

## THE FUNCTION AND TASK OF LITURGICAL PREACHING

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### *Introduction*

The division of the Divine Liturgy into two primary segments, the *Liturgy of the Word* and the *Liturgy of the Faithful*, is a commonly accepted structural feature of the rite. This division, grounded in the literary form of the service and the historical practice of excluding catechumens from the eucharistic portion of the celebration, can be a helpful aid in liturgical analysis. When the sermon is considered simply by itself and divorced of its literary and historical context, though, this division may also have the deleterious practical effect of allowing the two halves of the liturgy to be considered and performed as though they were entirely separate entities, leaving little sense of the connection between biblical proclamation and eucharistic communion and thereby undermining them both. Fr Alexander Schmemmann clearly recognized the danger of this type of division both for liturgical practice and gospel proclamation when he wrote:

in the Orthodox perspective the liturgy of the Word is as sacramental as the sacrament is "evangelical." The sacrament is a manifestation of the Word. And unless the false dichotomy between Word and sacrament is overcome, the true meaning of Christian "sacramentalism" cannot be grasped in all their wonderful implications.<sup>1</sup>

The problematics of separating Word and Sacrament has also been noticed by biblical scholar Fr Paul Tarazi, who asserts:

The Lord is fully present in both the broken bread and the preached word. However, this "both/and" should not be un-

<sup>1</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (Crestwood: SVS Press, 1973), 33.

vital component of the rite, the essential linchpin which allows the eucharistic liturgy as a whole to accomplish that which neither of its constituent parts is independently capable of. The sermon's importance in the eucharist has been duly noted by others; indeed, as Fr Thomas Hopko has recognized, "preaching God's Word is a sacramental act, an essential element in the liturgical action of God the Father, the Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit."<sup>3</sup> There has been little commentary, however, on how it is that the sermon operates to unify the liturgy.

Therefore, this essay seeks to show how it is that the liturgical placement of the sermon (at the end of the Liturgy of the Word and immediately preceding the Liturgy of the Faithful) and its task (uniting the two halves of the liturgy by delivering a contemporary gospel address to the congregation) uniquely enables the sermon to function as the linchpin which fastens together the gospel proclamation of the Divine Liturgy.<sup>4</sup> It seeks furthermore to demonstrate how these theoretical propositions might be parlayed into practical principles for homiletic preparation and delivery which will support the sermon's liturgical placement and function. Since the liturgical sermon is an event centered in worship, the first step in analyzing its role must be a consideration of its liturgical home.

### *The Liturgy*

#### *The Word Dwells Among Us*

Liturgical ritual is inseparable from the Word of the gospel. The language and symbolism of the service are the touchstone of God's revelation, and the church the arena within which the

3 Thomas Hopko, "The Liturgical Sermon," *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* (SVTQ) 41:2-3 (1997) 176.

4 For clarity, "gospel" in this paper refers to the general proclamation of Christ as used, e.g., by St Paul in Rom 1:16, whereas the term "Gospel" refers to the four canonical Gospels which present literary narratives of Christ's life; the term "apostolic preaching" is also, in accordance with its early usage, synonymous with the term "gospel." The term "Scripture" refers to the writings which are now grouped together as the Old Testament.

It is within the symbolic world which the Liturgy presents, a world which is not divorced from the real world but is rather its *hypothesis*, describing and making sense of it, that the worshipper is refashioned on the terms of God's revelation and equipped to face the world outside of the church doors in light of this revelation.<sup>8</sup> Robert Taft notes,

When we leave the assembly to return to our mundane tasks, we have only to assimilate what we have experienced, and realize this mystery in our lives: in a word, to become other Christs. For the liturgy is like an active prophecy. Its purpose is to reproduce in our lives what the Church exemplifies for us in its public worship.<sup>9</sup>

By restructuring the worshipper's symbolic world to conform to the world of God's revelation, the liturgy fulfills the ultimate goal of divine worship: the glorification of God by every word and action of the children of God in the world. In order to understand how the liturgy accomplishes this task, it is necessary to turn to its constituent elements: the ritual liturgical texts and the eucharistic sacrifice.

<sup>8</sup> The term *hypothesis* in the ancient Greek world was a technical description for the outline or plot of a philosophical or dramatic work. The *hypothesis* served as the "first principle" of the work, the foundational assumption which was not provable from reason but which was rather a postulate upon which the logical arguments of the work could be constructed. Modern English usage preserves this ancient notion of the *hypothesis* as being the essential epistemological condition for logical argumentation; as one recent English lexicon defines it, a *hypothesis* is "a tentative assumption made in order to draw out and test its logical consequences," or, even more appropriately for the current discussion, "an interpretation of a practical situation or condition taken as the ground for action." *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, ed. Frederick C. Mish, (Springfield: Merriam-Webster, 1985). For an introductory discussion of *hypothesis* in both its classical Greek and later Christian theological manifestations, see Robert M. Grant, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (New York, Routledge, 1997), 47-49.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Taft, *Beyond East and West: Problems in Liturgical Understanding*, 2nd ed. (Rome: Pontifical Oriental Institute, 1997), 258.

his/her own.<sup>11</sup> The difference between the novel and the Bible is that the Bible also invites the one who claims it as his/her authority permanently to adopt its symbolic categories and to live his/her life according to and within this symbolic universe. The literary experience of the liturgy seeks to present the biblical world and its symbols to the congregation, drawing them into God's revelation in a way which transcends simple text but is nevertheless intimately tied to it.

