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# BOOK REVIEW

## TIMING GRACE. REFLECTIONS ON THE TEMPORALITY OF PREACHING

Cilliers, J. (Stellenbosch: African Sun Media, 2019),  
96pp. Price: R440. ISBN: 978-1-928480-22-8

It is about time – pun intended! – Johan Cilliers wrote his homiletical credo on “preaching which somehow contributes towards ‘a redeeming of time’ within (to be) redeemed time” (p. 7). This one short sentence, and there are numerous others I could have quoted, clearly indicates that Cilliers leaves us with much to ponder. There is, I believe, no way in which we can do homiletics and liturgy in South Africa nowadays, which is not “after” Cilliers’ work.

First, his sensitivity for “the quality of the ‘now’” (p. 10) could be viewed as a constant *leitmotiv* and skill throughout his career. This book is much more than simply a mere logical follow-up on his previous work, *A space for grace – Towards an aesthetics of preaching* (2016), where he clearly indicated “when I will be speaking about space, the notion of time will always be lingering in the background” (p. 3). Already in his *God vir ons – ’n Analise en beoordeling van Nederduits Gereformeerde volksprediking van 1960-1980* (1994), we heard his sharp antenna for the (mis)timing of the gospel during the heydays of apartheid. For instance, in a razor-sharp evaluation, Cilliers reminds us that this kind of mistiming was nothing other than

homiletical escapism ... a reach back into history to avoid contemporary realities and the challenges of the future. It represented a form of 'anti-prophecy' that does not dare to jump ahead, but rather arrests time and reproduces history (p. 46).

No wonder Dr Andries Treurnicht, leader of the Conservative Party, threatened to take some legal action against Cilliers when findings of his unpublished PhD of 1982, *Soos woorde van God*, got some publicity in the media. And this is obviously just the beginning as *Timing grace* recalls also other well-timed work in his oeuvre that soon followed hereafter. From the characteristic "volkspreaching" we move to the (un)ethical preaching he unmasked and witnessed to during the next decades of the so-called transition in South Africa,<sup>1</sup> which was yet another "successful" attempt to interrupt the "mistimed" status quo at the time. Cilliers recalls this particular "sermonic pathology" as an attempt "to manipulate (activate) people to activate (manipulate) God" (p. 76). Even his introductory textbook to preaching, *The living voice of the gospel – Rethinking the basic principles of preaching* (2004), assumed all along that the mysterious blending of the four different voices into the living voice of the gospel in the event of a sermon was always a question of *timing grace*. Schooled in that work, one is not surprised to hear him repeating anew the following sobering thought in arguing *timing grace*:

Preaching might sound even spectacular or popular ... but it could still be false. The right content, delivered to the 'right' people, but it does not fit into the 'right' time. Indeed, preaching might sound 'correct,' but still be 'wrong'; in fact, it can be 'so' correct, that it is 'so' wrong ... The what, whom, and when in preaching need to be in sync, and perhaps timing (the when) is the most important 'homiletical synchroniser' (p. 23).

This reminds us of Van der Woude's famous saying in *Wat is waarheid?* (1973) on the prophetic literature in the 1970s when he stated: "De valse profetie heeft de waarheid van God nie bewust verdraaid, maar het uur van die waarheid niet verstaan." Even *Dancing with deity* (2012) – Cilliers' liturgical credo – could be regarded as an implicit attempt to speak a timely theological word on the state and future of Protestant worship. Therein we remember him saying that it would be a sad day if it were indeed true that Reformed worship services "hamper beauty, smother imagination and sabotage poetry" (2012:35). As a real artist, which Cilliers is, he believes that preachers as liturgists too may be able to pick up the early seismographic vibrations, and "read the times" with "a signal of transcendence, as an indicator of the light that gets in, through the 'crack in everything' [Cohen]" (p. 7). In short, before we lose ourselves in all the interesting details and lines of thought within

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1 See *Uitwissing van God op die kansel* (1996) and *Die genade van gehoorsaamheid* (2000)

*Timing grace*, we should perhaps first of all acknowledge and applaud Cilliers for embodying (time and time *again!*) with such “relaxed awareness” the very theory he describes so vividly in his book(s).

