

**The Servant Parish Project:
Strengthening Our Ministry to the Poor and Suffering**

Father Theophan Whitfield

**Chapter 2
Justice and the Biblical Witness**

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1. *Overview of the Chapter*

To encourage parishes to strengthen their sacrificial ministries to the poor and suffering one could point to the many passages in holy Scripture that clearly command us to offer relief and material support. But such a catalog of passages and commandments would only succeed in telling us what we already know: that some actions are praiseworthy, and that some are blameworthy. One premise of this project is that by and large Christians already know “what to do” and that such knowledge has not, by itself, led to the sort of high-impact ministries one might expect to blossom forth from communities transformed by the gospel of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

A review of the biblical witness is important, but this chapter will not be a “Greatest Hits” compilation of passages that speak of virtues related to justice, compassion, and boundless hospitality. Instead, this chapter will first focus in a narrow but extended way on the parable of the Last Judgment recorded in Matthew 25:31-46.¹ Too much confusion -- or too many loose readings -- surround this critical passage. In this chapter I will argue that a careful reading of Matthew 25 provides the basic insights on which an Orthodox moral theology may be built. In other words, if we want to understand the virtue of justice from an Orthodox perspective, we have to first make sure that our understanding of Matthew 25 is based on

¹ Hereafter, we will refer to Matthew 25:31-46 as ‘Matthew 25’.

sound exegesis, rather than on partisan eisegesis. We want to hear what the Lord is telling us in the parable, and to avoid telling the Lord ahead of time what we wish to hear.

Matthew 25, more fully appreciated, will tell us why the “good actions” are indeed the good things to do in love for others. As such, Matthew 25 does more than set forth “morals” for disciples of Christ. It also sets forth a moral theology that explains with particular force why these moral actions are so important to the ongoing life of the baptized believer. If we allow it to do so, Matthew 25 can add the critical dimension of “why” to our already sound knowledge of “what we should do.”

After a careful exploration of Matthew 25, we will then turn to the wider witness of Scripture. Given what Christ reveals in Matthew 25, how should we understand the many biblical commandments to “seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow” (Isaiah 1:17)? In this study, we will approach the meaning of “justice talk” in the Bible, not by simply listing its many instances, but by reflecting on the function of such talk. Our question will be: how is the language of justice in Scripture relevant to our experience as Orthodox Christians of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior?

The conclusion of this chapter will introduce emerging insights related to the practical strategies that can assist a parish in turning desire into action. These practical strategies will be developed with greater care in later chapters, but it is useful to appreciate along the way the gems we gather. The servant parish is a parish that has the “mind of Scripture,” one that never tires of receiving the Lord’s teaching as both challenge and invitation.

2. The Parable of the Last Judgment

Any reflection on ministry to the poor and suffering must be consistent with the parable of the sheep and the goats found in Matthew 25:31-46.² Sadly, this is an easy standard to achieve. By and large, we have reduced the parable of the sheep and the goats to a dry set of virtuous actions that we “must do.” Too often we neglect the totality of the passage and quickly move to separate the wheat of love from the chaff of its scriptural setting. This makes it appear as though ministry to the poor and suffering is somehow independent of the overall gospel narrative. This independence is an illusion. As we will see, it is too easy to “de-christologize” Matthew 25 -- it is too easy to give it a thin reading laced with Arian sympathies.

The parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31-46 is placed by most into one of two categories. Either it is viewed as an eschatological pericope, commenting on the identity of those who will be judged at the end of time. Or it is viewed as an ethical pericope, describing the criteria on which eternal judgment will be based. This section will argue that the parable is neither primarily eschatological nor ethical. This pericope, like all narrative units in the gospels, is Christological. Exegeses which attempt to recover the original eschatological or ethical meaning of Matthew 25:31-46 must begin by recovering the Christology of the passage.

² In this chapter, ‘the sheep and the goats’ and the ‘Last Judgment’ are used interchangeably for Matthew 25:31-46.

A. Author and Audience³

The church in Antioch was founded by Hellenized Jews who fled from Jerusalem after the martyrdom of Stephen in 40 AD. In this period, the followers of Jesus were still considered part of a movement within Judaism. But in Antioch, the church leaders made a momentous decision: to allow Gentiles to convert without going through the rite of circumcision. In 49 AD, largely in response to the conversion of such uncircumcised pagans, a council of church leaders (including Peter, Paul, James and John) met in Jerusalem to decide whether, in fact, Christianity was a branch of Judaism or whether it was a new religion. They decided, in effect, that it was a new religion and that Gentile converts did not have to be circumcised.

Nevertheless, a division within the Antiochene church persisted between those who felt that the Jewish roots of Christianity were being unjustifiably neglected and those who felt that fidelity to Judaism hindered the Gentile mission and, thereby, placed the survival and success of the Christian movement into jeopardy. However, great success in converting pagans made it clear that the future of the Church would be dominated by Gentile Christians, not Jewish Christians. The success in converting Gentiles had a downside, however: conversion was happening so quickly that sight was being lost of Christianity's continuity with Jewish legal and ethical traditions. Additionally, elements of pagan spirituality and religious practices were creeping into the Christian community, creating doctrinal and liturgical disputes. So the church in Antioch by the close of the first century AD was full of competing constituencies. The extremes in the community included, on the right, a conservative Jewish element that still resented the admission of uncircumcised Gentiles and, on the left, a growing collection of pagan converts who paid little attention to Christianity's Jewish past and ethical legacy.

It is generally held that Matthew's Gospel was written by a Christian writer, or group of writers, in Antioch around 90 AD to address these late first-century tensions within the Antiochene church. Against the Jewish reactionaries, the Gospel writer maintains that the church is the true Israel -- that the inheritors of God's promises are Abraham's spiritual descendants and not simply his genetic descendants. Against its Gentile enthusiasts, the Gospel writer emphasizes the close and essential connection between the meaningfulness of the Christ event and the sacred history of the Jewish people. To both groups, the Gospel of Matthew issues the two-fold challenge of granting forgiveness and of living by the "better righteousness" of Jesus, who taught that mercy is the original, guiding principle in the Jewish legal tradition. Without forgiveness and mercy, the church cannot move forward in unity with its universal mission.

B. A Christological Exegesis of Matthew 25:31-46

³ John P. Meier, "Antioch," in Paul Achtemeier, ed., *Harper Bible Dictionary* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 33-34. Also, Daniel Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 8-16.

The parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31-46 is undeniably a judgment scene, regardless of whether one places it among the “parables” told by Jesus.⁴ It is an account of the final reckoning at the close of the ages when πάντα τὰ ἔθνη (“all the nations,” 25:32) will be judged according to the mercy extended to each ἐνὶ τούτων τῶν ἀδελφῶν μου τῶν ἐλαχίστων (“one of these, the least of my brothers,” v40). The sheep which Jesus places on his right are those He calls “blessed of my Father,” and they are invited to “inherit the kingdom prepared for [them] from the foundation of the world” (v34). The goats placed by the Son of Man on the left are those he calls “cursed,” and they are commanded to “depart ... into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (v41). The sheep have done well by those whom Jesus calls the “the least of these my brothers,” extending to them acts of mercy and charity. The goats have refused to minister to those in need, and for their refusal, they receive condemnation.

