

## UNIT 1B LITURGICAL THEOLOGY

### 13a: The Eucharist

#### Passover and Symbolism

The Eucharist or the Divine Liturgy is without doubt the central act of Christian worship in that it represents a specific command of our Lord at the Last Supper (often known in Orthodoxy as “the Mystical Supper”): “*Do this in remembrance of me*” (Luke 22:19). There are other reasons for this centrality, and these will become clear in this analysis. First, we need to consider what bearing the Last Supper has on the evolved form of the contemporary Eucharist. In two important senses the Last Supper and the Eucharist are not identical, and these concern the mode of Christ’s Presence and the corresponding context of the celebration.

At the Last Supper Jesus was present as an embodied person still subject to death, bearing within Himself (as all must) the consequences of human sin–mortality. Upon the death-defeating and sin-undoing resurrection his mode of Presence underwent two important changes, anticipated in John 6 and realised in Luke 24. From this point onward it is the *Risen* Christ who will be manifested in the Breaking of Bread and this Presence is to be found precisely in the Body and the Blood by both his own word, Himself being the Word from the Father and the transforming power of the Spirit, also from the Father. This Eucharistic Presence is without prejudice to His Presence elsewhere and everywhere. This mode of Presence, however, is different from that at the Last Supper where the Kingdom of God is gathering momentum as the hour of Christ’s death approaches but is not as yet mediated by the *Risen* Christ. When He is raised from the dead His Presence will be manifested in the reconstituted community of Israel, that is, the Church of the Oikumene, the Holy Catholic Church. This transformation is not complete until Pentecost; so even the Resurrection is not the decisive turning point in the evolution of the Eucharist. As St. Irenaeus reminds us, the Father has *two* hands, the Logos / Son and the Spirit. This insistence of the Orthodox

on the transforming power of both the Word and the Spirit<sup>1</sup> has profound implications for the Eucharist in the Words of Institution and the Epiklesis as we shall shortly discover.

Two further contested questions remain before we can begin our commentary on the Divine Liturgy. Was the Last Supper an actual Passover meal and does the Eucharist have its own legitimate pedagogy, an overlay of meaning carried by the Eucharistic actions themselves? As a classic example of this pedagogical symbolism we might cite the Great Entrance as signifying the going up of Christ to Jerusalem before his Passion.<sup>2</sup>

That the Last Supper was celebrated in the Passover *period* is clear from all the Gospels. In consequence, the Passover themes of both Christian soteriology and Eucharistic theology are straightforwardly applicable. However, St. John's chronology is different to that of the synoptics where the Last Supper is a Passover meal.<sup>3</sup> St. John places the Last Supper the night *before the* Passover.<sup>4</sup> Given that the Passover character of the meal itself is by no means established in the synoptic gospels it seems at least likely that the Last Supper was *not* itself a Passover Seder. A more likely possibility for this meal is the Jewish 'chaburah' which in first century Judaism would be shared between members of any close group with common interests; in this case, a sacred meal shared between a rabbi and his disciples.<sup>5</sup> As such, unleavened bread would *not* have been used and unlike the Passover Seder the bread was blessed first, not the wine (as in the Christian Eucharist). This also goes some way to explain why a Christian matzo or unleavened bread is not used in the Orthodox Eucharistic liturgies.

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<sup>1</sup>St. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* V, 6, 6-7

<sup>2</sup> Nicholas Cabasilas, *A Commentary on the Divine Liturgy* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1998), p.65

<sup>3</sup> Mark 14:16; Matthew 26:17; Luke 22:7

<sup>4</sup> John 13:1

<sup>5</sup> This view has been strongly argued by Fr. Louis Bouyer in *Eucharist: Theology and Spirituality of the Eucharistic Prayer* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1973), Chs. 2-5

## The Centrality of the Eucharist in Christian Worship



The issue of the meaning of the Eucharist in a pedagogic context is more straightforward. It should be remembered that “The Eucharist is fundamentally an incarnational mystery: it is grounded in the Son’s taking of human flesh and becoming a person of true human nature.”<sup>6</sup> Commentators such as Fr. Alexander Schmemmann have deplored the symbolical overlay of meanings that have artificially been applied to the Eucharistic actions over the centuries (Figure 1). He regarded these as contrived, inconsistent and, more importantly, obscuring the Eucharistic actions themselves.<sup>7</sup> This author concurs. However understandable as such pedagogic devices might have been in a pre-literate age, they have no place in the Church today. The Eucharistic action has its own dynamic, not to be buried under ever shifting and inconsistent layers of superimposed interpretation. It is to this dynamic that we now turn in a consideration of the Eucharist’s several parts.

