

The Person and the Challenges
Volume 9 (2019) Number 2, p. 267–269
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15633/pch.3466>

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Book review

Albín Masarik: *Grieving with Hope. Selected Aspects of Funeral Sermons*, Cumbria 2017, Langham Global Library, Carlisle, ISBN 9 781783 683772, pp. 166

Albín Masarik's monograph takes on the theme of preaching as an integral part of the funeral service. The sciences fail to offer any meaningful insight when it comes to death. Only the timeless wisdom of God's word is able to shine the light of hope into the lives of those grieving a loved one. A dignified valediction with a suitable proportion of the reading of God's word and homiletical application serves a valuable purpose for just these situations. Major life events such as funerals naturally include people who do not regularly attend services. Funeral sermons can seriously address them, but a wrong sermon can discourage them. Hence the importance of giving proper attention to the preparation to the funeral homily – something this monograph approaches from a variety of perspectives. Included among these is the important topic of grief management and the loss of a loved one, which is an important part of pastoral work. For this reason, this book makes a significant contribution to the field.

The sanctity of funeral rites has resulted in a dearth of critical research and analysis into their homilies. They relied on the authority of God's word. As a result of current scientific and technical advancements, not to mention social relationships and mass media communication, sermons have increasingly become the subject of social, theological, rhetorical and linguistic critique. This of course is the result of proper freedom for research into every phenomenon of human existence. Linguistics, communication and religion have always been a part of the enduring values of any discrete culture. By integrating linguistics

with the theological, sociological and rhetorical areas of study, Albin Masarik's work is an important and timely monograph.

The author has set out to make a contribution to the development of special occasion preaching through research into the theoretical questions pertaining to funeral sermons based on his own previous research. This includes his analysis of the collected works of funeral sermons from Professor Kišš, which he used to map the structure of funeral sermons and the variability of approaches to handling the individual steps involved in preparation. Through study, excerption and the handling of the available preparatory material, he arrived at a collection of findings related to religious communication. What is especially valuable is the analysis of homilies in relationship with intra and extra linguistic factors, the analysis of the application of stylistic approaches, the influence of both objective and subjective style-forming factors and the demarcation of means of expression. Together, this creates tools for a critical evaluation of the current state of funeral sermons and a collection of questions and working hypotheses to move forward in the proclamation of faith in the context of death and resurrection. Also significant in the author's previous works are the results of his work in field observations of preaching ministry at cremation services.

The monograph is composed of four parts. Its structure is logical and clear. It includes an ample bibliography of technical works. In terms of style, language and clarity of expression, the work is well written and demonstrates the author's ability to articulate his results with precision. The abundant use of foreign language literature makes a significant contribution to Slovak theological literature while the English version presents the vitality of the theological environment in Slovakia to the English-speaking world.

This publication is unique in its field with very few similar works in Christian ecumenical theology (Catholic or Protestant). It takes into consideration the receptivity of the audience as well as the opportunities that the community of believers brings in their mission. Our current Pope Francis has commented wittily that "some suffer because they have to listen, others because they have to preach" (*Evangelii Gaudium* 135). The difficult role faced by preachers is that two thousand year-old truths must be translated into the language of the contemporary audience. In this case, hermeneutics and contextualization are more important than exegesis.

What emerges clearly is that, in the context of the funeral service, it is not enough to swamp the listeners with an overabundance of the eschatological. Specific to the homily is the fact that metaphysical phenomena can only

be communicated through symbol, narrative, example, metaphor and parable. The communication of faith through homily is not just for the communication of theological truth, but it is rather an encounter with timeless Wisdom. The value of such an encounter is not in its informational content but in the revelation of the meaning of life and its spiritual rooting.

Grieving with Hope, in its content, is undoubtedly a contribution that will lead to further development in the communication of faith and theology. On the basis of its clear goal, proper methodology, and its use of available resources, it creates a more complex picture of the current state of funeral sermons, and also the quantitative and qualitative value of religious communication.