To be sure, this is a heavy scene. From their Lord, the Matthean community hears with full certainty that a final day of judgment is coming and that an eternal separation between the blessed and cursed will be made. The close of the age is approaching, and “when the Son of Man comes in glory, and all his angels with him,” he will “sit on his glorious throne” as King and Judge (vv 31-32). His pronouncement to “all the nations” will be absolute and eternal.

Given the gravity of the subject, two standard exegetical questions understandably arise. The first is an **eschatological question**: who is being judged in the parable? Who exactly are τὰ ἔθνη (the nations) on trial at the end of time? The second is an **ethical question**: what is the criterion of divine judgment? Who are οἱ ἐλαχίστοι (the least) which the sheep treat so selflessly and the goats so uncharitably?

Establishing the referents of πάντα τὰ ἔθνη (all the nations) and οἱ ἐλαχίστοι (the least) is certainly important, but to focus on these questions alone is to overlook the big, surprising fact unveiled by Jesus in Matthew 25:31-46 -- the revelation that the Divine Judge is Himself present in each ἐνὶ τῶν ἐλαχίστων (one of the least of these). “For as much as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me” (25:40). This revelation is the jarring climax of the judgment scene, and as such it urges its audience to consider a problem of deeper significance, more fundamental than the standard eschatological and ethical questions described above. What exactly does Matthew 25:31-46 say about *Jesus*, whom it reveals as the Divine Judge which unexpectedly stands together with “the least”? The basic question, therefore, is **Christological**.⁵ To the Christology of the parable, we now turn.

First, it is important to catalogue the Christological imagery employed in Matthew 25:31-46. The imagery is dense, constituting “a rich Christological tableau”⁶ which brings together many of the messianic themes developed in the Old Testament and reinterpreted throughout Matthew. In 25:31-35, the Divine Judge is referred to ‘the Son of Man’ (cf. Dan 7:13-14) who ‘comes in glory’ and before whom ‘will be gathered all the nations’ (cf. Joel 4:2, Is 66:18). He is like ‘a shepherd’ (cf. Ez 34:12), and he is a ‘King’ (cf. Ez 37:24, which also links the

⁴ Harrington (1991), 357.

⁵ This general approach to the exegesis of Matthew 25:31-46 is developed in John R. Donahue, “The ‘Parable’ of the Sheep and the Goats: A Challenge to Christian Ethics,” *Theological Studies* 47 (1986) 3-31.

⁶ Donahue 1986, 17.

imagery of shepherd and king!).⁷ At the same time, this exalted Son of Man is a Suffering Servant -- in this case, a hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, and imprisoned stranger [25:35-36].⁸ Indeed, Matthew's equation in 25:40 of the King/Son of Man with ἐνὶ τῶν ἐλαχίστων is, not so much an innovation, as it is an extension of antecedent "Servant Christology."⁹ In this pericope, Matthew presents Jesus in short order as the crucified Suffering Servant who will come again as the exalted Son of Man, and to the close of the ages he will remain both Suffering Servant and exalted King. Such is the Messiah spoken of by the prophets, and such is the Lord worshipped by the Matthean community. The Sheep and the Goats, therefore, is a recapitulation of the imagery and argumentation present throughout Matthew's Gospel. It is Matthean Christology in digest form.

Second, it is profitable to reflect on the position of 25:31-46 in Matthew's Gospel. The Sheep and the Goats is the concluding pericope in the "apocalyptic discourse," which is itself the final of the five great discourses in Matthew. It follows three parables about preparing for the coming Son of Man¹⁰ and represents Christ's answer to the question: 'what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?' (24:3). The parable is the concluding statement of Matthew's concluding argument. It is also the final episode from the life of Jesus before the passion narrative, which begins immediately after 25:31-46. It is clear that the parable of the sheep and the goats occupies a strategic position in the structure of Matthew's Gospel. It is the ligature which binds two momentous Christological portraits in Matthew. It is a hinge which joins the two great panels of Christ-as-Cosmic-King (chs. 24 - 25) and Christ-as-Crucified (chs. 26 - 27), permitting us to collapse and unfold those portraits, but never permitting us to separate them. And this "hinge" is the *context* of the identification of Son of Man and τῶν ἐλαχίστων (the least). This identification is revealed on the "horizon of apocalyptic"¹¹ to which the hearers of Matthew's Gospel are transported -- a time when Christ returns as the exalted Son of Man. It is an affirmation to the hearers of Matthew that only on the cross can the Son of Man be glorified. As such, the parable of the Last Judgment is a hyperbolic restatement of Matthew's basic theme: that the crucified and risen Jesus Christ, through his perfect obedience to the Father, is the true Messiah spoken of by the prophets. The source of heavenly inheritance lies in the reality of earthly obedience and defeat. What was true of Christ will be true of those in whom he can still be found: they will be 'the least', those subject to the woes of this life. We therefore have additional evidence that 25:31-46 serves as a recapitulation of Matthew, one which contains in miniature the full Christological portrait presented by the Gospel as a whole. Not only is Jesus Christ the one of whom the prophets spoke, his glory as the Son of God is fully located in his obedient death. He was, is, and will be the least among us, and this on-going kenosis is precisely why he has been exalted by His Father. This is a great deal of significance to assign to a single pericope, but the placement of 25:31-46 between the apocalyptic discourse and

⁷ For these references I rely on Harrington 1991, 356-357, and John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005) 1040-1041.

⁸ Donahue 1986, 18-19.

⁹ Donahue 1986, 18. I rely on Donahue for the term, but not for the claim made in this sentence.

¹⁰ Harrington 1991, 354

¹¹ Donahue 1986, 16.

the passion narrative -- together with the multiple points of contact among Matthew, the Old Testament, and the parable -- bespeaks disproportionate significance.

Third, it is critical to note the connection between the parable of Last Judgment and the Great Commission in Matthew 28:16-20. "If the Sheep and the Goats is a portrait of the close of the age, the Great Commission is a mandate for church life prior to that close...The assembly of the nations at the beginning of the Sheep and the Goats as well as the presence of Jesus in the least looks to the end of history promised in 28:16-20"¹² Jesus instructs his followers to "go and make disciples of all nations (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη)," and he reminds them that "Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age". The textual parallels between the Sheep and Goats and the Great Commission are striking. The "close of the age" (24:3, 28:20) is of course when πάντα τὰ ἔθνη (25:32, 28:19) will be gathered and judged according to the merciful works shown to those with whom Jesus resides (25:40, 28:20). The language of 25:31-46 anticipates the language of the Great Commission, but of course the events described in 25:31-46 are to take place at the close of the age and so are themselves foreshadowed by Christ's Great Commission. Textual priority and temporal priority are blended in such a way that it becomes impossible to separate the Last Judgment and the Great Commission in Matthew, and so the Great Commission informs the Christology of 25:31-46 no less than its narrative position or messianic imagery. Consequently, the parable of the sheep and goats functions, not as a summary of required charity, but as a recapitulation of the Gospel-wide mandate to follow the crucified messiah. It is a call to emulate Christ, even as it more deeply describes the person of Christ. Who is Jesus? He is the Christ who will reside with all who preach the good news, even as they become -- like him -- the "least" in the course of this missionary activity.