<sup>6</sup> M. C. Steenberg, “Eucharist,” in John Anthony McGuckin (ed.), *The Concise Encyclopedia of Orthodox Christianity* (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), pp. 185-189.

<sup>7</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *Symbols and Symbolism in the Byzantine Liturgy in Liturgy and Tradition* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press), Ch8; originally published in D. Constantelos (ed.), *Orthodox Theology and Diakonia*, Festschrift Iakovos, (Brookline MA: Hellenic College Press, 1981), pp. 91-102.

*'Life of Christ' Symbolism in the Liturgy: Comparative Table*

	Prothesis	Enarxis	First Entrance	Ascent to Throne	Epistle	Gospel	Dismissal of Catechumens	Great Entrance	Placing of gifts on holy table	Anaphora	Elevation	After Communion
Theodore of Mopsuestia								Christ led away to his Passion	Christ laid in the tomb	The Resurrection of Christ from the dead		
Maximus the Confessor			First coming of Christ in the flesh, Passion and Resurrection	The Ascension of Christ	Instruction in the Christian life	The end of the world and the Second Coming of Christ to judge the world	The entry of those worthy into the bridal chamber of Christ	Revelation of the mystery of salvation hidden in God		Our future union with the spiritual powers of heaven	The union of all the faithful with God in the age to come	
Germanos	The sacrifice of Christ: Passion and Death	Prophetic foretelling of the Incarnation	Coming of the Son of God into the world	Completion of salvation and Ascension	Prokeimenon and Alleluia = Prophecies of the coming of Christ	Revelation of God brought by Christ Bishop's blessing after Gospel = Second coming		Christ proceeding to his mystical sacrifice	The burial of Christ in the tomb	The Resurrection of Christ		
Nicholas of Andida	The Virgin Birth and hidden life of Christ before his baptism	Prophetic foretelling of the Incarnation and the ministry of John the Baptist	Manifestation of Christ at his Baptism in the Jordan	Passage from the Law and the Old Covenant to the beginning of divine grace	The calling of the Apostles	The teaching of Christ	The Lord's journey to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday	The upper room made ready	The Last Supper	Christ's Crucifixion, Death and Resurrection	The Ascension of Christ and the coming of the Spirit	
Nicholas Cabasilas	The Incarnation and early years of Christ; his Passion and Death foreshadowed	Prophetic witness to the coming of Christ: the time before the Baptist	Manifestation of Christ to the crowds at his Baptism		Manifestation of Christ in his teaching to the Apostles	Manifestation of Christ in his teaching to the crowds	Christ's journey to Jerusalem and his entry on Palm Sunday		Christ's Death, Resurrection, and Ascension	The Zeon = The coming of the Holy Spirit		
Symeon of Thessalonike	The Incarnation of Christ; his Passion and Death foreshadowed	The Incarnation and the work of the incarnate Word	The Resurrection and Ascension of Christ The coming of the Spirit	Christ's sitting at the right hand of the Father	Mission of the Apostles to the Gentiles	Proclamation of the Gospel in all the world	The end of the world and final consummation	The final coming of Christ		The elevation of Christ on the Cross	The Ascension of the Lord and the proclamation of the Gospel in all the world	

Figure 1<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Figure 1 from: Hugh Whybrew, *The Orthodox Liturgy* (Crestwood, New York: SVS Press, 1996), pp 182-183

## The Structure, Content and Process of the Eucharist – an Introductory Commentary

Before the Liturgy, but after personal prayers of preparation and vesting, the priest and the deacon prepare the Holy Gifts quietly in the altar. The people offer their prayers for the living and the reposed; and these are offered in conjunction with particles of the prosphora or Eucharistic bread which itself will have been prepared with prayer by some of the believers. The whole company in heaven and earth are commemorated. The Eucharist is an oblation or offering of the Church for all to God.

