

Liturgy

11a: Why Liturgical¹ Theology?

Experiencing God in Worship

This question is readily answered--because quite simply, although we often forget this, Liturgy is a source of our Faith, as well as the Gospel proclamation. “*Lex orandi, lex credendi*” as the ancient Latin tag has it ... the rule of prayer is the rule of faith. We can see this in the New Testament itself and in the practice of the Eucharist. “*For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death till He comes*” (1 Corinthians 11:26). Liturgy and Gospel are intimately linked; they belong together. Theologising, as an articulation of faith, is impossible outside the context of liturgy and prayer. Liturgy pre-existed any written text as both the locus of divine revelation and its celebration.

The faith that established the Church and by which Church lives is not merely a corporate assent to certain doctrines but rather her living relationship to God’s action in history, the events associated with the coming of the Messiah. These events concern, primarily, the incarnation, life, death, resurrection and glorification of Jesus Christ, His ascension to heaven and the descent of the Holy Spirit on the ‘last and great day of Pentecost.’ This relationship to God’s action makes the Church both a constant witness to and participant in these events along with their saving, redeeming, life-giving and life-transforming realities. She has no other experience or rationale to guide her believing apart from her immersive participation in these divine interventions of grace, love and power--no other life apart from that new life in Christ which they always generate and communicate to each generation. Tradition, that which is handed down², always concerns that “*which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands*” (1 John 1:1). The faith of the Church, therefore, is not extrapolated from personal experience in a disinterested, abstract or speculative manner: it is in fact the shared experience itself, consciously willed into action. In the pre-Nicene era over 300 years of liturgical tradition existed before any creed was formally promulgated and about 350 years passed before the New Testament canon itself was officially closed.

¹ Throughout the lectures of Year 1 Term 2, “liturgy” has a general reference to all the services of the Church. In respect of the Divine Liturgy itself, reference will be made to the Eucharist in order to avoid confusion.

² Etymology: ‘traditio’ (Latin) “delivery, surrender, handing down”.

To summarise, the Church is not an institution that keeps certain divinely revealed doctrines and teachings about this or that event in the past; rather she is the very 'epiphany' of these events themselves. She can proclaim and teach about them because, first and foremost, she knows them as her own life. She is the communion where the events may truly be experienced in a transformative manner. The business of liturgy, therefore, is central to the integrity and life of the Church. It is where both God acts and humans respond.

The New Creation and the Kingdom in Worship

Through the study of liturgy we come to understand that the Eucharist and indeed all the mysteries of the Church (sacraments) together with the cycles of prayer, the times of fasting and feasting, place us at the beginning and end of all things, revealing the true meaning and power of God's action in history. Therefore, liturgy without eschatology is incomprehensible. Liturgy without salvation is powerless and incoherent. Liturgy without personal transformation is a travesty of the gospel. Instead, we know that all these actions (eschatology, salvation, personal transformation) are truly manifested and accomplished in the liturgy of the Church. They are brought about according to the structure and rhythm of Orthodox worship, its beauty, words and rites. Liturgy is the epiphany of a new creation in Christ--the presence and power in this world of the joy and peace of the Holy Spirit, of the eternity of the Kingdom of God in the present moment and always.

This Pentecostal aspect of Orthodox worship and life has been magnificently set forth in a sermon preached by a former Patriarch of Antioch, Ignatius IV, at the World Council of Churches in 1968 when he was Metropolitan of Latakia:

Without the Holy Spirit God is far away.

Christ stays in the past,

The Gospel is simply an organisation,

Authority is a matter of propaganda,

The Liturgy is no more than an evocation,

Christian loving a slave mentality.

But in the Holy Spirit the cosmos is resurrected and grows with the birth pangs of the Kingdom.

The Risen Christ is there,

The Gospel is the power of life,
The Church shows forth the life of the Trinity,
Authority is a liberating science,
Mission is a Pentecost,
The Liturgy is both renewal and anticipation,
Human action is deified.

Patriarch Ignatius IV's understanding of the liturgy as the means by which "human action is deified" is closely linked to the work of Father Alexander Schmemann (1921-1983) in which worship is "the very source of theology", as set out in the opening paragraph of this lecture.³ It is through the liturgy that theology "becomes mission in the lives of Christians."⁴

Receiving from the Apostles

This then is what Christians have always done, worship God in order to give Him the glory and to know both personally and communally the salvation of the Son, the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit and the transformational possibilities of the Good News for all creation. The primary work of the apostles was not to write philosophical or theological treatises; they expressed their knowledge of God and Christ in prayerful worship and in sacraments. Their theology was a lived experience, deeply grounded in their experience of communal worship in "the apostles' doctrine, in the breaking of bread and in prayers."⁵

There is no corruption here of anything received from Christ as some Protestant Christians suppose, no distinction between the so-called "Jesus of History" and the "Christ of Faith."⁶ Saint Paul, like the other apostles, did not invent anything new. He conformed his preaching and testimony to the mind of Christ in His Church--what he himself had received from the Twelve. For example, he prefacing his Eucharistic teaching with the following disarming and highly significant phrase ... *"For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you"*⁷ The

³ See Father Alexander Schmemann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir Seminary Press [SVSP]), 2nd ed. The quotation of "worship as the very source of theology" is from Michael Plekon, "The Russian religious revival and its theological legacy" in Mary B. Cunningham & Elizabeth Theokritoff (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 208.

