

BOOK REVIEW

David H. C. Read. *Preacher: David H. C. Read's Sermons at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church*. Edited by John McTavish. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2017. x + 291 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-1-5326-0574-1. \$35.00.

David H. C. Read was pastor of Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City from 1956 to 1989, a position previously held by Henry Sloane Coffin and George Arthur Buttrick. Yet in contrast to his predecessors, as the volume editor is quick to point out, he is now largely unknown. John McTavish attributes this relative anonymity to Read's theological moderation, midway between “liberal” and “evangelical” extremes, even though in his day he published more than two dozen volumes of sermons and theological reflections. Although I could find no reference to such details within this volume, Read was also, *inter alia*, campus chaplain at the University of Edinburgh, Chaplain to Her Majesty the Queen in Scotland, and a regular preacher on NBC's “National Radio Pulpit,” as well as co-founder (with Walter J. Burghart) and first editor of *The Living Pulpit*. Read additionally gave the Lyman Beecher lectures at Yale in 1973. In what is clearly a labour of love, McTavish seeks to restore more fitting measure of acclaim with this collection of forty-two sermons that were presented—all but one at Madison Avenue Presbyterian—between 1970 and 1989. Only one (“Virginia Woolf Meets Charlie Brown”) has previously appeared in print. Each includes a brief editorial introduction explaining background details (including the curious tidbit that Donald Trump's parents were married at this church).

Recalling the audience for whom they were preached helps to explain the tone and thrust of these sermons. It is not so much that the sermons are addressed to urban sophisticates (Read's

learning and eloquence are surely equal to the task) as the fact that the congregants are (so it would appear) mainline Christians whom Read wishes to call to a deeper awareness of spirituality and grace than the cultural or conventional reasons that may have brought them to church. The example (in one of the book's more challenging sermons) of Moses as a "God-intoxicated leader" (158) seems representative in this regard. That being said, the spirituality that Read here advocates is largely contemplative and inward; there is only a muted call for social justice (at one end of the spectrum) or missionary endeavour (at the other). Typical in this regard is his admonition to gracious agnosticism regarding the fate of the "unevangelized," as well as those of other living religions. Against such inquisitiveness, he quotes the words of Jesus to Peter, "What is it to you? Follow me" (John 21:22 [207–11]). The title of Read's retirement sermon, preached on 31 December 1989 (the last of an estimated 1,490 sermons presented at Madison Avenue Church since January of 1956), provides an apt summary of his preaching focus: "P. S. God Loves You." God's indiscriminate love, Read declares, is not a cliché, but rather "a conviction to live by" (97).

Although the editor acknowledges that Read's moderate theological position failed to satisfy either conservatives or liberals, his sermons include the strengths of both at their best—a commitment to social justice combined with an invitation to mystical encounter with and worship of Christ. Read is worth quoting on this point (from a sermon marking his twentieth-fifth year at Madison Avenue in which he indicates how his understanding of the Gospel has broadened over time):

[The Gospel] is not a technique for successful living; it is not a blueprint for immediate solution to social problems; it is not a moral code to which we are bound: it is a divine power that meets us at the point of our sin and helplessness and lifts us up to "the measure of fullness of the stature of Christ" (110).

A number of sermons make specific reference to then-contemporary events—Watergate, the 1979 visit of a newly elected John Paul II to New York City, the launch of the Voyager II spacecraft, the creationism debate in Arkansas, or Richard

Nixon's comments on environmental pollution ("by 1980 huge areas of the country may be unlivable" [129]). An otherwise inspiring Pentecost sermon from 1972 refers to "this psychedelic age" (234). As a result, not only the comments themselves but the sermons in which they appear may at points seem dated, in contrast to the timeless message of the gospel which is the proper focus of preaching. In some instances, a rudimentary knowledge of contemporary events is necessary; otherwise the title of a sermon from December of 1974, "Advent Parables: Oil Crisis for the Bridesmaids" (which is not otherwise explained in the sermon itself), will not make much sense. Yet many of the arguments remain current: two clear examples include Read's critique, in the course of treating American Thanksgiving, of patriotic chauvinism, and his insistence, in a sermon for American Independence Day, that the only true freedom is to be found in Christ. References to social upheaval and consequent anxiety are surprisingly frequent.

The subject matter of these sermons is largely theological and thematic rather than directly exegetical. Many deal with the great themes of Christian faith and discipleship: the reality of sin and evil; the "mystery of iniquity" (39) and the greatness of God's grace; faith; prayer (unanswered and otherwise); Christian faith, hope, and love; conversion and Christian nurture; the significance of the cross; and the meaning of Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, and the Holy Trinity. The latter themes are made more prominent by the editorial decision to organize the volume according to the seasons of the liturgical year. Read's position on matters both moral and metaphysical is broadly orthodox and his exegesis in line with commonly accepted scholarship, although those familiar with the work of James Barr will likely wince at his endorsement (from 1972) of the view that "When Jesus was a child 'Abba' was his word for 'Daddy'" (238). For their time (and setting), some of these sermons would have appeared bold, such as Read's direct address to environmental stewardship, or to racism (in which he declares, "We are all mongrels" [135], and essentially admits his own complacency), both preached in 1970. But Read also has a knack with narrative and poetry, as for instance with his Christmas Eve children's sermon in verse, or his

imaginative retelling of the innkeeper who hosted the Last Supper. Notwithstanding this predominantly thematic approach, the volume treats many familiar texts (although this may simply indicate that the editor has chosen wisely), among them the episode of the Golden Calf; Ps 23 (the closest that Read comes to an expository sermon); John 3:16; Jesus' parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids; or that of the unforgiving debtor; his words in Luke to the so-called "good thief"; and even, "The Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10).

Although rarely extending beyond Western intellectual traditions, Read's breadth of learning is impressive: quotations and illustrations range from favourite hymns, Gallup polls, and the most recent issue of *Time* magazine to citing Hamlet and the sermons of John Donne; Blaise Pascal or the poetry of Thomas Traherne, Robbie Burns, Robert Browning, Emily Brontë, and John Updike; Ibsen's "Peer Gynt"; George Bernard Shaw; Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*; or Jean Paul Sartre and the Chinese intellectual Lin Yutang (who had attended Madison Avenue Presbyterian in the early 1950's).

What of the preacher? He is a keen observer of the everyday, frequently commenting on details of life in New York City. Although there are relatively few references to his own background (apart from an Easter sermon account of his conversion and belief in the resurrection), one biographical detail that emerges on several occasions is his experience as a military chaplain during the Second World War, mostly spent as a prisoner of the German army. A moving example is his account of experiencing God's presence intensely while preaching to fellow internees nearly thirty years prior: "one thing Palm Sunday will always mean to me," he observes, "is the overwhelming power of God who comes in the blood-stained humanity of Jesus" (176). Another is his meditation on the moment of his capture, in which he reflects on the temporary triumph of oppressors and hope in God's providential direction of human history.

The sermons themselves are nearly free of typographical errors (although in one instance [148–49] the date in the text does not match the date assigned by the title). The volume concludes

by listing nineteen of Read's books (although without explaining this choice), followed by eleven brief reviews (presumably by the editor), and the sermon with the best title of all: "Virginia Woolf Meets Charlie Brown" (on the foolishness and wisdom of God).

In the age of the Internet and YouTube, reading printed sermons can hardly be considered a popular pastime. Nonetheless, this volume will appeal to audiences like that for which the sermons were first preached: those who occupy a social and theological middle ground, and wish to be reminded of the enduring truths of Christian faith.

Michael P. Knowles
McMaster Divinity College
Hamilton, ON