Immediately before the Eucharist begins the deacon turns to the priest and says: *“It is time for the Lord to act!”* This then, the Liturgy, is no mere human commemoration designed to delight, inspire or even mortify the faithful. The Church lives in the freedom of the divine action which imparts the freedom and joy of heaven to the believers. Immediately the priest blesses God: *“Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit.”* The scene is set for the glorifying Mysteries of God in Christ to be disclosed. The Kingdom is at hand and is to come!

Some have commented adversely on the repetitive character of the multiple litanies in the Liturgy and other services. To the Orthodox, however, these are glorious and essential rhythmic respirations of the people in prayer, breathing in the mercy of God (*“Lord have mercy”*) and breathing out the petitions to the Lord for the Church and the whole world. The Great Litany at the beginning of the Liturgy sets the tone for what follows.

The liturgical section before the Little Entrance has an educative history. Originally, this antiphonal material in three parts was sung (at least in Constantinople) outside church in a stational procession, the Eucharist then beginning at the so called Little Entrance. This material has now been absorbed into the Liturgy itself, but without much consistency of content or practice. The Slav tradition maintains the arguably earlier practice of typical psalms and canticles, sometimes abbreviated; the Greek tradition has substituted festal refrains in their place. The only common invariable portion is Emperor Justinian’s famous hymn: *“Only Begotten Son.”*

Such evolution and variation in liturgical practice might lead some to suppose that each tradition should return to its more primitive “common ancestor.” However, the Orthodox Church does not practice antiquarian revisionism in its liturgical practice. Change in context

and purpose does not itself merit reversion to earlier forms unless there has been obscurity or deformation. Variation and development in the liturgical services is not always therefore indicative of a problem warranting reform. More often than not, there are good and justifiable reasons for ongoing adaptation to differing situations and contexts. For example, in respect of the assimilation of the antiphons, the Church decided that this could properly fulfil a fitting purpose in disposing the faithful to hear the gospel proclaimed. Of course this may not have been a “new” intention at all; simply a new way of doing something that had always in fact been done, the original provision now having been replaced and lost.

When addressing the next section, (the proclamation of the Gospel prefaced by a reading from the Apostle), we do well to remember that the Scriptures suffuse the whole of the Liturgy in every nook and cranny. Biblical testimony and proclamation are focussed here but are by no means absent from the rest of the Eucharist or in the other services of the Church.

The characteristic concern of the proclamation of the words of Scripture is the Word Himself, our Lord and God and Saviour, Jesus Christ; the Word made flesh. All Scripture is interpreted in the light of Him and the Holy Spirit is invoked to this end. It is impossible to attend Orthodox worship regularly and listen attentively without becoming Biblically literate. Needless to say, the homily should be preached at this point ... at least in accordance with ancient invariable practice. Deferring the homily to the end of the Liturgy is a concession to weakness (in connection with the tardiness in attendance of many) and should not be indulged.

It is instructive to regard the whole of the next section as the preparation for the Holy Oblation from the litanies through the Great Entrance to the Symbol of Faith (the Creed of Nicaea-Constantinople). First, after the litanies concluding in that of the Catechumens, the latter were dismissed in the early Church. Those not baptised did not remain for the Anaphora, the prayer of the Eucharist and Holy Communion. Baptism is precisely the entry into the Mystery of Christ and His Church the sacramental expression of which is Holy Communion. Widely disregarded today, this early normative practice has been complicated by the issue of the heterodox or the catechumens wanting to worship with the Orthodox **at this point** but without being in sacramental communion with the Orthodox. This may indeed be the pastorally more sensitive approach but, frankly, it is at best anomalous in the contemporary celebration of the Eucharist. A possible resolution might be to either remove the requirement that the heterodox and catechumens should leave the church

at this point, or preferably to acknowledge their presence in some way that indicates they are welcome to remain in the church, but express the hope they will soon be baptised. Whatever the resolution of this anomaly, the goal is precisely that stated by Father Vassilios Papavassiliou—to invite those who are not Orthodox Christians “to come in and see how Orthodox Christians all over the world worship,” and to experience for themselves “the profundity with which this special service offers its participants a way to encounter God.”<sup>9</sup>