Replete with (1) a "greatest hits" collection of messianic imagery, the parable of the sheep and the goats is both (2) a hinge which connects the portraits of Christ-as-King and Christ-as-Crucified and (3) an "arch between the ending of the historical career of Jesus and the end of history itself".¹³ As such, it is argued that the primary emphasis of Matthew 25:31-46 is Christological. Eschatological and ethical emphases would have been secondary.

C. The Arianization of Matthew 25:31-46

Matthew 25 is perhaps the most relevant yet most imperfectly understood passage in Scripture for Christians who seek to understand what baptism demands on a daily basis. No conversation about our moral obligations as disciples of Christ is complete without a reflection on Christ's command to minister to the "least of these my brethren." But too often, the conversation stops with the moral obligations themselves. Yes, we know that we are commanded to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the sick. But the question remains: "But why these particular obligations?" When pressed to answer, most Christians can offer little more than human wisdom: "because Jesus said so," or "because 'the least' really need our help," or "because that's what love (or basic decency, or common sense, or entrance into the

¹² Donahue 1986, 13, 14

¹³ Donahue 1986, 13.

Kingdom) requires.” But if human wisdom were enough, then Church and State around the world would be hard at work already, eliminating all forms of poverty and suffering. Neither would we need anything like the parable of the Last Judgment placed so powerfully in the gospel of Matthew in the ways described in the previous section.

In practice, Matthew 25 is toothless. I am speaking largely about Orthodox Christians in North America, but often parishes do not rally around “the least” with the sort of high priority typically given to bake sales, ethnic festivals, and stewardship drives. Bills, budgets, and buildings are important, but the Lord is largely silent on these things, except to condemn those that emphasize self-aggrandizement at the expense of mercy and relief. And we do not feel the bite in North America because we do not hear Matthew 25 as a kenotic hymn about the divine Christ. We hear it, instead, as a reflection on eschatology or ethics, and too often we stop listening there. This is nothing less than hermeneutic Arianism. No Orthodox Christian would deny that Christ is divine, but it is too easy to skip the powerful Christology in Matthew 25 and go straight to the secondary questions related to either eschatology or ethics. For many, Matthew 25 is mainly about the created order (us, and our obligations) rather than about what is divine (Christ, and where he may be found).

Exegeses which view the Last Judgment as primarily an eschatological or ethical pericope ignore the relevance of the Matthean contexts described in the previous section. These contexts underscore that the Last Judgment, just like the gospel as a whole, is a story about Jesus. To be sure, the story about Jesus has consequences for the Matthean community. But the priority of Christology over eschatology and ethics is important to note: the Last Judgment is a story about Jesus with consequences for the Matthean community. Deflationary exegeses which ignore Christology in favor of eschatology and ethics reverse this order, suggesting instead that the Last Judgment is an ethical story for the Matthean community with Christological implications about the person of Jesus. If there is a “logic” behind the gospels, it seems to be this: first one should tell a story about who Jesus is, then one should draw appropriate conclusions from this story for an intended audience. Deflationary exegeses -- by taking the Judge out of the Last Judgment -- violate this logic. Such exegeses do not necessarily reach incorrect conclusions about eschatology or ethics, but by inverting the logic of the Gospels -- by emphasizing consequences-for-audience over revelations-about-Jesus -- these interpretations begin to blur the boundary between exegesis and eisegesis.

Deflationary exegeses turn Matthew 25:31-46 into an elaborate answer to the dual question: *who goes where, and why?* On this view, the parable of the sheep and the goats is told by Jesus to awaken the sort of dread and fear of eternal punishment that might finally move the Matthean community to live as they should. The story becomes a prod, one which forces its audience to think about standards of correct conduct -- in this case, about acts of charity and mercy. To be sure, the Last Judgment has a great deal to say about the requirements and eternal consequences of loving action. But exegeses which view the pericope as a response to the question *who goes where, and why?* miss the fundamental, Christological point of the gospel writer. To focus on such questions alone is to overlook the big, surprising fact unveiled by Jesus in this story -- the revelation that the Divine Judge is himself present in each of the “least” to whom acts of mercy and charity are extended. There are few words spoken by Jesus more jarring than those in verse 40: “For as much as you did it to one of the least of these my

brothers, you did it to me.” This revelation is the astonishing climax of the judgment scene, and it urges one to think in the first place, not about oneself nor even about those to whom one should minister, but about *Jesus*. The question which the Gospel writer provokes is not “Who goes where and why?”, but “Who is this *Jesus*, revealed here as a Divine Judge who unexpectedly stands together with the least among us?”

Jesus reveals that he is present in the least at the close of the ages, when he sits on his “throne of glory” as the exalted King and Judge. Matthew tells us that the Lord will reveal to the sheep and goats that he was present, all along, among the least. As a fact about *Jesus*, this is really nothing new. It is another instance of the theme of kenosis which, arguably, is the constitutive theme of the Christian gospel (in all its expressions) and, therefore, is the central theme of all New Testament writings. Only when Jesus became the least among us, emptying himself through perfect obedience to the will of God even to a scandalous death on the cross, is he finally revealed as the Messiah. He became the least for our sake, and he remains so for our sake as well. All eschatological and ethical consequences must follow from this kenotic emphasis: what was true of Christ remains true of those in whom he can still be found -- they will be the emptied ones, those subject to the woes of this life.

It is significant that Matthew’s Gospel does not contain a record of Christ’s ascension. In the final verse of Matthew, Jesus says to his disciples, “Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age” (28:20). At this point, the Gospel account simply ends. In a manner of speaking, Matthew tells his listeners that their Lord did *not* ascend to heaven, at least not in the sense of being somewhere “out there,” somewhere far away from the earthly life of human experience. Rather, Jesus remains Emmanuel -- “God with us” -- to the close of the age. The Matthean community faced a crisis at the end of the first century. To move forward in unity with the church’s universal mission, the Jewish and Gentile Christians in Antioch had to embrace the “better righteousness” of forgiveness and mercy. For this reason, it is important to allow these final words of Christ from the Great Commission to inform one’s understanding of the parable of the Last Judgment. Jesus is present in his disciples (28:20), but Jesus is also present in the least (25:40). To follow Christ, to be his disciple, is *both to minister to and to become the least*. The parable is not a mere summary of required charity. It is a powerful summary of the Gospel-wide mandate to follow the crucified messiah. Matthew calls his community to emulate Christ, even as he more deeply describes the person of Christ. Who is Jesus? He is the Christ who will reside with all who preach the good news, even as they become -- like him -- the “least” in the course of this missionary activity.