⁴ Michael Plekon in Cunningham & Theokritoff, p. 208.

⁵ Acts 2:42

⁶ The so-called "Quest for the Historical Jesus" has a long pedigree in modern liberal Protestant thought. The sharp (and from an Orthodox of view, bogus) distinction between Jesus as lived and Christ as preached prompts some heterodox to search for the "original Jesus." Others (e.g. Rudolph Bultmann), supposing this to be a doomed project, reject the notion almost entirely and prefer instead their version of the "Christ of Faith." Something of the history of this impasse can be accessed here: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quest_for_the_historical_Jesus.

⁷ 1 Corinthians 11:23

Orthodox stand in that unbroken line of transformative transmission of the mind of Christ to mankind through His Church.

Worship transforms the World

The very word ‘theologia’ originally meant hymns sung to God, not an academic treatise. Nonetheless, a debased, formalistic concern for the minutiae of the services can sometimes lead to a failure by some to see in the Church’s liturgy as an all-embracing vision of life, a power meant to judge, inform and transform the whole of existence, a philosophy of life shaping and challenging all our ideas, attitudes and actions. Liturgy is an icon of the new life in Christ which is meant to challenge and renew an old life in us and around us. In order to achieve this, God through the Church has ordered our worship not only to inculcate a Christian mind and heart but also to guide Christian practice through the sanctification of space and time. This is why the Church’s worship is both sacramentally theophanic of God Himself and an anticipation of His Kingdom transforming spatial and temporal realities. The theology derived from such worship is never disincarnate or mundane. It is nothing less than the experience of the Holy Trinity making all things new. “All worship is an ecclesial, and personal, celebration addressed to the Father, through Christ, in the Holy Spirit.”⁸ So, in the Aramaic words of one of the most profound, ancient and simple of liturgical invocations recorded by St. Paul in his letter to the Church in Corinth: “*Maranatha (Our Lord Come!)*”⁹

Worship without effecting preaching and teaching is unthinkable. So, in this second part of the lecture we shall introduce and continue throughout this term a study in homiletics.

Homiletics

11b: Historical Perspectives and Theological Principles

Preaching and Teaching

There are two ministries of the Word we shall consider in these lectures and these are teaching and preaching. Sometimes they are confused. The person who preaches may also teach within

⁸ Boris Bobrinskoy, “God in Trinity” in Mary B. Cunningham & Elizabeth Theokritoff (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 52

⁹ 1 Corinthians 16:22b

the sermon or homily but the person who teaches will not usually preach. Teaching presupposes the acquisition of information with understanding or a task with a skill. The teaching process has a functional objective which seeks to engage the different modes of learning that the students bring to the class. Preaching, however, has an aim which eludes the scope of teaching, although as we said, it may include it. The preacher seeks a transformation by grace and application in the lives of those who hear. This transformation is the power of the gospel itself; more strictly speaking, it is the activity of the Holy Spirit in the proclamation and unfolding of the Word who is Christ Himself. The words of the sermon are offered as vehicles of challenge, encouragement and transformation in God.

The challenge that Christ gave to His apostles in The Great Commission still confronts us today—to be His witnesses in our own local surroundings as well as “to the remotest part of the earth” (Acts 1:8). However, like the apostles, we too must wait to “receive power” from the Holy Spirit before we seek to witness to others. Such “power” includes both the ability to grow as a person and to grow in understanding of the Christian faith. Furthermore, as the preacher grows in understanding of self and Christian faith, there is the further challenge of drawing the congregation into their own increased understanding of self and Christian faith. In *Reading for Preaching: The Preacher in Conversation with Storytellers, Biographers, Poets, and Journalists*, an experienced Christian teacher and preacher, Cornelius Plantinga Jr. has pointed out that each sermon “has to change all the time.”¹⁰ This is very different from the situation that confronts the politician who can take a stump speech everywhere and change a few phrases for local context. Preachers in their own parishes are confronted with the opposite situation from the politician: “It’s the audience that stays the same week after week and the address that needs to change.”¹¹ Therefore, if a preacher fails to grow in self-understanding and Christian faith, the congregation will inevitably be drawn into that same dreary rut.