Secondly, *Timing grace* is a text before us because of the vocabulary, grammar and key concepts with which Cilliers envisions anew the *cor ecclesiae* – preaching as the heart of the church. There are a number of articulations throughout the text, in which a nuance such as “the present is the present is the present” (p. 91) comes to us ever anew. His artistic playfulness with words is nothing less than a serious engagement with “the most fundamental (theological) underpinnings of the act and art that we call preaching” (p. ii). Or, to be more specific: All the talk of words such as “imagination”, “interruption”, “synchronization”, “improvisation” and “the pre-sencing of Presence in the present” is nothing but to ponder the gift of this timed and timely Word that continues to speak ever anew a plethora of new possibilities to us. Throughout the text, he constantly moves and times basic definitions on what preaching could be anew. For instance, he launches the argument with preaching, which

entails more than just speaking, hearing and (cognitive) understanding. It calls for a multi-sensory (re)discovery of space and time, within space and time (p. 12).

Such

a ‘space for grace’ always calls for, and always is constituted by, the ‘timing of grace, i.e. the *pre-sencing* of Presence in the present (p. 24).

Sensing, linking, connecting past, present and future in such a way that the preacher can be in sync with grace, with the present as Presence, is what this timing and *pre-sencing* of the Present One is all about. When such grace happens, we realise it is not under our control, and that we as recipients are constantly in need thereof ourselves. According to this line of thought,

grace is the deconstruction of the ‘predictable timing’ of the conditional cause-and-effect structure, through the unconditional and mostly ‘unpredictable improvisation’ of time that is characteristic of timing” (p. 30).

Or, to put it even more bluntly: Grace “cannot be scheduled, manipulated, or choreographed – homiletically, or otherwise. Grace happens – therefore it is called ‘grace’” (p. 24). This kind of grace cannot be “monumentalized” (p. 10), “pillarised” (p. 25), and be a certain “enclave of rigidity” (p. 29). In a beautiful line, he states:

Preachers have the calling to pre-sense the Presence of the moving God in the present, in the 'now' – knowing all the time (!) that they cannot fast-freeze this God according to a patented image (p. 58).

We are thus in constant need of past, present and future to intersect, and for grace to interrupt the “now” (p. 189). As participants of preaching, we all long to experience the fullness of time, a simultaneity within every “now” that is composed of many other “nows”, in order that the preacher may time grace, and grace time the preacher (p. 93). In short, this is a homiletical credo, which professes that the following is somehow indeed possible, namely “a redeeming of time within (to be) redeemed time” (p. 7).

Thirdly, it would thus appear that he is not envisioning a static, closed, predictable and boring linear or cyclical experience of time, but rather a dynamic and fluid spiral movement (p. 9). And again, this is true of Cilliers' work, not only on a mere “abstract” theoretical level, but also embodied in his engagement with some new and timely challenges of the times (coming). Besides our “nod of recognition” towards the lingering presence of his earlier work in this book, it is also worth noting the “shock of recognition” of engaging some other newly timed challenges in a timely – interruptive and improvised – manner. Through an overarching theme of “wasting time”, he “breaks the silence” on a variety of pressing new ecological challenges within the South African context. In fact, there are even some smaller sections where he makes some significant comments on other contemporary, theological discourses, with specific relevance to the South African context. For instance, the small footnote on (read: “lonely” reference to) “prophetic preaching” is quite revealing of Cilliers' take on the current dominant trends within the so-called circle of “public theologians” in South Africa when he states:

I know that the notion of 'prophetic preaching' can be understood in a number of ways, and, in my opinion, even has been devaluated and sensationalized to some extent, or viewed as an anachronism. In this book, I am using this concept in view of its 'interruptive dimension' (p. 23).

Cilliers' edge lies perhaps in the subtleness in which he contributes to the discussion. He has a different contribution, but then you have to read between the lines. He not only writes about a different tone, mood, genre, style, and timing, in which we could theologise, but again embodies it in and through his own writings. The envisioned “centripetal” and “centrifugal” movement he proposes in his critique on missional theology (p. 142) is very stimulating. This critical yet constructive – interruptive and improvised – antenna is also clearly visible in a significant rereading of the past within our present. The past is also not done for Cilliers, and often lingers and mutates in problematic manners, as a more recent critical reading of one of Allan Boesak's early

sermons clearly indicates towards *timing grace* anew (pp. 101-116). This continuous movement, with its openness towards all directions (and times), ends on an aptly note in the last chapter with a reflection on John Mbeti's work for the notion of "fulfilling time". The qualitative "now" is further explored, in this instance, within the dynamic interplay between "time" and "event". "Africans time the event; they however also invent (event!) the time" (p. 210). Against this background, there is yet another beautiful attempt in which he tries to articulate the intersection and flow of space, time, and grace within preaching:

In short: now is movement, not a monument being erected in the centre of the ocean, trying its best to resist the force of the waves, standing fixed and firm against the gale. Preaching is, in my opinion, the art of riding the waves of now; more than constructing a monument that must withstand the movement of these waves (pp. 210-211).

