

Reviews

THE EIGHTH CENTURY PROPHETS by B. W. Anderson. SPCK. London 1979.
pp xvi + 111 £3.25

Bernhard Anderson's exposition of the message of Amos, Hosea, Isaiah and Micah is grounded in the conviction that the prophets not only witness to Christ, but also "point out the meaning of life now in the immediacy of personal encounter and relationship with God" (p xiv). Anderson argues his case on the basis of Jesus' use of scripture, which was not merely a matter of justifying his own ministry; he urged his hearers to attend to the "prophetic exposition of the meaning of life *now* in the immediacy and urgency of relationship with God" (xv). In order to undertake this task, Anderson seeks an understanding of the eighth century prophets which is, in the first instance, historical.

While admitting the individuality of each of these prophets, Anderson decides to treat them as "a prophetic quartet that sings the same themes" (2) in the midst of Israel's political discord in the eighth century. Their most basic common perception was of God, as the lion of Amos 1.2, present in the world and ready to pounce, even on his own people (6-10). From this insight, there followed certain further realizations, which Anderson discusses in subsequent chapters. In Chapter 2, he deals with the recognition that God's imminence requires that the present be seen as an urgent time of decision; more precisely (chapter 3), it is a time of repentance in which catastrophe provides the incentive for reformation. The next three chapters, proceeding from Micah 6.8, treat of justice, loyalty and humility as God's positive requirements from his people. Any legalistic construction of these requirements is denied in chapter seven, on the grounds that they are but part of God's total involvement with his people, "And he decided to be present with, and go with, Israel in her historical journey, so that this people, *his* people, might be a paradigm to the world of what it means to be 'known' or 'cared for' by God" (74). In this sense, as chapter

eight asserts, "The path into the future is along a *via dolorosa*, a pathway of suffering for both God and his people" (89). Anderson concludes that this prophetic insight is confirmed and actualized by Jesus of Nazareth.

The obvious strength of this book is that it encourages the Christian preacher to take these prophetic books seriously as part of the canon. They are not in any way treated as proof texts, but rather as expressions of an abiding relationship between God and his people. As the series editor, Foster R. McCurley, states in the foreword, "Since the Word of God is always addressed to specific and concrete situations in the life of people, the motifs and themes in these commentaries are directed to those selected situations which best exemplify a certain witness's theology" (vii). McCurley edits *Proclamation Commentaries - The Old Testament Witness for Preaching* for Fortress Press (from which S.P.C.K. acquired the publishing rights for Great Britain). As an aid to preaching, the book's value is enhanced by the "Pericope Index" on p xvi and the "Index of Prophetic Preaching Themes" on pp 109-111. One will also wish to consult at least some of the works listed in the brief and serviceable "Selected Bibliography" in the course of sermon preparation, because this book's brevity prevents it from offering an adequate historical or exegetical treatment of the many passages it cites.

Indeed, it should be stressed that Anderson's book is less a preaching manual than one intelligent and learned preacher's attempt to isolate major preaching themes in the eighth century prophets. Before accepting his categorization, there are certain matters one would first want to think through. The most obvious concerns the place of generalization in homiletic discourse: if, as Anderson would agree, the prophets spoke to particular circumstances, to what extent do we dilute their witness

by attempting to discover common motives in them? In this regard, Anderson might be faulted for using passages from one of the eighth century prophets to characterize the other three. To give some prominent instances, he relies principally on Amos for the lion metaphor in discussing the divine presence, on Micah in discussing ethics, and on Isaiah's Immanuel in discussing the Christological dimension of prophecy. Taken individually, these seem reasonable (if not equally reasonable) expositions, but it may be doubted that the eighth century prophets as such are successfully treated by this procedure. Moreover, Anderson repeatedly refers to other prophets – and indeed, to the Torah and Writings – in the course of his remarks, which provokes the suspicion that he may be speaking of a generally Old Testament or even biblical theology. This makes his book all the more stimulating, but, as preachers, we will always want to start from our text and test such generalizations, not vice versa.

On the New Testament side, while agreeing with Anderson that Jesus called hearers to encounter with God in the scriptures (that is, the Old Testament), I sometimes found the exegesis strained. Citing Matthew 9.13, he asserts on p xv, "Jesus' imperative, 'go and learn', sends us to the Old Testament to hear words of the prophets that cut incisively into the wounds of social life and bring the therapy, or healing power, of divine judgment and grace". In context, of course, Jesus' reply to the Pharisees pertains to a specific issue (table fellowship), not the general ques-

tion of the relevance of scripture. Similarly, we are told that in John 2.19 "the centrality of the temple is reinterpreted to refer to Jesus' own person" (93): is it reinterpreted, or denied?

In the first example cited in the last paragraph, Anderson voices his conviction (which is repeatedly expressed) of the social emphasis in the prophetic message. Such an emphasis seems undeniable, but it invites us to ask how that is to be represented in our own faith. Anderson writes from the perspective of an America which, in the light of Vietnam and Watergate, doubts its power to save itself (84), and he understands the resistance to oppression as a proper component of the gospel (57). The reader in this country has, perhaps, turned less recently from putting his trust in princes, and may wonder what he and his Church can do positively about oppression. On the other hand, such sentences as, "The shock treatment of historical catastrophe belongs to divine therapy" (18) speak to the West – maybe even the world – as a whole, and they remind us that the prophetic message is durable enough to speak to any cultural condition precisely because it is the expression of what is most genuinely human in us: our attendance on God's presence in the conduct of our lives. This book can be warmly recommended less as an explication of passages or books than as a stimulus to recall the vitality of prophetic faith, and to act on the recollection.

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STRUGGLE AND FULFILLMENT: The Inner Dynamics of Religion and Morality by Donald Evans. *Collins*. London, 1979. pp 238 £6.95.

Treatises on Virtues and Vices went out of fashion some forty years ago in Catholic circles; now they are back again, this time mainly in Protestant circles. Some years ago Professor Harned of the University of Virginia spent a year in the Faculty of Divinity of the University of Edinburgh and summed up his reflections in a book called *Faith and Virtue* while the first volume of *The Journal of Religious Ethics* (1973) carried an extensive bibliography

of Christian and secular works on "the ethics of virtues". And now we have Professor Donald Evans of Toronto, who made his name with *The Logic of Self-Involvement* (1963) turning his attention to a study of virtue that will probably run to at least another volume. In the present book he is mainly concerned with Trust (and Distrust), though he deals briefly with eight other virtues, or, as he names them, attitude-virtues. This because one