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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18820/23099089/actat.v37i2.14>

ISSN 1015-8758 (Print)
ISSN 2309-9089 (Online)

Acta Theologica 2017
37(2):216-219

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REVIEW

A SPACE FOR GRACE: TOWARDS AN AESTHETICS OF PREACHING

CILLIERS J., (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2016),
pp. 177, Price: R300, ISBN: 978-1-920689-93-3

On the cover of Johan Cilliers' highly original and provocative new book, *A space for grace: Toward an aesthetics of preaching*, is Ben Willikens' painting "The last supper". The painting is of a long table, covered in a white cloth and situated in a spare, white, light-infused room. Upon seeing it, one immediately thinks of Leonardo da Vinci's famous painting of the same name. The table is familiar, as are the setting and the perspective. In contrast to da Vinci, however, in Willikens' painting, the room is vacant and the table is bare. "There is no Jesus, no disciples", writes Cilliers later in the book.

... The 'empty' table represents the era
of the Spirit and as such a space of
expectancy; it is pregnant with possibilities.

Willikens' painting and Cilliers' interpretation thereof could well stand as a symbol of what Cilliers hopes to achieve in this volume. He strips the homiletical table of its usual furnishings and refurnishes the bare space with a spiritually electric sense of movement and expectancy. Traditional homiletics, claims Cilliers, especially homiletics within the Reformed tradition, has focused on the question of understanding, namely, how does a preacher interpret a biblical text and craft a sermon that is understandable by contemporary listeners? Cilliers writes:

I opt for an *aesthetical approach*, which does not exclude the question of intelligibility, but places it within aesthetical frameworks, such as our multi-sensing of space and time.

Cilliers' views of space and time are clearly post-Einstein and post-Hawking. Space and time are no longer the fixed dimensions of the old Temple or the measures of medieval stabilities, but fluid, in motion, and intertwined – a “tent in transit”. The fact that time and space have been set in motion and have, as a consequence, become de-stabilized is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, contemporary existence has become “decentred and a-sacral, eccentric and a-centered”. Such an environment can feel empty and homeless. On the other hand, the Spirit enters such fluid spaces and fills them with meaning and blessing, transforming emptiness and homelessness into a home. This theological claim opens up a window for preaching. Cilliers writes:

Any space can be or become a space where meaningful experiences and encounters take place – and this is where, in my opinion, preaching could play an important role.

Cilliers imagines preaching as joining with the Spirit, entering the interflow of space and time, and creating a “space called home”. But it is important to understand what he does *not* mean by “home”. The Spirit does not shield one from uncertainties of time and space, making a nostalgic home, a closed-in place in an ever-moving universe, an isolated refuge from the swirl of space and time. (Indeed, Cilliers thinks that some people in the New Testament were always trying to halt Jesus' motion, to tie him down to fixed space and frozen time.) Instead, the Spirit creates a home in which the protective “inner space” is always wide open and porous to the “outer space”, the known and familiar always beckoned and expanded by the unknown and the new. It is not insignificant that Cilliers' homeland is the semi-desert Karoo region of South Africa, a place of vastness and unbounded horizons, a place that, according to Cilliers, “is truly a ‘landscape of the heart’; a holy place, a sacred place”. No wonder, then, that, for Cilliers, when preaching, bound to the Spirit, creates in the flow of time and space an encounter with God and fashions a home for the homeless, this home is one that has “the horizon as a point of orientation” rather than “the security of the home and hearth”.

Much of the second part of the book is given over to a description of Cilliers' understanding of how God's grace enters the fluidity of time and space through aesthetic means. Cilliers is, no doubt, inspired by liturgical theologian Don E. Saliers' seminal book *Worship come to its senses*, in which Saliers argues that participating in the awe and delight

of worship depends on the physical senses of “hearing, seeing, touching, moving, smelling, and tasting”. Accordingly, Cilliers describes how the work of grace and the power of the Spirit make time and space the arena for hearing, seeing, touching, smelling, and tasting the presence of God. A fine feature of this book, incidentally, is that the publisher has permitted the author to include in the text over a dozen full-colour photographs and paintings (some of the paintings by Cilliers himself), which form a pleasant accompaniment to Cilliers’ aesthetic emphasis.