The Great Entrance with Gifts proceeds after the litanies. This is achieved with great solemnity and causes some to wonder why this is so, for the bread and wine are not yet the Body and Blood of Christ. The Orthodox, however, do not have an exactly linear concept of time. Like the people of God in the Old Covenant we thank God for the future being present to us and indeed the past also. The latter is familiar to many in the Judaeo-Christian concept of “anamnesis” or actualisation in the present moment, from the Passover itself to the Second Coming. As liturgical rites continually reinforce, especially in the Great Feasts of the Church’s Year, everything is “now” since the Kingdom intersects with each and every coordinate in the space-time continuum. Later in the anaphora the whole dispensation of salvation will be made present. Here in the Great Entrance this disclosure is anticipated and revered.

The Creed is also part of the preparation for the Oblation although it was not introduced to the Liturgy until somewhat late. The reason is clear from the preface. “*Let us love one another that with one mind we may confess ...* “. Confession of faith is inseparable from the Feast of Love. Christianity can never be made into an abstract speculation or an ideological position without doing great damage to its true identity. We speak the truth in love.

Of course, when these preparations are concluded the Feast of Love can begin; and of course, the characteristic note is thanksgiving—the etymology and praxis of Eucharist. The Greek word *eucharistia* means “a giving of thanks.”<sup>10</sup> The early Eucharistic rites are presented in these anaphora prayers from those both composed and belonging to a bishop’s use in his local church and having continuity from

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<sup>9</sup> Father Vassilios Papavassiliou, *Journey to the Kingdom: An Insider’s Look at the Liturgy and Beliefs of the Eastern Orthodox Church* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2012), p. 3. The 20 chapters of this book consider the different sections of the Eucharistic

Service. For further reflections on the different parts of the Eucharist, see also A Monk of the Eastern Church [Father Lev Gillet], *Serve the Lord with Gladness: Basic Reflections on the Eucharist and the Priesthood, Our Life in the Liturgy* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1990). Translated from the French edition of 1962 by Father John Breck.

<sup>10</sup> See John Anthony McGuckin, “Eucharist” in *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), pp. 126-127 which gives a succinct theology of the Eucharist and comments on the writings of the Church Fathers.

apostolic practice and universality in the assent of other churches through their own bishops. St. Paul makes this clear in the preface to his short extract from the Liturgy. He emphasises that he hands on what he himself has received.

*For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, "Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me." In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes. (1 Corinthians 11:23-26)*

As the Liturgy moves through the thanksgiving we notice how the Holy Gifts themselves become the locus of God's redemptive work in Christ and regenerative work of the Holy Spirit. This is classically presented in the words of institution used by Christ at the Last Supper and the invocation of the Holy Spirit (the epiklesis), significantly on both the People and the Gifts. Clearly it is envisaged here that the Holy Mysteries will confer holiness on the believers as they faithfully receive and respond to Christ and the Holy Spirit, both timelessly offered from the Father. Such faith from believers is not necessary to the Eucharistic transformation itself, but rather to its transformative action in and through the lives of the believers themselves. The context within which this personal growth in holiness takes place is always the Church, which is why the saints with the Theotokos are always venerated prior to the reception of Holy Communion. It is the Lord's Prayer that immediately heralds the breaking of the Body, the Bread of Heaven and its reception with the Blood of Christ by the faithful. All the many prayers of thanksgiving that follow on from Holy Communion help the community descend from the transfiguring heights of Eucharistic communion to be the Body of Christ in the world, indicating that as surely as the faithful have received the Body of Christ from heaven, the relevance of that Body to the world has not been forgotten. This ascent to the in-breaking Kingdom—the Kingdom that has broken into our lives—is followed by the apostolic dispersal of this leaven into the world and then its in-gathering once more into the Church. The words of the ancient hope expressed in *the Didache* remain true today:



Even as this broken bread was scattered over the hills, and was gathered together and became one, so let your church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into your kingdom. To you is the glory and the power through Jesus Christ forever.<sup>11</sup>

This is the Eucharist—the Divine Liturgy—and it lies at both the heart of the Church and the energies of God in the world. It is in the Liturgy that Christians become by the power of the Spirit their own true selves in the love of God for all, indeed ... *“for as much He is a good God and loveth mankind.”*

## Homiletics

### 13b: Context: Personal, Social and Spiritual

Preaching takes place within three quite different contexts—personal, social and spiritual. It is essential for a preacher to become immersed in each of these contexts, and then to learn how to bring these perspectives together into a homily that brings the Word of God to others.

