Not too long ago, a revival of the musical 1776 played at Ford’s Theater in Washington, D.C. Near the end of the play John Adams is alone in a darkened congressional chamber room in Philadelphia. He sees no way to achieve the necessary unanimous support for a proposal declaring independence from England and so he sings: “Is anybody there? Does anybody care? Does anybody see what I see?” These words come from the depths of Adams’ soul and mirror the not infrequent experience of any speaker with a vision. Adams’ questions are even voiced by preachers more often than most might like to admit. If no one is hearing what we are saying, then preaching fails.

The Turn to the Listener

In Guerric DeBona’s recently published Fulfilled in Our Hearing: History and Method of Christian Preaching, readers are offered a comprehensive presentation of the most recent developments in preaching theory and methodology under the rubric of “the turn to the listener.” The author observes that “the attention toward the listener is a mature and vital development in the history of preaching and a necessary one to contemplate in our own culture,” concluding that “the history of preaching is a story about the rise of the listener in the homiletic act” (23).

Official documents since the Second Vatican Council also began to take more specific notice of those listening. While the General Instruction of the Roman Missal described the homily’s task as developing some point from the readings or other liturgical texts, it also called preachers to bear in mind “the needs proper to the listeners” (no. 41). Even more emphatic was the 1982 NCCB document Fulfilled In Your Hearing. This pastoral document’s opening section was not on the homily itself or on the preacher but on the assembly. We read: “The Eucharistic assembly that gathers Sunday after Sunday is a rich and complex phenomenon. Even in parishes that are more or less uniform in ethnic, social, or economic background, there is great diversity. . . . Such diversity is a constant challenge to the preacher, for our words can all too easily be heard as excluding one or the other segment of the congregation” (8).
Today’s preacher is called to be a listener to both God’s Word in the Scriptures and to God’s Word being spoken in the lives of the people and in the signs of our times. Such listening necessitates the preacher’s being attentive to the joys and sufferings, questions and doubts, actions and reactions—and sometimes, the inaction—of the community, in all its diverse forms, and then employing the biblical texts to serve as an interpretive lens on life, leading the community both to worship and to action in the world.

This column will now indicate some recent works that may assist preachers in coming to a more nuanced appreciation of their community and its rich diversity. They also suggest ways of crafting a message appropriate to various groups. Some books look at the community “at large,” whereas others focus on a particular segment.

The Community at Large

In *One Gospel, Many Ears*, Jeter and Allen consider a variety of possible listeners, taking into account not only differences in age but in “mental typologies,” including stages of faith development, various psychological types, and various representational patterns of viewing the world. The authors take into account differences in gender and in multicultural settings that need to be factored into how a message is shaped, as well as diversity in theological and political positions. Their chapter on “the least of these,” which highlights the presence of strangers, children, the poor, and those with mental and physical disabilities, is especially notable for its pastoral sensitivity.

Nieman and Rogers in *Preaching to Every Pew: Cross Cultural Strategies* offer preachers four “frames” or “particular points of view” through which to view their congregations: ethnicity, class, displacement, and beliefs. The authors describe the characteristics of each frame, then suggest various strategies preachers can employ. While no single frame provides a complete picture, each allows for focusing on an area of broad application. Andrew Carl Wisdom restricts himself in *Preaching to a Multi-generational Assembly* to the frame of age, drawing on various empirical studies which allow him to offer profiles of the five cohorts likely to be present in most liturgical gatherings. Their differences are rooted in both sociological and cultural characteristics, as well as theological ones. Wisdom offers one instance of a homily that specifically aims to include every segment of the assembly.

The Community in Part

Other homiletical works consider distinct ethnic groups. In past decades, preaching to the African American community has received a thoughtful analysis by such noted homileticians as Henry H. Mitchell, James Earl Massey, and Evans E. Crawford. More recently, attention has turned to Hispanic/Latino preaching and Asian American preaching. Davis and Presmanes offer a collection of articles on *Preaching and Culture in Latino Congregations* from a Roman Catholic perspective, emphasizing the importance of reaching this “cusp community” that “will continue to resist assimilation,” while in *Púlpito*, González and Jiménez and others offer reflections on Hispanic preaching from the perspective of the Protestant tradition of preaching. Among other aspects, this book considers an appropriate hermeneutic and preaching style when addressing the Hispanic community.

Eunjoo Mary Kim discusses Asian American preaching in *Preaching the Presence of God: A Homiletic from an Asian American Perspective*. After setting out the internal influences of Confucianism, Buddhism, and shamanism on contemporary Asian American congregations and the external tensions created by racial prejudice and stereotyping, globalization, and the “cultural imperialism” of American society, Kim articulates the
need for a theology of preaching rooted in Asian spirituality, an appropriate exegetical method, a “spiral-form” of design, and language suited to Asian Americans.

For those who preach to “older adults” and are not sure what to say to them, or worry that their listeners have heard everything ad nauseam, or who might even feel a little intimidated, *Graying Gracefully: Preaching to Older Adults* is an insightful collection of articles. Experienced senior preachers and homileticians, including Walter J. Burghardt, S.J., David G. Buttrick, Cynthia M. Campbell, and James Earl Massey, share the fruits of their study, life, and preaching experience, providing biblical and contemporary input on the importance of preaching an appropriate word to those struggling to age in wisdom and grace.

Finally, Chalice Press has issued a four volume series entitled “Channels of Listening” on how people listen to sermons. The first work in the series, *Listening to Listeners*, presents several case studies conducted by Protestant homileticians, discussing with one or more listeners how they process sermons. As with many such collections organized by Protestant homileticians under the aegis of Protestant publishing houses, there is, unfortunately, no one representing Roman Catholic homiletics or the Roman Catholic listener.

The cumulative impact of these books might lead preachers to wonder how, or even whether, one can ever preach a homily that will speak to all the members of any congregation. Perhaps in some communities that are marked by great diversity no one homily ever will. What seems most important, though, is to live conscious of the diversity that faces all those who move toward the pulpit—and to prepare with a representative number of your people present to your mind and heart. While we may not speak to every group all the time, it is possible to speak to all of them over time. More importantly, there remains the mystery of the word of God entrusted to us. We must not forget that preaching remains the work of the Spirit. God’s word falls like the rain and snow and waters the hearts of listeners and, despite our lack of courage in making a bold proclamation and even our lack of understanding this word, it does not return to God void, but does the will of the One who sent it.

**References**