What kind of preaching is called for by Cilliers’ rethinking of time, space, and aesthetics? If one is seeking a detailed and specific homiletical manual, one will be disappointed. Such is not Cilliers’ goal (although he does include seven finely crafted sermons of his own, which can serve as worthy models). Indeed, he does not want to throw off, in one convulsion, the traditional methods and procedures of preaching, but he instead invites his readers to continuing wonder and reflection about the environment of preaching. According to him, one’s best path is “to keep on asking *theological questions* concerning our paradigms of time and space (be they old or new)”.

Nevertheless, some things can be said about the kind of preaching Cilliers envisions. First, he is clearly nudging us away from message-centred preaching toward an experiential approach. His keywords for preaching are “event” and “encounter”. For example, in his discussion of the aesthetics of hearing, Cilliers affirms the homiletical commonplace that God speaks through biblical texts. But he does not leave it there. This divine speaking happens only through the eventfulness of human speaking:

God’s voice does not become audible without the dialog[ue] between preacher, text, and congregation, and, ultimately, the dialog[ue] with the Spirit.

Thus, preaching is not the mere conveyance of a set of ideas, however skilful. It is the acoustical event of the preacher’s voice, in dialogue with text and congregation, through which the divine voice is heard as a powerful encounter. Without the divine action and the divine voice, “preaching is voiceless or perhaps just good theatre”.

Secondly, Cilliers imagines preaching as a kind of eschatological event. While he tends to reserve the proper theological term “eschatology” for the tension between the “already” of linear existence and the “not yet” of God’s future, the dialectic between God’s presence and absence, he presents preaching as a broker of a second understanding of eschatological time. Borrowing from Hermann Minkowski’s idea of a “fourth space dimension”,

in which time and space become unified and full, Cilliers imagines preaching as participating in such “fourth spaces” when the fullness of God’s eternity enters into transitory time. For example, when Israel entered into the Promised Land, they went into a physical place in a particular time, but they also entered a “holy space”, one that “transcends the border of the imagination” and a new time, one in which “the old world (the status quo) comes to an end and the new is joyfully heralded”.

The event of preaching heralds such an eschatological “fourth space”, a space where “time loses its linear onslaught” and a place where “I can and I want to remain forever”, a place that can truly be experienced as “home”. In this instance, Cilliers is describing, in more traditional biblical language, a portrait of preaching as a Sabbath event. The relentless drumbeat of linear time, of history as one damned thing after another, is ceased, and the concept of the land as a place that must be seized, possessed, guarded, and exploited, is suspended. Sabbath time and Sabbath place come together in a unified reality of blessing, the gracious gift of the dwelling place of God. As Cilliers describes it,

We enter a new understanding and experience of time and space which we could describe as the *event of Kairos within the strange space of grace*. But this movement does not intend escapism from historical time and geographical space. We remain in “real” time and space, but within this real time and space we experience a different type of time and space, which we call “*kairos*”. In preaching, we experience “time out” in order to re-evaluate and re-enter “time in”.

Because this is a project in practical theology, Cilliers’ aesthetic approach to preaching must eventually move beyond theological and philosophical reflection to the place where preachers can imagine what form it would take in the step-by-step, week-in-week-out process of sermon preparation. The theological vision must yield practices that both result from and participate in that vision. There is work left to do before this can claim to be a full homiletics. For the moment, though, we can be grateful to Johan Cilliers for re-describing the frame in which such practices will grow. By doing so, he reaffirms his position as one of the most creative and venturesome scholars at work in the homiletical world.