

First, there is Good Friday

Spirituals can make the point well, says

John Pridmore

Dem Dry Bones: Preaching, death and hope

Luke A. Powery

Fortress Press £12.99

(978-0-8006-9822-5)

Church Times Bookshop £11.70

WE LIKE to say that the gospel is good news. The claim is only partly true. Luke Powery's passionate study of the spirituals, sung by the enslaved black people of America, tells the larger truth, that to preach the good news one must preach the bad news, too.

Christianity insists on the inescapability of suffering, pain, sorrow, and death: the realities that the slaves knew only too well. Much contemporary preaching would have it otherwise, guaranteeing you health, wealth, and happiness if you become a Christian. (There are conditions, of course, including the requirement that you donate generously to the church whose pastor may need a larger jacuzzi.) Such "candy theology" is the grotesque mutant of Christianity peddled by American televangelists and by countless churches in poor places that preach a "prosperity gospel". There were many of the latter in Hackney, where once I worked.

It would be a bad mistake to categorise Powery's fine book as yet another study of African American spirituals. Primarily, this is a homiletical work, a theological consideration of what must take place if we are to preach authentically. Spirituals, heard as "musical sermons", yield an understanding of preaching which is unevasive about the certainty of death and all the "little deaths" that daily afflict us. Such preaching is true to "the whole gospel in its gory glory". Powery

suggests that his book is work not done before. It is certainly unlikely that it has ever been done as well.

Much is made of Ezekiel 37, the passage that both inspires a thrilling spiritual and provides the title of this book. Dry bones — death — are the necessary context of preaching. But if death is the necessary context, the animating Spirit (staying with Ezekiel 37) is the divine reality that enables the preacher to speak — or to sing — hopefully. "There is" — despite it all, through it all — "a balm in Gilead." Spirituals integrate death and hope. To be sure, we need to listen to them sung to sense how this synthesis is achieved, but Powery's expert analysis of their lyrics goes a long way to showing how the slaves' valley of death was illumined by hope.

And this is what true preaching must always be. The great biblical themes on which the spirituals linger — above all, the death of Jesus ("the death-threat to death", as Powery calls it) and an eschatology that, for all its aching longing for the other side of the river, is yet a "future present hope" — must still fire the preacher's heart and words.

Powery starts writing his book in a library whose windows overlook a cemetery. He ends his book by recalling another one, the cemetery in which he buried his ten-year-old niece. He does not duck death, as do the prosperity evangelists about whom he barely contains his anger. Like Augustine, he contends that death, literally and figuratively, is "the pillow, the foundation, for Christian proclamation".

Readers — may there be many — of this important book may reflect that it is not only the sharp-suited evangelists who promote the heresy that Christian allegiance benefits you materially. There are less crude ways of telling lies.

The Revd Dr John Pridmore is a former Rector of Hackney in east London.



Messenger: white angel, from a fresco of the Myrrh-bearing Women, in the Monastery of Milaseva, Serbia, c.1235, which appears in *Choose Life: Christmas and Easter sermons in Canterbury Cathedral* by Rowan Williams. This includes Lord Williams's new introduction to these 22 meditative sermons (Bloomsbury, £10.99 (£9.90); 978-1-4081-9038-8)

Red-letter rebels of US Evangelicalism

Naomi Starkey looks at a bid to recover the priorities of Jesus

Red Letter Christianity: Living the words of Jesus no matter the cost

Shane Claiborne and Tony Campolo

Hodder & Stoughton £12.99

(978-1-444-74538-2)

Church Times Bookshop £11.70

THIS briskly paced and energetically argued book takes the form of a dialogue between two leading figures on the United States' so-called "Evangelical Left". The radical community activist Shane Claiborne is paired with the elder-statesman academic Tony Campolo to debate a broad selection of theo-

logical and social topics, including racism, liturgy, saints, politics, homosexuality, reconciliation, and Islam.

Their aim is promoting "red-letter Christianity" (www.redletterchristians.org): theologically Evangelical, but distinct from what they summarise as the "anti-gay, anti-feminist, anti-environmentalist, pro-war, pro-capital-punishment, and conservative Republican" values often associated with the label, especially in America.

Being a "red-letter Christian" means focusing on the words of Jesus, traditionally printed in red in some editions of the Bible, to try to emulate the dynamism of the Church's earliest days.

While this agenda risks sounding simplistic, the book provides sufficient anecdotal evidence to show that it can inspire younger generations in particular, bored by petty church factionalism and cultural stuffiness. The dominant concept throughout is generosity, with constant emphasis on seeking out what unites rather than divides groups of Christians. Impressively, the authors urge membership of existing churches rather than forming yet more separate congregations.