In this first talk we shall look primarily at the gift of preaching and how this might give glory to God in His Church and for the sake of humankind. Given the scale of the challenge that confronts any preacher, the reality is quite simply that “the preacher will need to get wisdom with all deliberate speed.”¹² The acquisition of such wisdom requires a genuine commitment to prayer, reading, self-growth and a determination to improve in the ability to communicate the significance of faith in Christ and His Church.

¹⁰ Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Reading for Preaching: The Preacher in Conversation with Storytellers, Biographers, Poets and Journalists* (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 2013), p. 65.

¹¹ Plantinga, p. 65.

¹² Plantinga, p. 107.

Preaching in the Old Testament

The transformational aspect of preaching roots the sermon in the prophetic tradition from which it sprang. Although the Old Testament rarely presents us with set piece sermons, prophecy often fulfills the same objective as a sermon. Both prophecy and sermon declare God's Word to his people; sometimes, as in the case of Daniel, to those outside the boundary of Israel. The distinction, such as it is, between prophecy and sermon concerns the degree of directness with which that transformative Word is heard. The prophet announces: "The Lord says ..." The preacher, on the other hand, sets out a personal vantage point from within the tradition of Israel. Compare the following texts: the first is prophecy, the second is preaching. (Sometimes, of course, the two genres are mixed).

"Comfort, yes, comfort My people" says God. ... "Cry out." So I said: "What shall I cry?"
"All flesh is grass, and all man's glory is like the flower of the field ..." (Isaiah 40:1,6)

"Now, therefore, fear the Lord, and serve Him in justice and righteousness. Remove the foreign gods your fathers served on the other side of the river and in Egypt and serve the Lord." (Joshua 24:14)

Preaching shares with prophecy the existential challenge of living a Godly life, but whereas prophecy is God speaking directly to His People through his servants the Prophets, preaching concerns the response of the People to that Word that has been declared. Preaching must always therefore reference the prophetic Word; and prophecy must ring true in the discerning of the Spirit within that living stream which is Holy Tradition. While the rescue of Jonah from his tribulations in the sea and in the whale is miraculous (Jonah 1-2), Matthew the Poor is right to focus on the importance of how the preaching of Jonah brought salvation to the people of Nineveh who were prepared to repent, somewhat to the amazement of Jonah himself.¹³ Preachers today should not be surprised that God will have compassion on their listeners, just as He did on the people of Nineveh. Every competent preacher in any age is a Godly prophet whose primary responsibility is to listen to and transmit the Word to everyone who is prepared to listen and repent.

¹³ Matthew the Poor, *The Titles of Christ* (Rollinsford, NH: Orthodox Research Institute, 2008), p. 28.

Preaching in the New Testament

All of this, of course, is carried over into the New Testament. St. Mark shows that the Word uttered by Christ is spoken with an uncommon authority, which indeed can only come directly from God Himself (Mark 1:22-29). In Christ the prophetic Word and the Word taught have but one Source. What He as the Word hears from the Father He declares in His own person and from His own mouth (John 15:15). The often heard refrain: "*you have heard that it was said ... but I say to you ...*" (Matthew 5:21-30) underscores the same point. Of course in our Lord's ministry, we also see a clear distinction between preaching to the multitude and teaching to the inner circle of his disciples. When our Lord preaches, his message is often terse and short: "Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand" (Matthew 3:2). However, when he teaches he does so in extended parables at times with detailed explanations given to those who have the capacity to understand them deeply—His inner circle, the Twelve. Our Lord recruited not only the Twelve to preach but also the Seventy Apostles (Luke 10:1-16), so the seed of the Church as a missionary body is already in place well before the Passion. However, it is only after the death and resurrection of Christ that the full gospel may be proclaimed.

After the Resurrection and Pentecost the content of the preaching of the Kingdom of God is filled out by the death and resurrection of Christ as constituting the heart of the gospel, which will remain the touchstone of preaching forever after. St. Peter's sermon in Acts proclaims the gospel in these terms; and the response is immediate and practical:-

Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call" (Acts 2:37-39).

Much the same pattern is discernible in St. Paul's famous sermon to the philosophers at the Aeropagus in Athens (Acts 17:22-32). This time, however, the Apostle adapts the presentation of his message to take into account the religious and philosophical concerns of his Gentile pagan hearers (the altar to the Unknown God) but not so as to sacrifice the centrality of the resurrection, at this stage "folly to the Greeks" (1 Corinthians 1:23). These two sermons by Sts Peter and Paul drawn from Acts offer an inspirational model for future preachers.

