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Longing to See Your Face

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Book Review by Angela McCarthy

Thomas Scirghi. *Longing to See Your Face*. Collegeville Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2017.

‘Preaching is the act of talking to people about Jesus Christ’.¹ This very simple definition is stated at the beginning of Scirghi’s book and as the title suggests, the work of the preacher is to bring to the people who long to see God’s face an understanding of the Good News of Jesus Christ. Scirghi once described to me how he had learnt much from his Baptist teachers in a preaching course and also from a drama course that he had taken to improve his presentation skills. These are well developed and useful skills in his preaching style.

For those of us who sit in the pews, we have heard many ordinary homilies, a few disastrous ones and some brilliant ones. We remember the brilliant ones and the disastrous ones but unfortunately there are many homilies that we just do not remember. This means that the work of the preacher or homilist requires the critical skills needed for this very important pastoral role. Scirghi has held classes in preaching across the United States, here in Australia as well as in Asia and Africa. While he has been a visiting scholar at Notre Dame on two occasions our community has been blessed with his homilies and they are truly memorable. So what is needed? Scirghi unlocks what is needed in this important book. It is written for clergy and seminarians, for lay ministers who preach in the absence of a priest, and for the laity so they might better understand what is spoken and perhaps how to offer constructive feedback.

This book is divided into two sections: Part 1 offers a theological grounding in the purpose and the matter of preaching. Part 2 presents practical advice. In section one Scirghi begins with St Augustine’s statement that eloquent speech should teach, delight and move.² That means that those of us in the pews should ‘hear an old story in a new way and understand how to adapt it to’ our lives.³ This makes eminent sense. The power of words is not simply in the words themselves but in the way in which the hearer is engaged, enlivened and then moved to see things or do things differently. Scirghi develops this understanding in Chapter Two. Even after hearing the Word for all of our lives we can still be opened to something different when we are drawn into it in a new way so that it opens for us again. As the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* says, Christ is truly present with us in liturgy in four ways: the person of the priest, the sacred species of his Body and Blood, the Word, and as a people assembled in prayer and song.⁴ As we leave the liturgy, missioned to take Christ into the world, the way in which we are moved by the homily, the music, the welcoming nature of our community and the reception of sacrament, should give us the fire in our belly to make a difference.

‘When God speaks, something happens’.⁵ As Scirghi develops this statement he emphasises that our words do matter. They are not cheap unless we cheapen them. Hearing a homily that

¹ Thomas Scirghi, *Longing to See Your Face* (Collegeville Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2017).

² *Ibid.*, 11.

³ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴ Second Vatican Council, "Sacrosanctum Concilium," (1963), http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html. 7.

⁵ Scirghi, 22.

involves a joke that is not worth telling is a way to cheapen words so that they lodge in the hearer in entirely the wrong way. It is good for a congregation to laugh and to open up their imaginations but not at the expense of hearing God and receiving God's grace.

Chapter Three engages with the issues around preaching in an increasingly secular world. Nones are the fastest rising group – those with no religious affiliation.⁶ This is the case in both Australia and the United States. What are the common questions to which all people seek answers, not just religious people? How often do we question why we do the things that we do? Such reflections bring us to focus on what we want to hear in a homily or what we want to say. Scirghi uses Paul's speech on the Areopagus where he names the unknown God to assist with the development of an approach in today's secular world. The preacher must have both the language of the culture and the language of the Catholic Tradition if he is to make sense.

In Chapter Four Scirghi develops the central focus of all preaching – the paschal mystery. There is no other 'theme' or story that can displace the paschal mystery. This is the reason for us to gather, to sing and to pray. The preacher or homilist is charged with the duty and the responsibility to make this come alive, to know that we are part of this story. Having been nourished by the Liturgy of the Word we move to the Liturgy of the Eucharist where we are fed and fully become one in the Body of Christ. All gathered have to in some sense experience what that means so that when missioned to go into the world it actually matters and becomes a reality.

In Part II of this valuable book, Scirghi develops the 'how' of preaching. The first section is about sitting down before preaching – praying and preparing what to say and how to say it. One of our former parish priests told us that he always began his homily on Tuesday. He would begin by reading the scripture for the following weekend and then work on what to say and how to say over the coming days. He still is an excellent homilist and it is rooted in his humble preparation. The second section is about this kind of reflection. Starting with the scripture allows the 'two edged sword' of the Word to work in the heart and mind before adding human words, knowing what scripture says in your own heart first. In Australia many parishes have priests whose first language is not English. If that is the case, their preparation should include a friend or fellow priest who is able to help with ensuring that the language is culturally relevant and correctly pronounced. The next step is mining the text – researching what it is about, uncovering valuable information. I remember a homily that Scirghi gave in our University where he talked about some new information that he had just found about Paul's preaching in Acts 17:22-34. He has used it in this book⁷ and shows the value of researching the material so that something meaningful and enlivening can be said well. The next section is about finally writing something down, mapping the homily. Some of the most forgettable homilies are due to nothing being written down and so the waffle continues to irritate or just float away unheard. The final section in Part II is about rehearsing. Musicians have to do it, readers have to do it and so does the homilist or preacher. Rehearse and time it – one would think that these are essential elements of providing a valuable service to the community.

⁶ Ibid., 28.

⁷ Ibid., 31-32.

Part III of *Longing to See Your Face* moves into practical elements involved in particular preaching needs – funerals and weddings. Scirghi has been requested many times to offer advice for these difficult occasions where there will often be many people who are entirely unchurched. Good preaching in these circumstances will ‘name grace and announce the presence of God in the midst of the assembly’.⁸

This is a very valuable book for all those named at the beginning: the clergy and seminarians, lay people called upon to preach, and the gathered faithful who want to know more about what good preaching entails.

⁸ Ibid., 101.