D. A Moral Theology to Guide the Servant Parish

One goal of this project is to develop a better understanding of our call as Christians to serve the poor and suffering. In the first chapter, this was described as the movement from morals to moral theology. It is the movement beyond just knowing what one ought to do, and achieving as well a better understanding of why these obligations carry special weight.

We used an analogy in the previous chapter with Orthodox worship to bring greater clarity to the expression ‘moral theology.’ ‘Liturgy’ names the study of the actions and rites

themselves through which we offer our worship. The one who is proficient in liturgics is the one who knows how to prepare and celebrate a given divine service. Beyond liturgics there is liturgical theology. 'Liturgical theology' names the study of the meaning and significance of the actions and rites. Liturgics teaches us how to celebrate a baptism, for example, and perhaps how the steps of the rite have changed over time. Liturgical theology teaches us that baptism is the Christian's rite of initiation into the Body of Christ through union -- a union with Christ in a death like his, so that the Christian might be raised to new life alongside her Lord and Savior.

More will be said in the final chapter of this study, but for now we can begin to sketch an outline of the basics. Based on a Christological reading of Matthew 25, the following emerges as the central idea of an Orthodox moral theology:

Through ministry to the poor and suffering, especially when paired with the evangelization mandate of Matthew 28, the Christian both encounters Christ, and becomes by grace what Christ is by nature.

Matthew 25:31-46 is a kenotic hymn which forges an identity between Christ and those in need of mercy and help. For the Christian, this fact about Christ leads in the second place to a fact about the goal of discipleship. Christ reveals his divinity precisely through his kenosis in love for the present and eternal welfare of his beloved. As for Christ, so also for us: we become like Christ as we also more and more extend relief and compassion, in love, to those in need, even if this requires that we too become more and more like "the least" we choose to love.

Orthodox Christians talk a great deal about salvation as theosis -- about salvation as divinization, as becoming divine by God's grace. But theosis is not the power to walk on water, to levitate during prayer, nor to see the uncreated light. If Christ is the measure of all things -- and if Christ "shows us what it means to be God in the way that he chooses to die as a human being"¹⁴ -- then theosis is the capacity for loving kenosis. To be sure, salvation is not achieved because we minister in love to the poor and suffering. Rather, through such ministry we become more and more like "the least" we serve and, in turn, more and more like our Lord who reveals his oneness with them in Matthew 25. Theosis is not a reward after the fact for those who seek justice in love for those in need. Seeking justice is the activity through which God shares his life, even as we lose our lives for the sake of Christ and his gospel (Mark 8:35).

Why is it important to strengthen our ministries to the poor and suffering? Matthew 25 begins to point the way. Through such ministries the parish becomes the Body of Christ, not just inside the four walls of the church building, but outside those walls as well. In worship, the pentecostal grace of the descending Holy Spirit changes earthly bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. In compassionate ministry to others, especially when this ministry intersects with our commission to preach and teach, that same Spirit descends on us and changes us in the very same way.

3. Functions of Justice in Scripture

¹⁴ Father John Behr.

Though important, a close reading of Matthew 25 is not enough to fully appreciate the force of the commandment to “do justice” found so frequently in Scripture. Still, the parable of the sheep and the goats provides an important foothold. From it, we can leap forwards and backwards in Scripture to see that kenosis (giving the self away to another in love) functions more often as cause than effect. That is to say, we can see throughout Scripture that kenosis is not a virtue of the already holy but is, rather, one of the main engines that drives our transformation into “little Christs.”

Although a comprehensive exploration of even the single term ‘justice’ is beyond the scope of this study, it is useful to look closely at the several contexts that frame various biblical passages that deal with compassionate ministry to the poor and suffering. By paying attention not just to the word ‘justice’ but also to the function of the wider passage in which it occurs -- by paying attention to context -- we can learn far more than just what to do: we can learn why those good things are choiceworthy in the first place. This, of course, is the movement from morals to moral theology -- from a catalogue of good deeds to an explanation of how those deeds function to reveal Christ and His Kingdom. In this section we will explore the connections that exist between justice and four key features of Christian life. We will see that justice is associated with situations and outcomes that are liturgical, sacramental, messianic, and ecclesial.

A. Justice is Liturgical

As Orthodox Christians, we might be tempted to breathe a sigh of relief when we realize just how demanding worship life can be in other Christian traditions. In evangelical and non-denominational churches of all sizes there is often an arms race to supplement Sunday worship with ever-better, bigger, and louder forms. There is an emphasis on what is new and appealing, all in the hope of attracting worshippers who otherwise might choose to go elsewhere, or nowhere at all.

For the Orthodox, liturgical life is largely set. Technology beyond the fourth century is rarely needed. And in general an Orthodox parish will not live or die based on whether the majority of its members feel “spiritually fed.” For that, we should give thanks to God.

And still, as Orthodox, we are not so different from our evangelical brothers and sisters. For them, Sunday worship is designed to attract. About this, evangelical Christians are explicit and high-octane. But all too often, Orthodox Christians fall into the same attractional model of church life and mission.

As mentioned in the first chapter, how often do we reduce our approach to missions to the biblical slogan “Come and see”? How often do we retell the story of the Kievan emissaries who report back to Prince Vladimir that in Constantinople “we knew not whether we were on heaven or on earth” and that “God dwells there among men”? I think the general attitude among Orthodox to the work of missions only differs from the typical evangelical attitude in degree, not in kind. We accept the same basic premise: if we could just get people in the door,

then they too would leave like the Kievan envoys, saying to themselves “We cannot forget such beauty.”

And no doubt this is the experience of many who have converted to Orthodox Christianity. For certain we hold in high esteem the capacity of Orthodox worship to allow us to breathe the air of the Kingdom, and yes, this alone can at times change people. But is this really all that there is to church life and outreach? Are we called simply to keep our icons polished and our chanting suitably mystical so that the Liturgy of St John can do double duty: so that it can usher us into the Kingdom and, at the same time, attract others who in time will want to do the same? Are Orthodox pastors and parish leaders also beholden to the Sunday-only crowd, organizing life on Monday through Saturday so that worship on the Lord’s Day is always well executed and thoroughly complimented? Are Orthodox Christians just cheaper versions of those evangelicals who pour enormous amounts of time and resources into creating and perfecting styles of worship that are cutting-edge and highly-marketable?

We know of course that, yes, there is a great deal more to ministry than catering to the Sunday-only crowd. If worship was all that mattered, then *Isaiah 1* would never have been written. These are the verses we read in church on the very first day of Great Lent each year:

“What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?” says the LORD; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of he-goats. “When you come to appear before me, who requires of you this trampling of my courts? Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath and the calling of assemblies -- I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. When you spread forth your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen (Isaiah 1:11-15).