I found the chapter on environmentalism the most stimulating in its contrast between the bleakness of many US inner cities (neighbourhoods where it is easier to buy a gun than a salad) and the transformative projects run by groups such as Claiborne's. He shows how hope can flourish amid "post-industrial ruins . . . on the wrong side of capitalism".

While the dialogue style gets slightly wearing at times (and there are occasional howlers, such as G. K. Chesterton quoted as "Lord Chesterton"), it fits the book's overall message well by modelling discussion of — rather than dogmatic solutions to — complex questions. It is also consistently readable, with coverage of enough issues to provide points of connection or challenge for a wide audience.

Naomi Starkey is a commissioning editor with BRF, editor of New Daylight, and a Church in Wales ordinand.

Philip Welsh reads Holy Week talks

origins. But he wears it lightly, in a concern to read each story on its own terms, to "step inside the horizon of the narrative". He acknowledges his debt to a "reader-response" approach, which focuses not on the inherent properties of the text, but on the reader's interaction with it, and particularly with the gaps and indeterminacies of the story, in which readers may find room to actualise the text as their own.

This is especially fruitful as Sadgrove concludes by looking at the inconclusive account of the resurrection in Mark, the most reticent of the Evangelists. "Mark's Easter is about things not seen: 'he is not here.' His faith is in the gaps, the silences, the hints. . . Mark's great gift to the Church is to refuse to make it too easy for us. The empty tomb is not the answer, but the question."

The Revd Philip Welsh is Vicar of St Stephen's, Rochester Row, London.

Sons and Saviour

Lost Sons: God's long search for humanity

Michael Sadgrove

SPCK £9.99

(978-0-281-06214-0)

Church Times Bookshop £9

"THIS book is about a disturbing theme: how children can be lost." So begins Michael Sadgrove's eloquent exploration of eight stories from Genesis and early Exodus, highlighting in each case the motif of the lost son, and linking each story with an aspect of the Passion of Jesus, the Son lost and found. "Abel is 'lost' by being murdered, Canaan by being

cursed, Ishmael by being abandoned, Isaac by being bound for sacrifice, Esau by being supplanted, Joseph by being betrayed, and Moses by being hidden. The first primeval son, Adam, is lost by being exiled."

Lost Sons is an expansion of Holy Week addresses given in Durham Cathedral, and its approach is persuasive, if occasionally straining to accommodate within its paradigm such disparate material as the cursing of Canaan — an ingenious recovery of an Old Testament bit-player — and the novella-length saga of Joseph.

But the author knows not to overstate his case, as he invites us to see "how knowledge of these stories might subliminally colour our reading of the Passion", and is nervous of the "typical preacher's ploy to turn narrative into exhortation".

Sadgrove has clearly done his scholarship, aware, for example, of the aetiological function of some of these archaic stories as accounts of

SISTER Beda Brooks OSB, in *The Resurrection Garden*, considers the resurrection and its power in 19 meditations. They have different formats: some are written as poems, others in prose; some ask questions; others tell stories (St Pauls, £7.95 (£7.15); 978-085439-772-3).

Hearing the voice of Jesus

The Words of Jesus: A Gospel of the sayings of our Lord

Phyllis Tickle

SPCK £12.99

(978-0-281-06920-0)

Church Times Bookshop £11.70

MANY *Church Times* readers will be familiar with red-letter Bibles, where the words spoken by Jesus are printed in red, while the rest of the text is black. Phyllis Tickle has taken this idea further. She has removed everything from the Gospels and the first chapter of Acts except Jesus's spoken words, which she has arranged in five sections: public teaching, private teaching, healing dialogue, intimate conversation, and post-resurrection encounters.

I found that reading the material in this way highlighted things that I miss when I read Jesus's words in the context of the Gospel narratives. Words with which I was less familiar stood out in a new way. Other things struck me, too: for instance, how few words are connected with Jesus's healings, where his actions convey his message in a way that needs no further explanation.

I found Tickle's reflections on her work fascinating and helpful. She explains how her project started and grew, and the effects it has had on her thinking. Interestingly, it all began with a colleague's question, to which she originally answered in the negative. Over coffee, she was asked: "Did you ever wonder what you would really find if you took out the duplications and triplications and connective tissue of the Gospels and stripped it all down again to just His words?" Her first response, as she tells it in the book, was "No, I had never wondered such a thing. It would never have occurred to me that such a thing could even be done."

And yet she took on the challenge. I would like to encourage others to join her in that by reading this book, which the editor of this newspaper chose as his contribution to a round-up in *The Times* of books that faith leaders, writers, and thinkers had found most spiritually uplifting last year (*The Times*, 15 December 2012).

Sarah Hillman

Priest-in-Charge of St Mary the Virgin, Puddletown, Dorchester