

# Views & Reviews

## ARTS AND LITERATURE VIEWS AND REVIEWS

### IN THE EYE OF THE STORM: SWEPT TO THE CENTER BY GOD

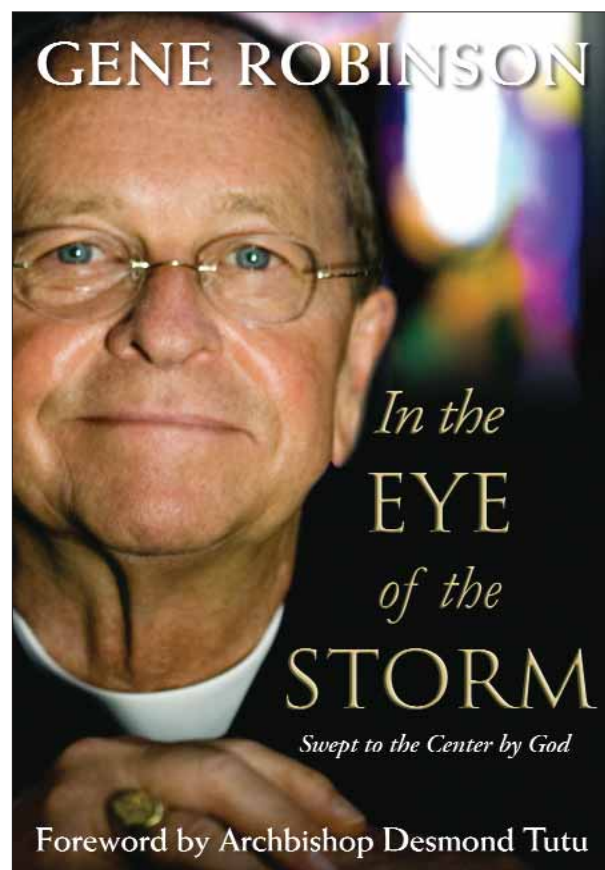
BY GENE ROBINSON  
SEABURY BOOKS, 192 PAGES

Reviewed by Nick Richardson

Looking back at historical injustices it can be salutary to ask where one would have stood in the struggle to end them. Where justice lay in the past can seem so obvious now: slavery was—was it not?—so clearly just plain bad. But would one, living in the South and white, a beneficiary of oppression, really have beaten the odds to recognize that what the majority claimed to be God-sanctioned was the opposite?

It is, after all, so quintessentially normal to be blind to injustice; and it is equally normal that once the vanguard has overcome it, the conservative and the moderate conciliator will look on and say “How obvious! We always agreed!”

The day I finished reading *In the Eye of the Storm* by Gene Robinson, the openly gay Bishop of New Hampshire, these truths were driven home with the publication in *The New York Times* (6/5/08) of a paid two-pager from The American Society for the Defense of Tradition, Family and Property (TFP), a Roman Catholic group, which equated advocates of gay marriage with Nazis and communists and argued that its legalization was “Religious Persecution in the Mak-



ing.” An extreme view, perhaps, but in stating elsewhere that “the acceptance of same-sex ‘Marriage’ is incompatible with Christianity,” TFP undoubtedly represents traditional Christian doctrine. Indeed, as Robinson writes, homosexuality is a state of being of which “at least in Western culture, God’s condemnation ... is assumed”; and, he argues, a complete transformation of attitudes toward lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) people is impossible in America unless Christianity itself reexamines and changes its teachings.

At the core of Robinson’s argument for making this change lie his views of the pre-eminence of what Jesus said and taught over the Law of the Old Testament on the one hand, and on the other of the continuing role of the Holy Spirit as the deliverer of new truths about God’s will—truths that over the centuries have changed many interpretations of di-

vinely inspired but humanly flawed scripture and tradition.

Citing Jesus’ words to his disciples the night before he died—“*I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth*” (John 16:12-13a)—he asks “*Did God complete his self-revelation in holy scripture?*” and answers himself with a resounding **NO!**; then he asks “Does God continue to reveal God’s self, throughout history and even today?” which he answers with an equally resounding **YES!** “The changes ... in our understanding of scripture,” he

writes, “...have happened through the guidance of the Holy Spirit...things that seemed simply the way of the world – like slavery, polygamy, and the lower status of women—in retrospect seem like examples of humankind’s flawed, limited, and mistaken understanding of God’s will.”

While, then, the battle for homosexual emancipation flows as a current through this book, it is also a starting point for a wider discussion of advancing Christian understanding of justice in general. Being gay, Robinson argues, puts him in a better place than most white, male, educated Americans to understand at least some of the nature of oppression—and the importance of doing something about it rather than being merely sympathetic.

While all of this may make Bishop Robinson’s book sound pretty dry, it is not. Nor is it the single-issue harangue of a man at bay. Robinson well knows that his enemies are eager to destroy him: but in this very personal book he displays not rancor, but awe; not heat, but gentle warmth; not panic, but quiet determination; not arrogance, but inspiring humility. He faces up to the hard questions and to his mistakes, answering the former and explaining the latter with an honesty and sincerity that should be apparent even to those who disagree.

This book will not change those who elevate immutable scripture and frozen tradition above all else. No book will do that: Bible thumpers will thump no other book, and those who cleave to tradition will not concede that those who made it were, like all of us, flawed. But it may well convince moderates who previously believed that while his cause is just, Robinson’s actions were ill-timed. For the bishop makes a convincing case: what homosexuals endure is oppression; there is no time when justice can be served and its opponents mollified; there is no way to move to justice by degrees; and the risks to an institution—even a church—can never justify stepping back from the pursuit of what is right.

*Richardson is communications officer for the diocese.*

### THE SCANDALOUS GOSPEL OF JESUS: WHAT’S SO GOOD ABOUT THE GOOD NEWS?

BY PETER J. GOMES  
HARPERONE, 272 PAGES

Reviewed by Robert Pennoyer

For those who have never encountered Peter Gomes before, his latest book, *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus: What’s So Good About the Good News?* provides a worthwhile opportunity. Those familiar with Gomes’s earlier, less provocatively titled works: *The Good Book: Read-*

*ing the Bible with Mind and Heart* and *The Good Life: Truths That Last in Times of Need*, will be eager to hear his fresh and thoughtful take on the good news of the Gospels.

As Harvard University’s Plummer Professor of Christian Morals, Gomes teaches both Divinity School students and undergraduates, and he serves as the Pusey Minister in The Memorial Church. He is a frequent lecturer, has received more than 35 honorary degrees, and his distinctive voice is oft-imitated by his students for its timbre and appreciated by his listeners and readers for its wis-

dom. I studied with Gomes as an undergrad and worked in his church.

Gomes begins *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus* with the terms “good news” and “the Gospels.” Too often the two are conflated, he writes, and we focus on Jesus’ life at the expense of his message. Gomes makes “the radical suggestion that we use the Bible to go beyond the Bible and embrace that to which it points: the gospel, or the good news.”

Gomes emphasizes this idea: “Jesus, who came preaching, became the preached... and in our zeal to crown him as the content of our preaching, most