God here rejects the worship of the southern kingdom, not because the worship was poorly done, but because the people of Judah rejected the call to righteousness on all the other days of the week. The teaching they celebrate on the Sabbath is neglected and flaunted at all other times.

So yes, there is something more to Church life. Ministry is not about simply attracting others to church on Sundays. Missions is not about padding our membership and stewardship numbers. Church life is not attractional, it is missional. We worship in order to be sent forth to keep the twin commandments of love of God and love of neighbor. And if our churches are not growing in all the ways that matter, perhaps this is because God is turning his back on our worship, just as he announced through the voice of his prophet Isaiah.

And not just through Isaiah -- other prophets in Scripture highlight the link between worship and care for the weak. With power, Amos and Micah also reveal that, to God, injustice renders worship odious.

I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings, I will not accept them, and the peace offerings of your fatted beasts I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (Amos 5:21-24).

With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my first-born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:6-8).

For Orthodox Christians, the close connection underscored in the prophetic literature between *doxologia* and *diakonia* is particularly concerning. Worship is of course not offered to God as a form of appeasement. Properly speaking, liturgy is not something offered to God at all but is, rather, the prime portal through which God reveals and offers his Kingdom. Through liturgy we deepen our communion with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Holy Mysteries at the heart of Orthodox worship are the pinnacle examples of "putting on Christ" (Galatians 3:27) and of becoming ourselves little Christs. For God to refuse worship is, for Orthodox Christians, like a second exile from Paradise: gone is the intimacy of walking with the Lord in the cool mist of Eden.

There is no Pelagianism here. The prophetic message is not that injustice is the cause of liturgical breakdown, or that one must be "good" before God grants grace through the Mysteries. The insight is rather that *doxologia* and *diakonia* go together, like breathing in and breathing out. It is a concrete example of Christ's proclamation that love of neighbor is another greatest commandment "like unto" the love of God. Like entangled photons with matching behaviors, you cannot evaluate the goodness of a community's worship without, at the same time, also evaluating the goodness of a community's care for the poor and suffering. Entanglement is a feature of quantum particles, and of eucharistic assemblies.

The condemnation of Israel's worship in Isaiah 1 is followed by an equally powerful plea from God.

Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow. "Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool (Isaiah 1:16-18).

God laments that "the faithful city has become a harlot, she that was full of justice! Righteousness lodged in her, but now murderers. Your silver has become dross, your wine mixed with water" (Isaiah 1:21-22). God is not here complaining about the quality of actual silver and wine, but about the low value of Judah's worship -- worship which may as well use dross and water given Judah's neglect of justice. Yet God holds out the promise of restoration, declaring that that "Zion shall be redeemed by justice, and those in her who repent, by righteousness" (Isaiah 1:27). It is not merely Jerusalem that will be restored upon proper advocacy of the weak, but "Zion" -- the vision of Jerusalem as the heavenly city and abode of God.

To the northern Kingdom in the time of Amos, the promise is the same:

Seek good, and not evil, that you may live; and so the LORD, the God of hosts, will be with you, as you have said. Hate evil, and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the LORD, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph (Amos 5:14-15).

If Israel allows “justice to roll down like waters” then God “will be with you” (5:24, 15). He will no longer command Israel, saying “take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen” (5:23).

B. Justice is sacramental

Because justice cannot be cleaved off from worship as a separate and independent concern for the community, it follows that justice also bears a close connection to the sacraments themselves. More to the point, justice itself a sacrament, a mystery of the Church.

In the previous section I briefly described the worry that Isaiah 1 provokes for the Orthodox: the rejection of worship is like an exile from paradise. It is to be once again cut off from the source of life and to “surely die” a second time, as did Adam and Eve when their disobedience led to separation (Genesis 2:17). What Scripture teaches is that we are connected to God through worship, but only when that worship is paired with zeal for bringing injustice against the weak and neglected to an end. And so if worship is space and time through which God reveals Himself to us, so too is the time and space we set aside for ministry to the poor and suffering. In other words, if liturgical life is sacramental, then so too is the pursuit of justice. The marquis moments in life during which the Kingdom is manifested to human beings include both the Liturgy, and the liturgy after the Liturgy.

This of course is the basic lesson of the parable of the sheep and the goats. By identifying with the poor and suffering, Christ reveals that compassionate ministry to the “least” is simultaneously an experience of Christ’s own divine presence and activity. This makes justice, quite literally, a holy mystery of the Church. Through *diakonia*, no less than through *doxologia*, God shares his life with us.

To illustrate the sacramental function and force of ministry to “the least” it is useful to consider the context of the call to justice issued by the prophet Hosea. Hosea differs from Amos in that the primary emphasis is the sin of idolatry rather than the sin of injustice.¹⁵ Nevertheless, a consequence of Israel’s idolatry is the normalization of a selfish and unjust neglect of the poor and weak. With power, Hosea speaks against the apostasy and unrighteousness of Israel through the imagery of marriage. Hosea obeys the command to marry the prostitute Gomer, and to name his children by her *Seed of God, Not Pitied and Not My People* (Hosea 1). Hosea relates time and again that God weeps over the broken covenant as a husband weeps over a faithless and scandalous wife. At the same time, Hosea repeatedly underscores the enduring tenderness of God, the undying divine affection for Israel despite Israel’s embrace of other nations and other gods. And the promise of reconciliation is repeatedly offered by the spurned and heartbroken Husband. God looks forward to the day when once again he will court his

¹⁵ Heschel, page 74.

beloved as he first did when he led her from Egypt. "Behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her ... And there she shall answer as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt" (Hosea 2:14-15).

Through the prophet Hosea, God offers nothing less than a second marriage:

And in that day, says the LORD, you will call me, 'My husband,' and no longer will you call me, 'My Baal.' For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, and they shall be mentioned by name no more. And I will make for you a covenant on that day with the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety. And I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness; and you shall know the LORD (Hosea 2:16-20).

God savors an eternal marriage with his people. This will be a betrothal not just in faithfulness, but in "righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy." In that day, God says that he will have pity on *Not Pitied*, and to *Not My People* he will say "You are my people." And once again the *Seed of God* will be planted by God himself in the land, yielding the riches of fruitfulness (Hosea 2:22-23). Israel's needed correction is viewed by God as equivalent to the correction needed when a marriage has been destroyed by the faithlessness of an adulterous wife. But reconciliation is possible, to be sure. And God proclaims his proposal for a second, eternal marriage using the language of justice: "So you, by the help of your God, return, hold fast to love and justice, and wait continually for your God" (Hosea 12:6).

The use of marriage imagery in Hosea for calling Israel to repentance is not just a device with rhetorical force. Such imagery and language allows Hosea to develop the theme of God's enduring tenderness and affection for Israel.¹⁶ Abraham Heschel describes this as "one of the boldest conceptions of religious thinking. ... Israel is the consort of God" -- something which predates and anticipates this same theme in the *Song of Songs*.¹⁷ "I desire love," says God, "and not sacrifice, attachment to God rather than burnt offerings" (Hosea 6:6). And if the "new betrothal" to Israel is a betrothal "in righteousness and justice" (2:20), then justice itself is elevated to the level of all the other sacraments through which God decisively shares His life with us. Just as marriage is the beginning of love, justice is the beginning of shared life with God. Just as marriage leads in time to the fullness of union, the pursuit of justice over time similarly deepens our solidarity with the One who created all things and called all things good (Genesis 1).