Clearly, those Jews who recognised that Christ had come to first century Palestine wished to share their lives and beliefs with non-Jews. In *Spread the Word: Reclaiming the Apostolic Tradition of Evangelism*, Father Michael Keiser frames the problem:

How do we sing the Lord's song in a new land? How do we translate the Gospel that has so successfully converted the Jews, so it will do the same for the Greeks? It is not just a question of language, but of ideas that must be nuanced so they can be understood, and that is always a problem.¹⁴

Furthermore, Father Michael offers a significant warning to us in our own efforts to bring Christian culture to our own generation: "Sometimes you can try so hard to make your ideas understandable to another culture that you accidentally wind up with their ideas instead and change what you believe rather than converting others."¹⁵ Therefore, any preacher today needs to have a firm grasp of the validity of God's presence in both the Old and New Testaments, as well as the Apostolic Era, before seeking to reach out to others. Without such a firm grasp of God's presence, preachers will find that their words will rapidly transmute from truth into fables, precisely as St. Paul warned (2 Timothy 4.2-4).

Preaching in the Apostolic Era

In the apostolic era the Church Fathers continued to preach in the same vein as set out in the Old and New Testaments, linked to a recognition of the contemporary culture. For example, St. Justin Martyr presented Christ as the Logos, the fulfilment of the highest aspirations of the Greek lovers of wisdom (literally, "philosophers.") However, precious few sermons remain from this period until the 4th century when we encounter that great diamond in the crown of preachers, St. John the Golden-mouthed (lit. Chrysostomos) together with St. Gregory the Theologian, St. Basil the Great, St. Ambrose, St. Augustine and St. Hilary. What is most notable about these fine preachers is the application of the skills of oratory to the task of preaching. However, straightforwardness was not lost in the application of oratorical skills. St. John Chrysostom's homilies had a directness that deliberately focused on the people's understanding of the Biblical text and he often paused in his delivery to ask questions of the congregation in order to make sure that they understood. Sometimes the people got rather carried away and applauded his sermons. On a number of occasions he needed to ask them to refrain from their acclamations for the sake of good order! Fr. John Behr¹⁶ comments that:

¹⁴ Michael Keiser, *Spread the Word: Reclaiming the Apostolic Tradition of Evangelism* (Chesterton, IN: Conciliar Press [now Ancient Faith Publishing]), p. 77.

¹⁵ Michael Keiser, *Spread the Word*, pp. 77-78.

¹⁶ St. John Chrysostom "On the Priesthood." (A lecture delivered by Fr John Behr, Dean of St Vladimir's Theological Seminary, at Anniversary of St John's repose.)

St John also answers those who would point out that the apostles –unlettered fishermen– had no knowledge of the finer points of oratory, that they did not have ‘*the polish of Socrates, the weight of Demosthenes, the dignity of Thucydides, and the sublimity of Plato.*’ But he points out that Paul makes a careful distinction, saying that ‘*even if I am unskilled in speaking, I am not in knowledge*’ (2 Corinthians 11.6, so likening himself to Moses). St John then continues:

‘But I pass by all such matters and the elaborate ornaments of profane oratory; and I take no account of style or of delivery; even if a man’s diction be poor and his composition simple and unadorned, let him not be unskilled in the knowledge and accurate statement of doctrine; nor in order to hide his own sloth, deprive that holy apostle of the greatest of his gifts, and the sum of his praises’ (On the Priesthood 4.6).

What then all preachers of the Word insist upon in this period and ever since is that the preacher must speak of what he knows personally and must lead the people thereby to God according to both the Apostles’ teaching and method. In this we observe the persistence of the direct personal invitation of the prophets to attend to the Word of the Lord, for in the doing of that Word the preacher (who has learned to be a listener to the Lord) is transformed by the Spirit of holiness.

Sound Orthodox preaching today requires a considerable appreciation of the Patristic heritage. As Augustine Cassidy has reminded us: “If the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church, the legacy of the Fathers is the fruit of the Church.”¹⁷ Furthermore, it should be noted that as Orthodox Christians our awareness of the theological and evangelistic heritage from the Fathers is just as significant as our appreciation of the lives and deaths of the martyrs. A good starting point for preachers, both new and mature, is to recognise that when we refer to certain people as “fathers,” we place ourselves “in the role of their children,” but in the rather unusual position of a reverse adoption in which we as children identify and affiliate ourselves to them as parents, choosing to be adopted by them because of their wisdom and experience.¹⁸ However, our role as children is not passive, simply receiving this faith of our fathers, but actively transmitting the patristic heritage to contemporary cultures in many different countries today.¹⁹ Inevitably, in our own personal confrontation with contemporary pluralism (with its strong tendency to reject

¹⁷ Augustine Cassidy, *Remember the Days of Old: Orthodox Thinking on the Patristic Heritage* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2014 p. 13).

¹⁸ Cassidy, *Remember the Days of Old*, p. 20.

¹⁹ Cf. Cassidy, p. 22.

the authority of Christian faith), we must each learn how to adapt the Patristic heritage to preaching in our own cultures.