

Preaching like a woman

Susan Durber (SPCK, 2007)

I was intrigued by the title of this book: did it imply that there is a way of 'preaching like a woman'? The introduction assured me that this was not the case, but that women could choose a new preaching language, and would inevitably be heard differently from the way male preachers are heard.

The author was co-editor of *Silence in Heaven: a book of women's preaching*, one of few books published in England on the subject of women's preaching, and Durber explores how much has changed since it was published in 1994. Today, the presence of a woman in the pulpit is almost normal, rather than being rare or shocking, yet there has been very little theological reflection on the preaching of women. Hence the need for a book like this.

In her introduction, Durber helpfully explores some of the issues which women preachers may encounter: the issue of preaching itself, when it can seem an outmoded form of discourse; and how to approach the Bible and the act of preaching. She notes that for some women, preaching is something to abandon as a patriarchal form, unfit for a new church which is truly inclusive of women. Rather than do that, the author argues, women need to use and reshape preaching.

So what will women's preaching be like? Rather than look for some definable 'feminine' quality, such as being more 'personal', more 'poetic', making more use of story and testimony, Durber argues that women should reject the idea that women will use particular kinds of style or subject-matter, but suggests that they may make a conscious choice to 'preach in forms, styles and words that come from their experience as women who live in patriarchal cultures and churches.'

In preaching as in many areas of ministry, women lack role models. The author urges women to find their voice as preachers, and helpfully draws attention to the strong tradition of black women preachers in the United States. Yet she seems unaware of other traditions of women preaching: among the early Baptists and Quakers, at the time of Wesley, and in the mid-nineteenth century.

A large part of the book is made up of sermons by the author. I found this a little disappointing, compared to the variety which I found in *Silence in Heaven*. Though there is some variety in the sermons, and they are chosen to illustrate aspects of the discussion under the three headings, 'Preaching from the Text', 'Preaching the Christian Year' and 'Preaching the Faith', for me the book failed to live up to its title.

I found myself alternately stimulated and annoyed by the book. I would like some Christians to face the fact that sometimes 'a feminist could not bear to read the Bible, let alone preach from it.' Yet when she discusses biblical interpretation, Durber turns to reformist feminists like Fiorenza, rather than – for example – biblical feminists. I enjoyed some of her insights, into the silence of the women in Mark's account of the resurrection, for example; and intriguing angles that challenge traditional theology. But coming from a biblical feminist position, I was frustrated by the assumptions that the author brings to the text, and some of the interpretations she makes.

An interesting, thought-provoking book – but not the one I was hoping for. I look forward to a book which opens up new forms and styles of preaching by women, but from a more conservative perspective.