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BOOK REVIEW

TIMING GRACE: REFLECTIONS ON THE TEMPORALITY OF PREACHING

Cilliers, J., (AFRICAN SUN MeDIA, SUN PReSS, 2019), 246 pp. Price: R250 (hardcopy); R280 (e-book) ISBN: 978-1-928480-22-8 & 978-1-928480-23-5, (E-book). www.africansunmedia.co.za/orders@africansunmedia.co.za/0212010071

“What is important to state here [is] that the notion of timing, which forms the leitmotiv of this book, should be understood as a ‘qualitative category’, and not in a quantitative sense. To put it briefly: in what follows, I will constantly be looking at the quality of the ‘now’, as it becomes apparent in a variety of sermons” (p. 10). In this sentence, Johan Cilliers lays the theme of *Timing grace* on the table. Not simply time, not merely any time, but the interplay of God’s revelation in the past, towards hope in the future, intertwining in the present of the sermon.

However, as becomes clear in the ensuing chapters, Cilliers has been contemplating the timing of sermons for a long time. Chapters 2 to 4 are an inevitable move into the past of sermons preached in South Africa, and culminate in the contemplation of sermons of Allan Boesak, Desmond Tutu, and Beyers Naudé as preached during apartheid. In these three chapters, I was struck by the repetition, sometimes word for word, of other articles by Cilliers in the past decade. Yet, I found it essential to be newly reminded of

the importance of discernment for the *kairos* of the contextual situation *vis-à-vis* an enclave of ignorance (p. 24). In this sense of repeating what he has mentioned previously, Cilliers locates his homiletic foundation in the historical lessons we have learnt in South Africa about timely and untimely, prophetic and anti-prophetic, as well as just and unjust preaching.

From this historical foundation, Cilliers reminds me that each contextual reality needs to be named acutely for what it is within the situation, in the present: “silence is a distinct form of (un)ethical preaching ... [it implies that] the status quo is good, or at least bearable” (p. 42). There is no preaching, or at least ethical preaching, when one does not speak in the present (p. 54). One of the most helpful homiletical keys that I have learnt from Cilliers, which he developed in an article titled “Where have all the prophets gone? Perspectives on political preaching” (2015) and which he repeats on page 89, is the understanding that God’s future breaks through in timely and present preaching as anticipation for God’s “*adventus*”. Once more, in opposition to the belief that God’s future can only break through once Christians bring their part in changing the world, anticipation is a promise that God is the primary actor in history, already in the present. Thus, the present becomes a gift of incarnation, of God’s presence.

But Cilliers is not yet done with what is to be learned from the South African past. In Chapter 4, he moves on to contemplate three influential preachers in South African history: Allan Boesak, Desmond Tutu, and Beyers Naudé. His reflection on Allan Boesak is featured almost word for word in an article titled “Prophetic preaching in South Africa: Exploring some spaces of tension” (2013). However, in this chapter, he expands his thoughts to include contemplation on Desmond Tutu’s and Beyers Naudé’s timely preaching during apartheid. On the one hand, I am convinced that Cilliers is critical of Boesak’s sermon, because God seems to be absent therein (p. 114). On the other hand, Cilliers is appreciative of Boesak’s acute ability to “unveil a deeper hidden reality, whilst facing the powerful” (p. 117). And it is in this unveiling where Boesak’s sermons are timed well. In a similar vein, Cilliers focuses on the most remarkable aspects of how each preacher times grace excellently. In the case of Tutu, it is his ability to react to the injustices of apartheid mischievously, breaking the spell of the contextual realities over people’s lives (p. 127). With regard to Naudé, it is his keen rhetorical ability to systematise the structural injustices of apartheid towards an ethical restructuring of justice (p. 134).

I have long been convinced that Cilliers can traverse any disagreement with his theological thought because of the aesthetic quality of his rhetoric. *Timing grace* is no exception; yet, I am inclined to understand that Cilliers places the location of where grace can interrupt the current times as among the poor and marginalised (p. 142). Stated differently, in Cilliers’ contemplation

between the historical examples of timed grace and the current context, he opines that the present breaking through of timely grace will be found in the places on the margins and edge of society.

In this first part of *Timing grace*, as I have alluded to previously, Cilliers merely reminds me of that which he has already said. This endeavour of reminding us of what we have forgotten is essential, and I much appreciate Cilliers for this. I want to propose that Chapters 5 and 6 represent the second movement in *Timing grace*. Having reminded us of the past, Cilliers now takes on two contentious and contextual issues: ecology and hermeneutics.

As far as I know, there is a paucity of writing on ecology and homiletics in South Africa. Furthermore, as Cilliers shows, there has been a lack of sermons on ecological issues, even though the South African context speaks of an endearing injustice with regard to our footprint on the ecology (p. 153-156). With this in mind, Cilliers calls on the protestant tradition of standing against any form of injustice and destructive forces. For Cilliers, this means also protesting in preaching against the destruction of the ecology. In his line of thought, Cilliers enters into conversation with body theology to propose that the world is God's body (p. 167). From this point of view, God loves bodies, the material, the ecology, and preaching is called to let go of the anti-material tendencies within Christianity.

Lastly, Cilliers moves to the liturgy of life in the lived experience of the Coptic Christians of Cairo. These Christians survived by recycling the waste of the city. For Cilliers, the importance of this liturgy-of-life lies in the participation in God's repurposing of creation. This call has yet to become part of the consciousness of Christianity. I am, however, slightly critical of Cilliers' usage of the Coptic Christians. After all, to my mind, the "garbage people" of Cairo are economically forced to collect and recycle garbage. This brings me to the following points: the living conditions of the "garbage people" are not ideal in any sense; on the contrary, their well-being and living situation is of poor quality. Does their situation speak of participation in God's re-creation as a choice or as a mere struggle for existence? Is it ethical to (even implicitly) idealise situations of dire poverty? I am, to some extent, convinced that God is to be found in their struggle, but I am not convinced that conditions of struggle are to be praised. However, taken as a whole, Cilliers excellently contemplates the importance of ecological ethics for homiletics.

In Chapter 6, Cilliers takes on another critical contextual issue, that of the interpretation of the biblical text. There is no doubt that this is one of the most contentious theological issues of our day. Keeping to his leitmotiv of time as the quality of preaching in the present, Cilliers proposes that the "Bible is not God or God's revelation" (p. 186), but that it has a dynamic of its own,

which does not tend towards a repetition of time. For Cilliers, the nature of the biblical text is instead “an interruptive, albeit salvific word, a word with an abrasiveness that penetrates the one-dimensionality of our world to surprise, to provoke, reveal – with a view to enter a new world: accepting and living an alternative ... oppos[ing] the status quo of all ideologies and all -isms that bound us and still bind us” (p. 194). Thus, the timing of the text stands directly opposed to a taming of the text for any agenda.

I want to conclude with three appreciations for *Timing grace*. First, I appreciate that Cilliers so adequately reminds us of our historical roots, in which we find excellent and well-timed sermons. Secondly, I appreciate that Cilliers takes on contextual matters in such an excellent and well-phrased manner. Thirdly, I appreciate the sermons that Cilliers includes at the end of each chapter. In recent years, very few, if any, South African sermons have been published, and I am grateful for Cilliers’ contribution.