Once again we see in the biblical witness that justice should not be thought of strictly as an activity of the already-holy. Instead, Scripture invites us to view justice as a mystery, like marriage, through which God shares life with us. Justice is presented as a source and cause of

¹⁶ Heschel, page 60: "A new factor not found in Amos is the sense of tenderness and mercy. Hosea is able to express as no other prophet the love of God for Israel in its most varied forms -- as compassion (11:8), as a mother's tenderness (1:6-8, 2:3, 6, 21, 25; 11:1), as love between husband and wife (3:1 ff)."

¹⁷ Heschel, page 62.

sanctification, not merely as an effect and capacity granted after the fact to those already among the righteous.

C. *Justice is Messianic*

If compassionate ministry to the poor and suffering is more than just a “good thing” to do -- more than something that is morally praiseworthy -- then what else might be said of such ministry? Thus far we have seen that justice nurtures important connections to our liturgical and sacramental lives within the Church. In this section, we will note that the biblical witness also urges us to recognize that justice is a mark of Christ’s kingship. Justice, in other words, is a messianic virtue -- an activity that helps locate where and when Christ is at work, bringing salvation to those in need of God’s mercy and help.

Classically, this aspect of justice is seen most vividly in Christ’s own debut in a Nazareth synagogue at the launch of His public ministry. He famously opens the scroll handed to him and reads the following from Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord” (Luke 4:18-19). And as Christ “closed the book,” the Evangelist Luke records that “the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.” Jesus breaks the silence and says, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:18-21). If first impressions are significant, then we should learn from the Lord: the “acceptable year of the Lord” is marked by compassionate ministry to the poor, the suffering, and the oppressed.

In this section, for the sake of greater focus, we will not explore additional New Testament passages, but will instead briefly mine the concentration of royal and messianic imagery in the book of the Psalms, the hymn book of both Judaism and the early Church. In the Psalms, the God of Israel is praised as both deliverer and sovereign, and the earthly king of Israel is viewed as both God’s heir and *locum tenens*. This is true both historically and prophetically. That is to say, the Psalms strongly link divine affection both to David and to his lineage, a lineage which will in time produce a promised messiah to inaugurate a final kingdom in which the goodness of God’s law is translated into the goodness of human freedom and flourishing:

I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living! Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; yea, wait for the LORD! (Psalm 27:13-14)

And the anticipated “goodness of the LORD in the land of the living” is characterized regularly in the Psalms by the presence of “righteousness and justice”¹⁸:

Righteousness and justice are the foundation of thy throne; steadfast love and faithfulness go before thee (Psalm 89:1).

¹⁸ FOOTNOTE about the underlying terms in Hebrew/Greek.

And justice itself is regularly unpacked as God's providential concern for the weak and the vulnerable. Noteworthy examples of this equivalence are heard at each Divine Liturgy that includes the "typical antiphons" of Psalm 103 and Psalm 146:

Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. The LORD works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed (Psalm 103:2-6).

Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no help. When his breath departs he returns to his earth; on that very day his plans perish. Happy is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD his God, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever; who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets the prisoners free; the LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous. The LORD watches over the sojourners, he upholds the widow and the fatherless; but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin. The LORD will reign forever, thy God, O Zion, to all generations (Psalm 146:3-10).

In these antiphons, *doxologia* and *diakonia* are linked. God is given praise for his saving works on behalf of the poor and suffering. The eucharistic Liturgy begins by glorifying God for his own "liturgy after the Liturgy" -- that is, for God's own activity on behalf of the oppressed, hungry, imprisoned, blind, bowed down, widowed, and orphaned. And if justice is a divine concern, it is our concern as well: "Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it. ... The LORD is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit" (Psalm 34:14, 18).

The Psalms emphasize that God's providential care for the poor and suffering is an ongoing and eternal feature of his kingship, one that is directed specifically against those responsible for oppression:

The LORD is king for ever and ever; the nations shall perish from his land. O LORD, thou wilt hear the desire of the meek; thou wilt strengthen their heart, thou wilt incline thy ear to do justice to the fatherless and the oppressed, so that man who is of the earth may strike terror no more (Psalm 10:16-18).

God not only opposes the wicked, he also comforts the humble and the humbled. The Psalms frequently counsel the hearer to be comforted by the power of the Lord to bring justice to those who wait with expectation.

Fret not yourself because of the wicked, be not envious of wrongdoers! For they will soon fade like the grass, and wither like the green herb. Trust in the LORD, and do good; so you will dwell in the land, and enjoy security. Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him, and he will act. He will bring forth your vindication as the light, and your right (*mishpat*) as the noonday. Be still before the LORD, and wait patiently for him (Psalm 37:1-7).

The Psalmist often combines imagery of kingship and the language of justice, reminding the reader that God's kingship, and the kingship of David and his authentic heirs -- and ultimately the kingship of the promised messiah -- is founded on a concern for those who have no earthly protector:

Righteousness and justice are the foundation of thy throne; steadfast love and faithfulness go before thee (Psalm 89:14).

Clouds and thick darkness are round about him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne (Psalm 97:2).

Mighty King, lover of justice, thou hast established equity; thou hast executed justice and righteousness in Jacob. Mighty King, lover of justice, thou hast established equity; thou hast executed justice and righteousness in Jacob. Extol the LORD our God; worship at his footstool! Holy is he! (Psalm 99:4-5)

Give the king thy justice, O God, and thy righteousness to the royal son! May he judge thy people with righteousness, and thy poor with justice! (Psalm 72:1-2)

The Psalmist even depicts God's superiority over all other gods (and those with divine aspirations) in terms of his own concern for the poor and suffering:

God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment: "How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked? Give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked" (Psalm 82:1-4).

Compassion for the poor and suffering is not just a mark of divine kingship, but is also a mark of divinity itself. A concern for justice is part of what it means to be both King and God.

But justice is not only a divine concern. It is also an interest of those who serve the Lord as God and King. Time and again the Psalms explain that we should seek justice because God loves justice and seeks it Himself.

Depart from evil, and do good; so shall you abide forever. For the LORD loves justice; he will not forsake his saints. The righteous shall be preserved for ever, but the children of the wicked shall be cut off (Psalm 37:27-28).