#### Preaching: The Personal Dimension

When the priest or deacon cense the church before the Great Entrance of the Divine Liturgy, as well as during the services of Matins (Orthros), the Third Hour and Compline, they recite silently the whole of Psalm 50(51) which contains the words in verse 6: “Behold, You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.”<sup>12</sup> The Hebrew word for “inward being” is *tūhôt* denoting

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<sup>11</sup> *The Didache*, 9.4: at <http://www.paracletepress.com/didache.html>

<sup>12</sup> The translation is drawn from the beautiful *Prayerbook in Accordance with the Tradition of the Eastern Orthodox Church*, Rev, 2nd ed. (Victoria, Canada: St. Arseny Press, 2011), p. 5, which includes nearly 100 pages of quotations from the Holy Fathers on prayer. Available from All Saints of Alaska Orthodox Church, [www.allsaintsofalaska.ca](http://www.allsaintsofalaska.ca). Some translations of the Bible have this verse as v. 8.

“the residence of truth or faithfulness.”<sup>13</sup> To gain such truth in one’s inward being requires a process of purging and cleaning in which the person—male or female, priest or lay—is filled “with joy and gladness” and in which “the bones which You have broken rejoice” (v. 7-8). We are more familiar with the words of v. 10: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.” However, such an experience of “a clean heart” and “a steadfast spirit” is often preceded by the breaking and healing of bones. Preachers must be willing to experience that breaking of their own initial structural supports and ideas for every sermon. Like Jacob who wrestled with God Himself to obtain a blessing (Genesis 32:24-32), preachers who worship and preach “in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24) often find themselves limping from the encounter of their ideas with those of the Lord.

The personal dimension of our lives can be disturbingly messy—at times disturbing to us and at times disturbing to others. As we move through the various stages of life, we accumulate baggage, whatever terms are used to describe that baggage—sin, inadequacy, failure. As infants, we need to learn to trust others; and if we do not experience trust at an early age, at some later stage in our lives we can still learn how to trust others. Erik Erickson has set out a psychological narrative which ends in old age (after 65) with the battle between integrity and despair.<sup>14</sup> Gaining personal integrity requires both a respect for past wisdom, as well as “the acceptance of one’s own and only life cycle and of the people who have become significant in it . . . free of the wish that they should have been different, and an acceptance of the fact that one’s life is one’s own responsibility.”<sup>15</sup> Christians rightly call this willingness to accept others as they are forgiveness. Furthermore, we also need to accept ourselves as we are, even as we seek to change through the grace of God. Preachers

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<sup>13</sup> R. Laid Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr. & Bruce K. Waltke (Eds), *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), Vol. 1, p. 347/802.

<sup>14</sup> Erik Erickson, *The Life Cycle Completed* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982), pp. 32-33. The ideas in this paragraph have been further developed in a Christian framework by Matthew Linn, Sheila Fabricant [Linn] and Dennis Linn in *Healing the Eight Stages of Life* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), esp. p. 23ff.

<sup>15</sup> Erik, Erickson, “Identity and the Life Cycle,” *Psychological Issues*, 1:1 (1959), 98. Cited by Linn, Fabricant & Linn, p. 204.

who have not yet recognised that their lives are their own responsibility will project their limited vision of themselves onto a congregation who will never learn that we each stand alone before God.

