," said Thomas. The daily concerns of his faith and his ministry in rural Wales were the frequent content of his poetic output. No glib certainty was granted him, but questions posed often force readers to confront their own "uncertainties, ambiguities and the equivocal and paradoxical nature of our experience of life".

Thomas's spare, brilliant poems come from one who held on to his living faith, but who spent much time arguing with a God who at times seemed as absent from him as he was to the psalmists of the Old Testament.

The poet was doing theology through his art and often found himself doing his art through his theology. In a world losing its connection with God and with poetry, RS Thomas, the theologian-poet, did much in his twenty plus volumes to re-connect his readers with the great truths.

This recorded selection is an absolute delight, to be savoured and enjoyed along with RS Thomas's books of some of the most astonishing and touching poems ever written.

John Lloyd

John Lloyd is an editor at Bible Society.

Screening salvation

It's not every day that critics get excited about biblical subject matter, but a series of original and powerfully performed dramas that Bible Society will release on video has bucked the trend. "Brilliant, moving stuff," *The Express* enthused, "perfectly portrayed, with a twist", opined *The Sunday Telegraph*, and "powerful and passionate ... intense and absorbing," the *Evening Standard* raved.

The cause of this frenzy was seven atmospheric monologues featuring actors such as Jonathan Pryce, Helen Baxendale and Tony Robinson, and screened by BBC1 as *Easter Tales*. Each offered an eye-witness version of the Easter events from one of the Gospels' supporting cast – people like Barabbas, Judas Iscariot and the servant girl in Caiaphas' household. With their identities disguised in Victorian dress and the unlikely location of a crumbling asylum, series director Norman Stone (the BBC *Shadowlands* film, *Ain't Misbehavin'*) lured an intrigued audience to empathise and identify with his characters even before the allusions to the Easter story struck home.

Since it is one of Bible Society's aims to help our culture have fresh encounters with the Bible, the Society was involved with the series that was seen by an estimated two million people per episode. Essential to the process was that top and emerging scriptwriters and directors, both Christian and non-Christian, engaged with the Gospels in creating the programmes. The result was a set of monologues which were contrasting and gripping and, in the *Daily Telegraph's* words "thoughtfully translated into language for our time" (a nice echo of Bible Society's historic aim of making the Bible accessible "to people at a price they can afford and in a language they can understand").

Through examining the motives and emotions of its characters, *Easter Tales* gave hints of the powerful human dramas behind

the Gospels. It asked viewers to identify with the characters in their brief but compelling encounters with Jesus.

For those who missed them or want to see them again, Bible Society will release a video version of the series in January, under the title *Tales from the Madhouse*. One bonus will be an extra unscreened programme featuring Claire Bloom as Pilate's wife. The eight fifteen-minute programmes are sure to fuel debate in house groups, arrest the imagination of armchair viewers, illuminate sermons and push openings wider for discussion with interested non-Christians.

Also with the impact of film in mind, Bible Society has published *Reel Issues 2000*, an update to its *Reel Issues* book. The turn of the millennium has shown an increased number of films with spiritual themes or undercurrents, while others reflect contemporary concerns, hopes and beliefs. The supplement looks at five of these, including *The Matrix*, *American Beauty*, and *Gladiator*. Like *Reel Issues* itself, *Reel Issues 2000* offers stimulating ideas for groups to discuss the films and issues raised from a biblical perspective. The book also covers areas such as the power and influence of film; guidance on how to plan and structure a film discussion session; and ten further detailed guides on individual films. More people than ever are watching the movies and these resources will give Christians an ideal opportunity to discuss shared concerns with others.

Reel Issues including the *Reel Issues 2000* supplement is available from Bible Society price £4.00. The supplement material can also be seen on the web at www.biblesociety.org.uk. Previous purchasers of the book can obtain the supplement free of charge by sending a large S.A.E. to Morva White at Bible Society, Stonehill Green, Westlea, Swindon SN5 7DG.

Lindsay Shaw

Lindsay Shaw is an editor at Bible Society.

Cover illustrations and headlines from:

Jonathan Clarke Cilla Lloyd
The Times The Sunday Telegraph
Church Times The Daily Telegraph
Church of England Newspaper
Royal Academy of Arts *Apocalypse* exhibition
National Gallery *Seeing Salvation* exhibition