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The Life Of Christ And The Death Of A Loved One: Crafting The Funeral Homily

Barbara G. Schmitz

Lima, Ohio: CSS Publishing Co., 1995

107 pp.

This very fine little book is divided into two parts. Part I is a methodology, and Part II contains the resulting sermons of Barbara Schmitz, the Rector of St. Margaret's Episcopal Church in Hazel Park, Michigan.

As I read Part I, I felt like a companion in ministry. I could identify with Schmitz' sensitivity to the challenges of preaching at funerals: the unchurched in the congregation; the expectation/temptation to eulogize the deceased; over-familiarity or lack of familiarity with the deceased; the stress of adding a funeral, and all its attendant activities, to an already busy schedule.

But even more importantly, I appreciate Schmitz' sensitivity to the primary pastoral task of the funeral, its liturgy as well as its homily, and how it can best be fulfilled. Citing a gem from Henri Nouwen, she suggests "that one of the chief purposes of the funeral homily is to relate the church year and specific events in the life of Christ to...the death of a loved one" (17).

Once the seasonally-appropriate theme has been identified, it is joined to the theological themes of death and dying. Schmitz offers some good advice, and also refers us to a variety of resources, which help to shape a homily containing four movements: "...a Christian understanding of grief;...gratitude for the life of the deceased; proclamation of the Word;...and an evangelistic thrust...." These are the four G's of sermon structure: grief, gratitude, God, grappling (23).

Part II consists of twenty homilies—one for every season of the liturgical calendar; major and lesser festivals, such as Ascension, Trinity, Presentation, Holy Cross Day, etc., also receive some representation.

For the most part, these homilies present liturgical and biblical preaching at their best. The four G's are not evident in every one, but I attribute this to the deep pastoral sensitivity Schmitz reveals in her preaching.

I cannot think of any book of funeral sermons I have read that I would recommend more than this one. The homilies in it are, in and of themselves, "worth the price of admission". And the introductory part is a wonderful bonus!

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