Who can utter the mighty doings of the LORD, or show forth all his praise? Blessed are they who observe justice,¹⁹ who do righteousness at all times! (Psalm 106:2-3)

This calls to mind the frightful commandment in Matthew's gospel "to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). Luke goes on to bring greater precision by

¹⁹ God's activity at the start of the couplet is paired with human activity in the concluding half. Given that in a Hebrew couplet A-B, B is usually a redescription in new terms of what is first described in A, it follows that the sense here is "Blessed are they who *also* do justice."

recording Christ's commandment as "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36). God's perfection is best understood as his perfect mercy, to which Christ calls all disciples. Through the Psalmist and through his Christ, God calls his people to imitate his own love for mercy and compassion. And through this imitation, God shares the dignity of his Kingship. His capacity to grant freedom becomes our capacity. We are commissioned to do as God does, to release others from all forms of enslavement.

When Christ opens the scroll of Isaiah at the start of his public ministry, he emphasizes compassion. Ministry to the poor and suffering announces the arrival of divine deliverance, so long promised by God through his prophets. Christ's march to the Cross is a *messianic* march, and this is so because Christ fulfills the prophecy of the "acceptable year of the Lord" (Luke 4:19, Isaiah 61:2). Justice, understood as selfless comfort and mercy to the weak and exploited, is inseparable from the identity of Jesus as Incarnate Lord and Savior. Such justice, according to the Prophet Isaiah and the Evangelist Luke, is the announced goal of his advent.

C. *Justice is Ecclesial*

Ekklesia is the Greek word for 'church.' Aptly, it designates those who are 'called out' (*ek-kaleo*) and set apart. Similarly, the word for 'assembly' in Hebrew is *qāhal*. Although the origin of *qāhal* is uncertain, it bears a close resemblance to the Hebrew *qôl*, meaning 'voice'. This leads some scholars to suspect that there was once a verb form **qal*, meaning 'to call'.²⁰ In any case, the biblical terms that designate the community of God's people preserve the sense in which church is a matter of call and response. Whether in Greek or Hebrew, God calls, and the covenant people respond.

What does God call His people to do? What is the reason for calling out human beings in the first place? The biblical witness is instructive. In Genesis, just after Abraham is visited by the Lord in the form of three angels, God deliberates whether he should go on to tell Abraham about his plans for Sodom and Gomorrah. "The LORD said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by him?" (Gen 18:17-18). God answers his own question negatively.

No, for I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice; so that the LORD may bring to Abraham what he has promised him (Genesis 18:19).

Abraham is called by God to "do righteousness and justice," and to charge his children and household after him to do the same. Such is "the way of the LORD." And to underscore "righteousness and justice" as the purpose of Abraham's call, the biblical story then recounts the destruction of the wicked who, according to the Prophet Ezekiel, were content to neglect the needs of those they could have easily helped. "Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom:

²⁰ See entry for *qôl*, in G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, Heinz-Josef Fabry, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Volume 12, (Eerdmans Press: Grand Rapids, MI: 2003), p. 576.

she and her daughters had pride, surfeit of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy” (Ezekiel 16:49). Sodom’s behavior is the opposite of Abraham’s own display of selfless hospitality to the wilderness travelers in Genesis 17.

The “way of the LORD” is indeed pressed upon the descendants of Abraham. The covenant offered by God through Moses to the Hebrews after their deliverance from Egypt enshrines the same call. Torah itself is an elaboration of what it means to “do righteousness and justice.” And among the ordinances is a special concern for those in need of mercy and relief.

You shall not pervert the justice due to your poor in his suit. Keep far from a false charge, and do not slay the innocent and righteous, for I will not acquit the wicked. And you shall take no bribe, for a bribe blinds the officials, and subverts the cause of those who are in the right. You shall not oppress a stranger; you know the heart of a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt (Exodus 23:6-8).

And as we noted in the previous sections concerning biblical prophecy, God’s anger with the northern and southern kingdoms often grows from their toleration of injustice against the poor and needy. From the beginning and throughout the Old Testament, compassion for the weak and vulnerable is not just something which the *ekklesia/qāhal* does. Rather, such compassion is constitutive of being the true assembly of the ones “called out” by God for special election as a holy nation. Again, justice is not an optional hobby for assemblies already distinguished by their advanced holiness. The status of Israel as “chosen” does then enable them to “do good, and seek justice.” The arrow of causation runs in the opposite direction: doing good and seeking justice is part of what confirms and sustains that status. Apart from responding to the voice of the Lord (*qôl-YHWH*) to “do righteousness and justice,” there is no *qāhal*.

Neither is there an *ekklesia* in its New Testament sense of the mystical Body of Christ. As noted in the previous section, one function of justice in Scripture is to reveal that Christ is God’s messiah. And what is true of Christ as King will also be true of Christ’s Kingdom. Consequently, justice has yet another function: to reveal that the community of baptized believers is continuous with the *qāhal Yisrael* that is birthed with Abraham’s call and matured through Torah and its associated Mosaic covenant. There really is not anything new about the New Testament, at least not when it comes to the purpose of God’s call. When the voice of God is silent (when the word is not proclaimed to the called out ones) or when the voice of God is ignored, there is no church. Again, the claim here is not that God’s power in history is limited when his chosen people ignore the demands of Scripture. To be sure, when God needs to choose other agents, he does so. Instead the claim here is about one particular function of justice in Scripture: justice is ecclesial. Justice points to the Holy Spirit. It marks the boundary between communities enlivened by the Spirit, and communities bereft of pentecostal grace. When compassion for the poor and needy is present within a community, so too is the church as the mystical Body of Christ.

Ministry to the poor and needy is one way in which Scripture signals the presence of the Church, just as smoke signals the presence of fire. Again, this is no surprise given that the flowering of compassion is the particular signal which Christ himself chooses in Luke 4 to announce “the acceptable year of the Lord” and his fulfillment of messianic prophecy. Indeed, justice is a dominant theme at the true “birth” of the Church -- not Acts 1 and 2, but Luke 1 and

2. The incarnation begins with Mary and her “yes” to the archangel’s message that she will bear the Son of God. Mary’s song of rejoicing to Elizabeth is replete with the themes of mercy, relief, and freedom.

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden. For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his posterity forever (Luke 1:46-55).

It is no surprise that Christ launches his public ministry using prophetic imagery of preaching good news to the poor. Long before Christ did so, his mother did the same. Mary celebrates the incarnation, God’s debut as human, using imagery that is no less adamant regarding God’s affection for the downtrodden.

The language of compassion to the poor and needy is the language chosen by Mary to celebrate the incarnation of Christ in her, and this same language of compassion is the language chosen by the writers of the New Testament to celebrate the ongoing incarnation of Christ within the body of believers. A full catalog of the actions undertaken on behalf of the poor and suffering by Christ’s followers in the New Testament would be large, but a brief survey is useful as a reminder of the inseparability of what the church is and what the church does. In particular, these events are noteworthy since they are read in the Orthodox Church at the Divine Liturgies on the Sundays following Pascha, the Feast of the Resurrection.

Acts 5:12-20 (Second Sunday of Pascha). The Apostles’ preaching is always paired with “signs and wonders.” In particular, the sick are healed and the possessed are liberated. The church is compelling in both her words and deeds, attracting “multitudes” and upsetting the Sadducees, who are the elite and wealthy liaisons to the Roman overlords.