This leads to the second point, which is that the eucharist is as much a literary figure as it is a physical symbol. This is true because the sacrament of the eucharist itself is inextricably connected to the entire progress of the liturgy and to the literary symbols which the texts of the liturgy have invoked, leading to the presentation of the body and blood of Christ which was (and is) broken and spilled on the cross. In lifting up before the eyes of the congregation the crucified Christ and inviting those who would follow him to partake of his body and blood, the eucharist compels those gathered for worship to enter the literary incarnation of God proclaimed by the apostolic preaching and prods them to take action on the basis of this Word.<sup>12</sup> It invites the worshiper to take seriously what is clear in the gospel: that the person of Jesus Christ and his passion and resurrection are co-extensive with the Word of the gospel. As Tarazi asserts, "To consider Jesus' death as part of his communication to us means to acknowledge that the Person himself and his message are but one."<sup>13</sup> The eucharistic symbol is therefore itself a proclamation of

11 The literary text of the Bible requires the reader to know not simply the events of the text, but also to adopt the biblical author's interpretation of these events. For example, the history of the kings of Israel presented in Samuel and Kings is not a simple textbook account of events, but an explication of their meaning; as Tarazi notes, "the writer's intention was to elucidate his point of view, not to depict history... the data included in a given study or presentation are pertinent solely from the perspective of the writer; the reader must heed this caveat if he is to learn something 'correct' regarding the period discussed by the writer." Tarazi, *The Old Testament: An Introduction*, vol. 1 (Crestwood: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1991), 13-14, 89-90, 114-18.

12 Taft, *Beyond East and West*, 20-22.

13 Tarazi, "The Gospel of Christ," in *God's Living Word*, 30.

gospel proclamation of the risen Christ who is the Lord of all times and places. The function of the liturgical rite is to make the Christ of the gospel present for the assembly. As Taft notes, "it is this consciousness of Jesus as the Lord not of the past but of contemporary history that is the aim of all Christian preaching and spirituality and liturgical anamnesis."<sup>17</sup> This observation is supported in the Orthodox liturgy by the text of the anaphora attributed to St John Chrysostom, which clearly reveals Jesus Christ not as a past event but as an eternal reality when, after the words of institution, the priest prays:

Remembering, therefore, this command of the Savior, and all that came to pass for our sake (πάντων τῶν ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν γεγενημένον), the cross, the tomb, the resurrection on the third day, the ascension into heaven, the enthronement at the right hand of the Father, and the second, glorious coming, we offer to You these gifts from Your own gifts in all and for all.<sup>18</sup>

Jesus Christ is depicted in the prayer not simply as the one who died for us at some point in the past but as the one who is coming, and the grammar of this prayer makes it clear that this coming is something which has already "come to pass." The "coming" of Jesus is a present reality, and we stand under the judgment of this Coming One. If the liturgy is to proclaim the Christian gospel in its fullness, its symbols must *reveal* Christ and his Word to the congregation, imposing on them the symbols of the Kingdom of God and encouraging them to accept the symbols of the Kingdom as the ones by which they will live their lives.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Taft, *Beyond East and West*, 26.

<sup>18</sup> All selections from the Divine Liturgy of St John Chrysostom, both in Greek and in translation, are taken from *The Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom* (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1985). The anaphora attributed to St Basil essentially accomplishes the same task; the corresponding text reads, "remembering His saving Passion and life-creating Cross, His three-day Burial and Resurrection from the dead, His Ascension into heaven and Sitting at Thy right hand of the God and Father, and His glorious and awesome Second Coming." *The Divine Liturgy According to St. John Chrysostom, with appendices*, 2nd ed. (South Canaan: St Tikhon's Seminary Press, 1977).

<sup>19</sup> Schmemmann, *The Eucharist*, 33–34.

sealed by the eucharist, which represents the visible, tangible mark of membership in God's covenantal community.<sup>24</sup>

Yet this sign of inclusion in God's community is not a guarantee of divine protection or favor. Biblical Israel accepted God's salvation from Egypt and the Law which was the sign of this salvation, yet when they transgressed this Law, they also fell under the fire of his judgment and wrath, and those who violated God's covenant were purged from the community.<sup>25</sup> That Christians should pay heed to the judgment which Israel suffered is made clear by St Paul in his letter to the Corinthians, when he writes that "these things happened to them as a warning, but they were written down for our instruction... therefore let any one who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall."<sup>26</sup> In the same way that the Law at Sinai put Israel under God's authority and made them subject both to his salvation *and* to his judgment, every Lord's day the willing participation in the eucharist places the Christian once again under the authority of God's Word and, as a consequence, offers this same salvation and threatens this same judgment.<sup>27</sup> By the time we approach the Cup, we have heard God's Word and know what is expected of us if we seek to be included among his people. The Lord

