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Imaginal preaching: an archetypal perspective

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Reading this book and putting it on the reading lists of either a worship or systematic theology course would be a start. This vision deserves to be shared with all clergy and laity interested in worship and church renewal.

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Imaginal Preaching: An Archetypal Perspective

James A. Wallace
New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1995
iv + 151 pp.

"Images work," contends Wallace. "They work for us, against us, in us, and through us. They can transform us in our depths, move us toward the highest truth, motivate us to change the world, and ultimately influence the final outcome when we stand face to face with our God" (p. 18). This high faith in the effectiveness of images is based on the archetypal psychology of James Hillman (*Insearch*, 1979; *A Blue Fire: Selected Writings*, 1989) who, in turn, worked off Jung. Hillman's great concern, according to Wallace, is the recovery of "soul" (*psyche*), "the innermost aspect of the human person, the spiritual principle that informs us" (p. 22). The sphere of "soul" is the sphere of "imagination and heart", and the "language" of soul is images. "[S]oul is 'the imaginative possibility in our natures, the experiencing through reflective speculation, dream, image and fantasy—that mode which recognizes all realities as primarily symbolic or metaphorical'" (p. 25, quoting Hillman). This imaginative/spiritual capacity or dimension of human nature allows Wallace to conceive of images (especially the biblical images) as "living presences that mediate an encounter with Mystery" even as Jesus himself is the perfect image mediating an encounter with God (p. 34f).

Wallace holds that imaginal preaching is a (necessary?) alternative to the rhetorical model of preaching. The rhetorical model, he argues, attempts to persuade, convince, and exhort the listener to believe as the speaker does; an imaginal model, on the other hand, being based on "the psychological experience common to humankind", would be "revelatory", that is, imaginal and psychological rather than conceptual and cerebral (p. 1, 8), and, even more to the point, powered by the archetypes of the personal and collective unconscious.

Greek mythology has been especially drawn upon to identify and describe archetypes (e.g., Oedipus, Narcissus), and Wallace turns to this source too, in order to develop an imaginal homiletic. Mythology, he argues, "is the psychology of antiquity....The various mythic figures reveal the universal patterns that govern the psyche. The gods and goddesses

of Greek mythology can serve as metaphors for different modes of experience, and various ways of being in the world...These mythic figures serve as metaphorical expressions of distinct modes of consciousness. We look to the images of their stories for a deeper understanding of the gestalt or pattern that captures a particular way of being in the world" (p. 28).

The basic process of an imaginal homiletic is that of searching for a dominant image rather than for a main idea (p. 18), and to describe this process Wallace turns to the myth of Eros and Psyche (ch. 3). He interprets this myth *a la* Hillman as the awakening of the imagination. Eros is "the archetypal force" which awakens Psyche (= the imagination): "Eros present in the image of the biblical text seeks to awaken Psyche, the imagining capacity, of the preacher. And the sermon that results, centered in the biblical imagery, may act, in turn, as Eros to the Psyche of the gathered community, awakening and engendering it" (p. 47). The four stages of the myth are interpreted allegorically as four stages in the sermon process.

The preacher may enter this process from a number of mythological/psychological perspectives. Wallace chooses three: the Apollonian (ch. 4), the Dionysian (ch. 5), and the Hermetic (ch. 6). Apollo, of course, is the embodiment of reason, harmony, balance, order, and objectivity, though including also therapy, prophecy, and aesthetics. (It is unclear how this perspective is different from the "rhetorical" model.) The Apollonian movement is from chaos to order, the Dionysian movement is the opposite. Dionysus brings madness, ecstasy, dismemberment, androgyny, in short, the dark passionate experience of "the depths" where, astonishingly, "the sources of life are to be found" (p. 86). Hermes, the trickster messenger of the gods, is the movement through the obstacles which impede our journey by subverting them or by seeing through them to new possibilities and new meanings. "Metaphorical consciousness is Hermetic consciousness. From the 'between' comes knowledge of how one thing *is* and *is not* something else" (p. 105).

Wallace identifies the Gospel of Matthew as Apollonian, Luke as Dionysian, and Mark as Hermetic. He supplies a set of stimulating questions to assist the preacher to enter each mode, e.g., "How can the images of this text *enlighten* our lives as a community?" (Apollo); "How can this text dismember and loosen this community from social constructs that constrain and stifle?" (Dionysus); "How do the text's images help as community to move onward, to navigate a particular crossroads?" (Hermes).

This is a seminal work, and for that reason I find it both intriguing and frustrating. In this postmodern era reason has been toppled from its throne and made into only one way of knowing alongside a variety of other ways of knowing such as metaphor, metonymy, story, the emotions, images, and dreams. "Narrative" preaching began the journey away from the dominance of rational logic in homiletics, and now "image" is breaking free from "story". Wallace's study is thus an essential and ground-breaking study into the nature, function, and theology of image.

At the same time, my Apollonian proclivity keeps asking, Is all this ransacking of Greek mythology really necessary to describe imaginal preaching? As Wallace demythologizes Eros and Co. into psychological modes of

consciousness, I find myself demythologizing these into some pretty standard homiletical texts which deal with imagination, metaphor, and story in preaching. Then, of course, Eros and Co. shout, "But now you have *images* for all that conceptual stuff!"

Still, I wonder why I need Greek mythological images. Wallace himself goes out of his way to stress that the preacher's images must be drawn from the biblical text, and, if that's the case, would we not be further ahead also to draw our archetypal images and psychology from the Bible? We're constantly doing that already, in fact!

Perhaps the greatest concern I have is the want of a sufficient theological discussion. It is too easy and too "new age" to say only that images mediate an encounter with Mystery, and that behind the psychological awareness "a theological awareness is never entirely distant, for behind all that is said is the presence of that divine force which is Love incarnate" (p. 34).

In trying to assess what is coming to birth homiletically in the attention now being devoted to "image" I find it helpful to return to the basic categories of Prose, Story, and Poetry. Prose is, well, prose; Story is plot; Poetry is image. So perhaps the way into imaginal preaching is, as Wallace remarks in a casual aside, "*poesis*, a making or shaping of an imaginal reality through carefully chosen words" (p.34), or, better, images. Certainly the sample homilies included in the book (one in each of the three modes, and seven more in a closing collection) have the flow and feel and effect—even the look—of poetry.

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