

# Anyone Can Preach God's Politics

Review by Christine Havens

Around the year 2009, in the Diocese of Iowa, the rector of a parish was fired for preaching politics from the pulpit. This was a church in a university town, attended by a few professors. It came as a shock to me, though I knew that the subject of religion and politics was often taboo.

In the years since then, I've spent most of my time around clergy, as a parish administrative assistant and seminary student. Having listened to many drafts of sermons, I understand the balancing act of preaching so that one does not, as Thompson says, appear partisan toward one "secular political party or another, or worse yet, [suggesting] that Jesus endorses the political agenda of one political party or another" (p. 20). Even a parish communications assistant needs to be aware of presenting material in a way that draws on God's politics rather than appearing to favor any secular political agendas.

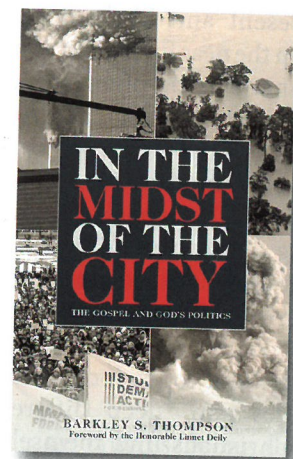
This is where Barkley S. Thompson's book enters in. Thompson is currently the dean of Christ Church Cathedral, Houston. Prior to that, he served as rector of St. John's Church, Roanoke, Va. In both places he has developed a well-discerned sense of how God's politics is expressed in the gospels and how it might be voiced in the public square

through sermons and opinion pieces.

*In the Midst of the City* is short yet powerful. The book begins with an introduction from Thompson, followed by the works he selected as representative of his output. Readers are often tempted to skip over introductions, seeing them as a hindrance or as unimportant to the main text. However, one must read this introduction, as it sets up Thompson's theological vision. It would be a shame for this book to be treated as anything less than an insightful and useful guide to preaching God's politics in a highly polarized culture.

The introduction gives a brief and clear vision of the author's understanding of the word "politics." He opens with the entry into Jerusalem by both Pontius Pilate and Jesus and then expands on the differences between the two men to demonstrate that "the politics of God is *commentary and action that proclaim the advent of God's kingdom in the world* [italics are Thompson's] (p. 19). From there, he shares his thoughts on what this might mean for those who preach and write from a Christian perspective as well as for those who hear and read such works.

The sermons and essays are divided into three sections. The first, "Breaking News," is a compilation of sermons that Thompson delivered at Christ Church Cathedral. All relate to a particular



## In the Midst of the City

The Gospel and God's Politics

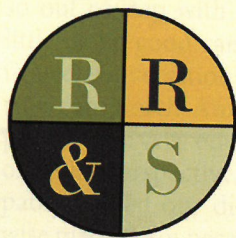
By **Barkley S. Thompson**

Bright Sky Publishing. Pp. 159. \$18.95

event in the world. The 15th anniversary of 9/11, the 2016 elections, Barbara Bush's death (my favorite both because of the subject and the use of 1 John), and Hurricane Harvey are excellent examples. The second section, "Christian and American," includes three thought-provoking sermons. Essays that either appeared on Thompson's blog, *In the Midst of the City*, or in the *Houston Chronicle*, round out the book. These draw inspiration from issues and events that have provoked divisive "conversations" on social media between those of various secular political parties. Thompson even received death threats after the publication of his essay, "I Own Guns, and I Believe in Gun Control."

Thompson notes at the end of his introduction, "the decision to march in the procession of Jesus or the procession of Pontius Pilate is always before us" (p. 24). In caring for a parish, a priest must consider how best to empower the people to enact the kingdom of God together rather than fostering secular political divisiveness that often harms the community. *In the Midst of the City* offers itself as a guide for doing just that.

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We practice in Title IV of the Constitution and Canons of the Episcopal Church regarding accountability and ecclesiastic discipline, leading negotiations, advising and navigating charges against clergy related to canonical offenses.

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