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### Preachers in print

by Christopher Driver

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**E**VEN among Christian consumers of books, it is generally conceded that collected sermons are barely readable, and the graceless Lydia Bennet has all our sympathies when she interrupts Mr Collins after he has read three pages of Fordyce and is rebuked for her lack of interest in "books of a serious stamp." Yet arguably, we read much that is less succinct, less apposite, less well thought-out and less polished in style than many essays in this art; and though a Donne is not born every century the sermons of lesser men at least reflect, even when they are unable to improve, the age which dozes under them.

But perhaps the trouble is that sermons are not simply didactic literature (though they are commonly mistaken for this, sometimes even by the people who deliver them) but rather, if they are to fulfil their purpose, part of the act of worship which includes them. In a sense, their excision and marketing between hard covers is a dismal second-best, like a film of Holy Communion. Thus, to discover a preacher worth reprinting many contenders must be eliminated, on various grounds. The man (or woman) must realise, as most Anglicans do not, the sacramental significance of what he is doing, and his responsibility to Scripture. He must have a talent, as most Dissenters and almost all Methodists do not, for being at once clear, concise, felicitous, and vivid. He must be acutely conscious of his audience—the particular gifts and limitations of a particular congregation.

There are two contemporary preachers in print, both now dead, who pass all these tests. One is the Congregational layman Bernard Manning. The other is the Roman Catholic Ronald Knox, whose *Occasional Sermons* (Burns Oates, 42s) are prefaced by Father Philip Caraman with a significant note on his method:

"Both on the scheme and on the detail greater labour was spent than on the preparation of his books. Each sentence was written, the emphasis and pauses were marked, any cuts bracketed off, words scored out and others substituted, on the typescript which unfailingly he carried with him into the pulpit. He was never known, at least in his later life, to preach even a short Sunday homily to a country congregation without a typescript. Every sermon in this volume is unlike any other in construction and content."

*O si sic omnes*—or nearly *omnes*—since the Church's few spontaneous speakers of genius, the William Temples of their generation, might

be unfairly confined by such a limitation. But this method enabled Mgr Knox to leave some of his best work behind him. Although some of the "occasions" he celebrates will seem strange to Christians of other traditions, there can be nothing but admiration for a man who could be simple but not simple-minded, allusive but not pedantic, stylish but not mannered—the same man, in fact, in the pulpit as in an Oxford SCR, but a man who never mistook, as others do, either place for the other.

**A**MONG the other collections one naturally turns to Karl Barth's *Deliverance to the Captives* (SCM Press, 12s 6d). The title is not lightly chosen, for most of these sermons were in fact preached to inmates of Basel Prison, where the great theologian is a visitor. It is an exacting test even for Karl Barth to submit to, and it is a tribute to him that wisdom, honesty, consideration, and reverence shine through these pages—even through an indifferent translation: "We do not know whether they could plead attenuating circumstances." Barth is made to say of the criminals crucified with Jesus. Barth himself remarks in a preface that the prayers he gave were to his mind as essential as the sermons themselves, and prints both together.

Helmut Thielicke's *The Waiting Father* (James Clarke, 12s 6d) also suffers from translation—into American—for even a faithful rendering of idiom cannot make a sermon preached in Hamburg sound like one preached in Cincinnati. Dr Thielicke has a congregation of 4,000, limited only by the size of the largest church in Hamburg, for sermons which are longer than English congregations tolerate. These are on the parables of Jesus, and apart from C. H. Dodd's "The Parables of the Kingdom" it is hard to recall studies, especially of the "difficult" parables, which are simultaneously so approachable and illuminating.

America, by all accounts, could do with more preaching of this kind. The addresses in Elton Trueblood's *The Yoke of Christ* (James Clarke, 12s 6d) are sound and pointed, but if their slapdash language entitles him—as the blurb says—to be advertised as "the most quoted religious author in America," then God help America. The pieces do, however, reflect their age, and one of them even tells us how American clergymen set about acquiring themselves unearned doctorates. The method makes the Lambeth degree system seem a model of academic rectitude.