In considering the personal dimension of preaching, a final warning is appropriate. In *The Book of Pastoral Rule*, St. Gregory the Great devotes the final chapter to the theme “That the preacher, after he has done everything that is required, should return to himself so that he does not take pride in his life or preaching.”<sup>16</sup> His insights from the sixth century remain equally important today:

Since it is often the case that when a sermon is delivered in accordance with a high standard, the soul of the speaker is inflated by the hidden joys of self-display, therefore it is necessary that great care be taken so that he might feel the sting of a fearful conscience. Otherwise, the one who is able to return others to health will ignore himself and develop the swelling of pride. Let him not abandon himself by helping others or stumble as he enables others to rise.<sup>17</sup>

Like St. Gregory, we too can be “tossed back and forth by [either] the waves of sin” or the possibility of sin. Therefore, we too need to turn to others “in the shipwreck of this life” and say to fellow Christians the same humble words with which St. Gregory closes *The Book of Pastoral Rule*: “I beg you to sustain me with the plank of your prayers, so that your merit-filled hands might lift me up, since my own weight causes me to sink.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> St. Gregory the Great, *The Book of Pastoral Rule*, Translated with an introduction by George E. Demacopoulos (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2007), p. 209.

<sup>17</sup> St. Gregory the Great, *The Book of Pastoral Rule*, p. 209.

<sup>18</sup> St. Gregory the Great, *The Book of Pastoral Rule*, p. 212.

## Preaching: The Social Dimension

The seamless command of Jesus Christ in the Gospels to preach (Mark 16:15), teach, baptise and “make the disciples of all the nations” (Matthew 28:19-20) requires not only considerable personal awareness of self, but also awareness of others. In the midst of the essential personal healing at various stages of our own lives, we must also seek “reconciliation with God” which is “a necessary pre-condition for reconciliation with any ‘other’.”<sup>19</sup> In what has been called “a comprehensive model for the whole of Christian theology,” Metropolitan John Zizioulas has pointed out in *Communion and Otherness* how “the fear of the other is in fact nothing but the fear of the different; we all want somehow to project into the other the model of our own selves. . .”<sup>20</sup> Therefore, whatever our own strengths and weaknesses every preacher needs to reach out to communicate to others. As the Roman Catholic philosopher Simone Weil has reflected, “every separation [between human beings] is a link,” because just as “two prisoners in adjoining cells learn, over a very long period of time, to talk to each other by tapping on the wall,”<sup>21</sup> preachers too must learn to tap and to listen, as they seek to draw themselves and their congregations closer in friendship with God and with each other.

The command which St. Paul gave to St. Timothy to preach the Word applies to all preachers as they reflect on what message to deliver, how to deliver it and how best to tailor that message to their listeners:

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<sup>19</sup> Metropolitan John D. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church*, edited by Paul McPartlan (New York: T & T Clark, 2006), p. 2.

<sup>20</sup> *Communion and Otherness*, p. 2. The quotation on the significance of this book is from the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams in the Foreword, p. xi.

<sup>21</sup> Simone Weil, quoted by Stephen Grosz, *The Examined Life: How We Lose and Find Ourselves* (London: Vintage/Random Hall, 2014), p. xii.

I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His Kingdom: preach the Word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. . . . (2 Timothy 4:1-2).

The two Greek words that are translated as “preach” in the New Testament are *evangelizō* meaning “to announce good news” and *kēryssō* meaning “to proclaim, to announce publicly.”<sup>22</sup> As this good news is proclaimed publicly in the Bible, it is important for each of us as preachers “to tap and to listen” to that Word, just as we seek to communicate to other people.

In different times and different cultures, how to communicate that Word might differ from the practices of the early Church. However, all preachers should be aware that:

The best examples of preaching by the early [C]hurch are found in sermons recorded in Acts, especially two by Peter (Acts 2:14-41; 3:11-26) and two by Paul (Acts 13:16-43; 17:22-31). The common elements in these sermons reveal basic truths that were preached as believers in the early [C]hurch set about evangelizing the world: Jesus, the historical person, was crucified and raised in accordance with Scripture. He, the promised Messiah, must be received by faith with repentance.<sup>23</sup>

Although the significance that Jesus is the Messiah—the Christ—the Anointed One—is communicated clearly by both St. Peter and St. Paul, the precise content of each sermon depends on whether the preacher is speaking solely to the Jews, as in the first two sermons

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<sup>22</sup> Lawrence O. Richards, *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words* (Grand Rapids, MI: Marshall Pickering, 1985), p. 501.