Acts 6:1-7 (Third Sunday of Pascha). The Apostles appoint deacons because preaching and serving community needs can no longer be managed by a single group. Among the first deacons is Stephen, who goes on to become the first Christian martyr.

Acts 9:36-41 (Fourth Sunday of Pascha). Peter raises Tabitha from the dead. Tabitha, described as “full of good works and acts of charity,” is celebrated as someone who labored to clothe those in need. ‘Tabitha’ means *gazelle* in Aramaic. In the *Song of Songs*, ‘gazelle’ is a mutual term of affection used by the lovers in their declarations to one another (Song of Songs 2:9, 7:3). The name ‘Tabitha’ is a signal by the Evangelist Luke that all who are “full of good works and acts of charity” are similarly beloved by God.²¹

²¹ The raising of Tabitha by Peter recalls the raising of Lazarus by Christ (John 11:1-44). The etymology of ‘Tabitha’ and the associated allusions to the *Song of Songs* suggest that all who extend mercy and relief to the suffering are beloved by God. Similarly, Jesus is fond enough of Lazarus to weep at his tomb and, later, to raise him from the dead. The etymology of ‘Bethany,’ the village of Lazarus and his

Acts 11:19-26, 29-30 (Fifth Sunday of Pascha). Following the martyrdom of Stephen, the first Christians move away from Jerusalem into outlying towns and cities. While preaching the gospel in new places, the apostles insist on gathering a collection for the relief of brothers and sisters still in Judea. (And this theme of collections for suffering Christians is a recurrent one in the letters of Paul.)

Acts 16:16-24 (Sixth Sunday of Pascha). Paul and Silas exorcise a slave girl who is clearly a profit-making vehicle for men in the community. The exorcism enrages the profiteers, who then have Paul and Silas cast into prison. The imagery here is striking in our contemporary setting: Paul and Silas are engaged in bringing the exploitation and trafficking of a young girl to an end.

The above is a small set of episodes in which justice is inseparable from mission in the New Testament church.

4. *Introducing the Five C's of the Servant Parish*

In the final chapters of this study we will develop practical strategies for strengthening ministry to the poor and suffering and, thereby, will help to bring greater completeness to Father Alexander Schmemmann's wider program of saying 'yes' to the Kingdom. In the first chapter this greater completeness was described as pursuing Father Alexander's goal of restoring the missionary character of the Orthodox parish, understood as replacing the false ideal of "serving the parish" with the vision of "the parish as servant." So far, we have sketched the basic outline of a moral theology that can guide the servant parish in its outreach to the poor and suffering. Briefly described at the end of the exegesis of Matthew 25:31-46, this moral theology holds up ministry to the poor and suffering as the very sort of Christ-like kenosis that leads in time to the fullness of union with Christ. Compassion is the engine that drives theosis, so to speak. Through it we are brought into greater contact with Christ, who identifies himself with the abject. In addition, we become more and more like the abject in proportion to the degree that our love is like the self-emptying love of Christ. We serve the poor because that is where Christ is. And as we serve the poor, we become poor ourselves, participating in the very identity at the heart of the parable of the Last Judgment -- the free substitution allowed

sisters Mary and Martha, suggests a meaning such as 'house of misery' or 'house of affliction.'

[FOOTNOTE] Bethany, it seems, may have been one of a collection of colonies to which the sick and suffering were taken for relief and convalescence. Lazarus and his sisters were not among the sick. In fact, Luke points out they have a home in Bethany (Luke 10:38-42), which they freely open to Christ and His disciples, suggesting that Lazarus and his sisters are among the caretakers in Bethany. They labored to bring relief to the sick and suffering. Like Tabitha, they too are "full of good works and acts of charity." Like Tabitha, they are also among the 'gazelles' beloved by God. Scripture emphasizes the special affection that God has for the compassionate by having Tabitha and Lazarus raised from the dead. And not just to display the power of Christ, but presumably so that Tabitha and Lazarus might continue their vital ministries to the poor and suffering.

between the personal presence of Christ and the personal presence of the “least of these” his brethren.

We may also say something introductory now about the promised practical strategies. The servant parish is a parish that honors five basic principles in its ministry to the poor and suffering.

(1) The servant parish communicates. Like the prophets, a servant parish will be engaged in bringing to light the injustices so prevalent around us. The prophetic vocation is not dead. God still moves aggressively towards the human being²², especially in support of the weak and neglected.

(2) The servant parish connects. And it does so, because Christ himself connects. Love is never abstract. Love presumes personhood and relationship. The servant parish will not just communicate facts about injustice, but will learn first-hand from those who suffer. Compassion means to ‘suffer with,’ and so compassion requires a posture of humility and a strategy of learning and listening. This is doubly important when the servant parish is largely populated by people who enjoy relative privilege and comfort. The aim is to create a servant parish, not a “savior parish” -- that is, a parish which believes the delusion that the power of evil must be matched by the counterpunch of virtue. There is only one savior, Jesus Christ. And this one savior identifies with the weak by becoming weak.

(3) The servant parish comforts. The servant parish will become another Bethany, a “house of affliction” set-apart for respite, where the sick and suffering can find a place of consolation. Following the examples of those like Mary, Martha, and Lazarus of Bethany, the members of a servant parish will convert resources into relief, while at the same time maintaining a place of hospitality for all. When Jesus journeyed to Judea, it was at just such a house of affliction that he chose to stay.

(4) The servant parish corrects. Mitigation is not the only goal of the servant parish. Suffering is an effect, a symptom of deeper causes. The servant parish will also emphasize correcting the causes of injustice, not just easing the pain of those who suffer. The servant parish’s call is Abraham’s call. Abraham was chosen by God so that he “may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice” (Gen 18:19). The way of the LORD is expressed through his good, holy, and just law. When righteousness is kept, when we learn and abide by the wisdom of God, then we starve injustice of the fuel it requires -- selfishness and apathy.

(5) The servant parish chrismates. Ministry to the poor and suffering is inseparable from the evangelistic mission of the church. As we noted in the exegesis of Matthew

²² Heschel and Tarazi.

25:31-46, the parable of the Last Judgment cannot be understood apart from the Great Commission. Matthew 25 and Matthew 28 are the twin engines that power the Church through space and time. And this is so because Christ identifies himself, not just with “the least of these my brethren,” but also with his Apostles and those who take up the apostolic mandate to baptize the nations. “Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Matthew 28:20). The *Acts of the Apostles* is a book-long testimony of the way that the Church both preaches good news and becomes good news to those who suffer. Like Christ, the church must also “preach good news to the poor.” We must “proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind.” We must “proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord” (Luke 4:18-18). Mission and mercy mutually enflame one another in the servant parish.

In the chapters that remain, we will expand on this brief introduction to the priorities of the servant parish -- these “Five C’s” of Communicate, Connect, Comfort, Correct, and Chrismate.

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