



Not Ashamed of the Gospel: Sermons from Paul's Letter to the Romans, Fleming Rutledge, Eerdmans, 2007 (ISBN 978-0-8028-2737-1), 421 pp., pb \$19.00

Consider for a moment the predicament of the reviewer of a book of sermons. How should such a one proceed? Perhaps with the combination of attentiveness and speed that is always proper to the reviewing task. In which case, the danger of homiletic indigestion is serious: after all, we do not normally experience sermons helter-skelter but with decent intervals, perhaps once a week; and we wish for neither less nor more. But if the reviewer were to do that, the book hangs about interminably, or the editor clamors for the review. So the inclination is to tend toward the former policy, which at least gives a clear picture of the particular preacher's ways. Then of course, one is liable, perhaps, if the preacher's repertoire is narrow, to get a feeling of contrivance. We become less willing to hear, again and again, this person's word as truly the deliverance of the preacher's heart that very day. We suspect the preacher of being yet another sermon-smith.

But this is a piece about sermons not reviewing, and it is time to turn to them and their preacher. Fleming Rutledge is an Episcopal priest and a well-known American preacher. In this book, she presents us with no less than fifty-one sermons on Paul's Letter to the Romans. She has been much in demand and, though many of these sermons were preached in Grace Church, New York, some were originally given to theological students (to whom she must have brought encouragement), others in a wide variety of places in the USA. She is revealed as a woman of wide sympathies ecclesiastically, though she expresses herself readily in what one could describe as controlled Evangelical terms. Her introduction reveals her as well versed in the history of the interpretation of Romans, as well as being deeply and broadly experienced pastorally. She illustrates her sermons appositely and interestingly, and is not afraid of social and political comments on American life. It was brave to publish so large a collection of sermons all preached on Romans texts (sometimes supplemented), and there is inevitably a good measure of repetition of themes. She is determined to communicate Paul's central message, so largely neglected in today's preaching. It is a laudable aim. She achieves a good measure of freshness and is always interesting and stimulating.

The neglect of Paul, ascribed to his works' perceived complexity, full of alien terms as far as today's talk is concerned, with a shadow of past heavy controversy hanging over them, is surely undeniable. How far these sermons overcame this obstacle we cannot tell, but they aim to

make Paul accessible without oversimplification or the shirking of difficulties. The great problem is, of course, not just the technical character of Paul's central language, but the fact that most churchgoers do not perceive themselves as sinners under condemnation and able to be released only through Christ's conveying of God's justifying grace. Not just the language but the whole frame of reference is far from the average churchgoer's mind. To many, it is probably the language of religious cranks, far from the averagely sensual dweller in modern Western society, whether religious or not. The fact that Paul's opposition came not, it seems, from a complete failure to think in his terms but from Jewish Christians who interpreted the legacy of Jesus as a supplement to and interpretation of God's age-old promise to Israel, does not enter the scene here. In other words, this is a view of Paul in Lutheran Reformation guise: it seizes Paul's single-minded grasp of the human condition but leaves it, inevitably, very alien indeed to modern Western people – no doubt thereby offering a stinging commentary on their shallowness as they, occasionally, turn their minds to relationship with God and the person of Jesus, who taught so helpfully in the Gospels!

Yet these sermons are in no way old-style Protestant rants, but attractively expressed, easily readable and pastorally sensitive presentations. They neither gratuitously offend nor pull punches. They must have been good to listen to. But it would have been nice to add to the collection some audience reactions. To 'get the point' they would have to be people of more than usual sensibility, able to enter into the alien world of Paul, with his unfamiliar vocabulary, which can be illustrated by modern parallels; but that does not yield automatic entry into his special and singular 'problematic'.

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Jesus the Riddler: The Power of Ambiguity in the Gospels, Tom Thatcher, Westminster John Knox, 2006 (ISBN 0-664-22640-X), xxvii + 188 pp., pb £12.62/\$24.95

This book is a breeze of fresh air! Thatcher has found an intriguing angle to interpret some enigmatic sayings of Jesus, namely, that of contemporary folklore researchers. Truly fascinating! Because the author has managed to make his book 'accessible' by 'avoiding tedious discussion[s]' (p. xxvii), the theoretical part of his book is like a guided tour where the only option is to follow the set course. What I mean by