In short, it is clear beyond doubt why we find ourselves "after" Cilliers' work. It inspires, moves and times us, even in this short review of his work. But a mere echo or repetition of Cilliers' work would not do him and our subject any justice. That would be a mistiming of *timing grace*! We are also inspired by the book to go in another way "after" Cilliers. *Timing grace* sensitises us to also raise gracefully a few timing questions.

First, I find it strange (odd and even contradicting) that all of his sermons in the book (and in previous works) are not "dated" and "placed". I have the greatest appreciation for including his own sermons at the end of chapters as yet another witness to how theory and practice dovetail in his work, but the lack of reference to the how they are both timed and timely, a moment within a greater movement, seems to create the idea of floating, cyclical and repetitive time. For instance, instead of reading again the very same sermon, "My times are in your hands" (pp. 17-21), which was already published – with a beautiful liturgy – in *Die uitwysing van God op die kansel* (1998:81-91), it could have been fascinating to note how the same text was timed differently within another context. It seems to create the idea that we can enter the same pulpit twice, and we all know that is just not true (or aesthetically pleasing). Thus, I have a question about the seeming eternal nature of these sermons, while we know that they are temporal and never done. Stressing the particular ongoing timed rootedness of these specific sermons might make *timing grace* (and its accompanied space for grace) even more persuasive and compelling.

Secondly, following from the above, there seems to be a question mark on the issue of "particularity" as such in Cilliers' work. It is not as if it is absent, but I am wondering whether it is clear and specific enough. It is obviously there, but not explicit, and not as an explicit point of departure. One has to assume it, and this might be troublesome. Is the movement between the general and the particular not, in essence, from the latter towards the former? Our starting

point in our thought and theology is – especially when we are thinking in terms of *timing grace* – not in creation and nature, but in Christ, the personification of a space for grace, and timing and timed graced. If we do not start here, with the scandal of particularity, the one Word of God who is Lord, then we might struggle time and time again to differentiate (and still be surprised by) the way in which the “threefold” (one!) Word of God comes to us ever anew.

Thirdly, although I find his feel for “prophetic preaching” and the later discussion on “missional theology” (pp. 138-142) very revealing, I sense again yet another contradiction. Whereas Cilliers states his basic argument in such an eloquent and nuanced manner, there is, in the way in which he responds to these discourses, perhaps not the same sensitivity and subtlety in his reading of others. The seeming one-sided reading and kind of dismissive take he has on these critical discourses might actually point to his own embeddedness in mistiming the hour on how to theologise in the now. (And I am also too aware of my own possible mistiming of what is at stake in stating this.) The nuance in Cilliers’ work, which I have come to appreciate over the years, I find strangely lacking in a kind of detached position he takes when it comes to these more technical, nitty-gritty, participatory and intra-theological discussions, especially related to the issues on grassroots level. It is not as if his timed critique on its mistiming is not without value (it is!), but if he could only come closer, he will see that there is so much more to these developments which we can, in fact, also acknowledge and celebrate. In fact, the semantics and nuance do indeed matter in whether we speak of “missional” or “missionary” in this context (see p. 142). In the use of these and other terminology (such as “public theology”, or “prophetic preaching”), the nuance and distinctions are of significant importance. How we name, phrase, and differentiate does matter. In fact, in itself there is perhaps already some indication of possible signs of “improvisation” and “interruption” – yes, some well-timed and timely strengths – which is not necessarily over against his own theoretical approach. Instead of pursuing with such an outsider’s approach where we, more often than not, miss the strengths of the other’s contribution, I wonder whether the openness and movement cannot be even more intense and dynamic to seek also the common grounds we share, and thus the ways in which we can complement and correct each other.

So where does this all leave us then? What would a fitting conclusive word be for “now”? Is there even another way we may be “after” Cilliers? If we are (more or less) correct in the two different ways in which we find ourselves “after” Cilliers, then another possibility “after” Cilliers’ work might emerge. We need to go through his work, on both sides, but eventually also beyond that. Thus, with a slight alteration, we conclude with *Timing grace*’s last words: “Now, it is [no] time to stop. *In spe ...*” (p. 228).