24 This interpretation of the Word's centrality in understanding the eucharist is supported by Tarazi, who writes, "The church community is the creation and the outcome of the 'apostolic word' which is to remain the central criterion for both its being and well-being. The eucharistic gathering is the place *par excellence* where this reality is 'anamnetically' impressed upon the being of each of the baptized through the imparted word and the broken body, both word and body of the same Christ, the sole leader of the church and of the life of its members." "The Parish in the New Testament," *SVTQ* 36:1-2 (1992) 100.

25 E.g., Num 14:13-25; Ezek 20:1-44.

26 1 Cor 10:11-12.

27 That St Paul also interpreted the eucharist this way is evidenced by the way in which he frames the eucharist by invoking the image of God's judgments against Israel, rhetorically asking the Corinthian community, "Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he?" (10:14-23) The notion that participation in the eucharist entails both salvation and judgment is also supported by the pre-communion prayer of St John Chrysostom, particularly in its closing petition, "May the communion of thy holy mysteries be neither to my judgment, nor to my condemnation, O Lord, but to the healing of soul and body."

through the medium of the arts, liturgical celebration aids in engaging additional creative aspects of the human psyche, serving both to amplify the challenging message presented by the liturgical texts and to facilitate its assimilation by those gathered to participate. The literary world which the Liturgy presents to us in texts is enacted before our very eyes; the liturgy remains faithful to text yet also transcends text.

What is fundamentally important about all of this literary engagement with a biblical symbolic world is the way in which this process helps to inspire a creative response to the gospel message. The liturgical sermon finds its home in a structure of worship which encourages those gathered to loosen the chains which bind their minds and hearts to the slavery of the world's demands and to direct their attention instead toward the Kingdom of God. The sermon, by interpreting for the assembly the present value and application of the universal liturgical encounter, plays a critical role in shaping the congregation's response to the experience of the gospel in the liturgy. Creative engagement with the world which is bounded by the dictates of God's Word in the gospel is essential to living a life in Christ. And it is within the liturgy, through its symbolic, artistic exposition of a literary world which is given contemporary depth by the sermon, that the believer is nourished with the Word.

### *The Gospel*

#### *Charin anti Charitos*

The sermon molds the gospel proclamation of the liturgy into a form which relates the Word of God to the circumstances of life faced by the assembly. The way in which God's Word is uncovered in the apostolic preaching about Christ is vital for understanding the gospel and important in deciding how it should be transmitted through the sermon. The cross of Christ which the gospel proclaims presents a summary of the entire Word of God, a unique and binding interpretation of Scripture as seen through the matrix

them.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, one who follows the gospel is freed from the slavery of the Law only because one is now expected to implement in life the will of God in its entirety.<sup>35</sup>

### *A Creative Response*

This imperative—to conform oneself to the fullness of God's will—is daunting in and of itself, but the immense scope of this task implies an even greater challenge. This is the gospel's absolute requirement for *creativity* from those who seek to follow it. It is at this point, the moment of translating the gospel's precepts into a program for carrying it out in life, that one encounters what is perhaps the most difficult and even frustrating aspect of the gospel: its failure to provide those who are baptized into it with a fixed set of concrete instructions for life. This is not to say that the gospel does not presuppose a certain code of morality and lay down some basic standards for living.<sup>36</sup> Yet although it does not deny these standards, the gospel proclaimed in the canonical writings of the New Testament steadfastly refuses to enumerate either a simple or a complex list of minimum requirements; there is no "easy-reference guide" which can be consulted for almost any situation which a human being might encounter.<sup>37</sup> The complexity of human life is

<sup>34</sup> Mt 5:17.

<sup>35</sup> This same thesis is asserted by Irenaeus, who writes that "all these [precepts] were not [the injunctions] of one doing away with the law, but of one fulfilling, extending, and widening it among us; just as if one should say, that the more extensive operation of liberty implies that a more complete subjection and affection towards our Liberator had been implanted in us." *AH* 4.13.3.

<sup>36</sup> It is not the overthrowing of moral standards that the gospel is concerned with, but rather that these standards should be upheld in the service of God. Mt 6:1–16; 23:1–7; Rom 1:16–2:16.

<sup>37</sup> The Sermon on the Mount, which is sometimes mistakenly thought to be just such a list of instructions, provides an excellent example of this point. As pointed out earlier, Jesus' prescriptions here are an expansion of a few points of the Law to its maximalist sense, designed to demonstrate why adhering to the literal code is insufficient in fulfilling God's will. Although Jesus only discourses concerning the laws on murder, adultery, divorce, swearing, and revenge, these examples are chosen only to show that the Law must be expanded beyond its narrow interpretation in all areas. Furthermore, even in the particular points which Jesus selects for elaboration,



