The Classics in the Pulpit. Ancient Literature and Preaching in the Middle Ages (CfP)

Date: 28-30.1.21
Venue: German Historical Institute London
Closing Date: 15.3.2020

When Thomas Bradwardine held his victory sermon after the battles of Crécy and Neville's Cross in 1346, he not only referred to the Bible and the church fathers as authorities for his theological ideas. He also quotes Aristotle, Plato and Ovid. Bradwardine's preference for classical allusions in preaching was by no means exceptional. Medieval preachers regularly introduced their (clerical or lay) audiences to the world of ancient literature, which provided them, amongst other things, with mythological and historical examples, philosophical arguments and rhetorical models. Of course, such stylistic devices did not necessarily imply any direct acquaintance with classical sources: Preachers could rely on a variety of manuals, example collections and similar texts, in which the respective material was already prepared for homiletic purposes (e.g. by allegorical interpretations of poetic narratives). The combination of pagan and Christian elements in preaching is in itself an interesting phenomenon; but it had, too, an immense cultural impact far beyond the narrower field of pastoral care. Reactions were not always positive, though, but sometimes mocking (Chaucer) or even openly hostile (Wyclif).

The aim of the conference is to shed new light on this both striking and irritating practice. Papers (25 min) can deal with topics such as the reasons and occasions for the use of the classics in preaching, the hermeneutic and literary strategies applied in order to adapt pagan mythology to homiletic needs, the social and educational background of preachers and their audiences, the connections of classicizing sermons with other fields of literature such as vernacular poetry, or the discourse they provoked within the clerical milieu. Applications from all relevant disciplines (e.g. history, literature, theology, philosophy) are welcome.

The conference language is English; an English language publication of the papers is planned. Travel and accommodation costs for those who give papers will be met.

Please send abstracts (c. 300 words) to hollick@ghil.ac.uk by 15. March 2020.

For questions please contact the organizer:
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