<sup>23</sup> Richards, *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words*, p. 501.

from St. Peter, or to both the Jews and the Gentiles, as in the first sermon from St. Paul, or solely to the “Men of Athens,” as in the second sermon from St. Paul.

As the preacher reaches out to communicate the Word to others, the congregation has a responsibility to reach out to the preacher and to reflect on whether the Word that is being preached speaks to them. There is here a mutual responsibility in which the social dimension of preaching is paramount. A rabbinical story is worthy of reflection:

Time before time, when the world was young, two brothers shared a field and a mill, each night dividing evenly the grain they had ground during the day. One brother lived alone; the other had a wife and a large family. Now the single brother thought to himself one day, ‘It isn’t really fair that we divide the grain evenly. I have only myself to care for, but my brother has children to feed.’ So each night he secretly took some of his grain to his brother’s granary to see that he was never without.

But the married brother said to himself one day, ‘It isn’t really fair that we divide the grain evenly, because I have children to provide for me in my old age, but my brother has no one. What will he do when he’s old?’ So every night he secretly took some of *his* grain to his brother’s granary. As a result, both of them always found their supply of grain mysteriously replenished each morning.

Then one night they met each other halfway between their two houses, suddenly realized what had been happening, and embraced each other in love. The story is that God witnessed their meeting and proclaimed, ‘This is a holy place—a place of love—

and here it is that my temple shall be built.’ And so it was. The holy place, where God is made known to his people, is the place where human beings discover each other in love.<sup>24</sup>

So may it always be in the relationship between a competent preacher and a searching congregation.

### **Preaching: The Spiritual Dimension**

It will be clear from considering the personal and social dimensions of preaching that every preacher must seek to be at one with God and God’s purpose for their lives. Learning to preach well is a lifelong pursuit which requires diligent study (especially of the Bible and the Church Fathers and the lives of saints), prayer (both personal and communal) and a genuine seeking of the will of God.

An Orthodox resource of immense help, readily consulted by anyone with an internet connection, is the website of Preachers Institute at: [www.preachersinstitute.com](http://www.preachersinstitute.com) from whom the book by Humbert of Romans, *On the Formation of Preachers*, is available.<sup>25</sup> Preaching is not “a soft option,” nor a ready route to personal aggrandizement, as will be evident from advice on “how one should begin this office” of preaching given in *On the Formation of Preachers*:

There are some who want to be preachers before they are entirely rid of their faults, and they claim the right by referring to Isaiah, who said to the Lord, ‘Lo, here am I. Call me’ (Isaiah 6:8). They do not observe that the Prophet had been first of

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<sup>24</sup> Belden C. Lane, “Rabbinical Stories,” as given in Matthew Linn, Sheila Fabricant [Linn] and Dennis Linn, *Healing the Eight Stages of Life*, pp.179-180.

<sup>25</sup> As Father John Peck, Director of Preachers Institute points out, this text from Byzantine homiletics is “thoroughly in line with the work of St. John Chrysostom, “On the Priesthood,” and St. Gregory the Great’s “On the Pastoral Rule,” p. 7.

all purified. 'He who asked to be sent thus,' St. Gregory tells us, 'had previously felt the angel purify his lips with a burning coal taken from the altar, so that no one dared claim afterwards the right to enter upon the holy ministry before having been worthily purified.

Some, purified though they may be, have not yet received all the supernatural gifts indispensable to them in order that they may distribute them to others, 'There are some,' says St. Bernard, 'who show such an ardour to communicate spiritual benefits to others, that they deem themselves to dispense these benefits before they possess them. . . .If you wish to act with discernment, take care first to become a reservoir, before becoming a canal; for the former has its function to receive and diffuse, while the latter waits to be filled before it discharges a superabundance.'<sup>26</sup>

Let us all seek to be reservoirs of the Holy Spirit before we seek to preach to others as canals of the Word.

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<sup>26</sup> *On the Formation of Preachers*, Chapter 3, "How One Should Begin This Office," pp. 76-77.