

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

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**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 often 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 a set of 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,” a topic we will develop fully in the concluding chapter of this study.

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”?² 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?

Once chapter 2 comes to an end, we will not then leave Scripture behind for good. In chapter 6, we will return to the insights provided by Scripture, translating them into practical strategies and resources that can assist a parish in serving the poor. The servant parish is a parish that for certain 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 25:31-46.³ 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.

It is common to place primary emphasis on one of two categories when reading Matthew 25. On the one hand, there is compelling evidence to view this as a primarily *eschatological* pericope, commenting in particular on the identity of those who face judgment at the end of time. On the other, there are convincing reasons to hear the parable as an *ethical* pericope, describing for us the criteria on which eternal judgment will be based. This section

² Isaiah 1:17.

³ In this chapter, ‘the sheep and the goats’ and the ‘Last Judgment’ are used interchangeably for Matthew 25:31-46.

will join those who argue that the primary emphasis is neither eschatological nor ethical. This pericope, like all narrative units in the gospels, is *Christological* in the first place. 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.

A. *Author and audience*⁴

The church in Antioch was founded by Hellenized Jews who fled 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 felicity 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.

⁴ 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.

Without forgiveness and mercy, the church cannot move forward in unity with its universal mission.

B. *A Christological exegesis of Matthew 25:31–46*

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.⁵ It is an account of the final reckoning at the close of the ages when “all the nations” (*panta ta ethne*, 25:32) will be judged according to the mercy extended to each “one of these, the least of my brothers” (*eni touton ton adelphon mou ton elaxiston*, 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.

The history of the interpretation of Matthew 25:31–46 is complicated, but as John R. Donahue notes, two standard exegetical questions typically attract attention.⁶ The first is an *eschatological* question: who is being judged in the parable? Who exactly are “the nations” (*ta ethne*) on trial at the end of time? The second is an *ethical* question: what is the criterion of divine judgment? Who are “the least” (*i elaxisti*) which the sheep treat so selflessly and the goats so uncharitably?

Establishing the referents of “all the nations” and “the least” is certainly important, but as Donahue further notes, to focus on these competing questions alone is to overlook the central, surprising fact unveiled by Jesus in Matthew 25:31–46—the revelation that the divine judge is himself present in each “one of the least” who suffer privation as the parable describes: “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 unexpected climax of the judgment scene, and as such it urges the hearer to consider a question 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

⁵ Harrington, 357.

⁶ John R. Donahue, “The ‘Parable’ of the Sheep and the Goats: A Challenge to Christian Ethics,” *Theological Studies* 47 (1986) 3-31.

least"? As Donahue urges, the basic question therefore is *Christological*.⁷ We turn now to the Christology of the parable.

First, it is important to survey the impressive of imagery associated with Jesus by Matthew in 25:31–46. The imagery is dense, constituting “a rich Christological tableau”⁸ 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 as ‘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 imagery of shepherd and king).⁹ 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].¹⁰ Indeed, Matthew’s equation in 25:40 of the king/Son of Man with “one of the least” is, not so much an innovation, as it is an extension of antecedent “Servant Christology.”¹¹ 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 parable of 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, the position of 25:31–46 in Matthew’s Gospel amplifies the parable, allowing it to raise the volume of what it has to say. The parable of 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 Man¹² 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”

⁷ Donahue, 16.

⁸ Donahue, 17.

⁹ For these references I rely on Harrington, 356–357, and John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005) 1040–1041.

¹⁰ Donahue, 18–19.

¹¹ Donahue, 18. I rely on Donahue for the term, but not for the claim made in this sentence.

¹² Harrington, 358.

is the *context* of the identification of Son of Man and “the least.” This identification is revealed on the “horizon of apocalyptic”¹³ 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 the passion narrative—together with the multiple points of contact among Matthew, the Old Testament, and the parable—confirm such 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”¹⁴ Jesus instructs his followers to “go and make disciples of “all nations” (*panta ta ethne*), and he reminds them that “Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.” As Donahue notes, the textual parallels between the parable of the sheep and goats and the Great Commission are striking. The “close of the age” (24:3, 28:20) is of course when “all the nations” (*panta ta ethne*; 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 final commission. Textual priority (ch 25 precedes ch 28) and temporal priority (the commission has happened, the Judgement has not) 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. This interdigitation allows the parable of the sheep and goats to function, not as a mere 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

¹³ Donahue, 16.

¹⁴ Donahue, 13, 14.

all who preach the good news, even as they become—like him—the “least” in the course of this missionary activity.¹⁵

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”.¹⁶ The parable’s powerful frame is Jesus-directed, pointing us to truths about who Jesus is. For this reason, the primary emphasis in Matthew 25:31–46 is Christology. Emphases on eschatology and ethics 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 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, as a catalyst to action. Orthodox parishes in North America in particular 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-gain 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 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

¹⁵ Donahue, 13.

¹⁶ Donahue, 13.

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 divine 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 surprising identification 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 25:40: “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?”

Matthew tells us that the Lord will reveal to the sheep and goats that he was present, all along, among the least. Outside the Gospels this is a surprise—indeed a scandal, for what deity considers it “exaltation” to be reduced to what is weak, forgotten, and dying. But inside the witness provided by the evangelists, the announcement “you did it to me” is nothing new. When Jesus identifies himself with the marginal, it is another instance of the theme of kenosis which is, arguably, the defining 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.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ 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.

3. *Functions of Justice in Scripture*

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." This again, will be the main idea of the moral theology we will present more fully in chapter 6 below.

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 dealing 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.

¹⁷ Donahue, 13.

¹⁸ Donahue, 13.

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 attractational 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.¹⁹

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 loving God and loving the 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.²⁰

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?²¹

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

¹⁹ Isaiah 1:11–15.

²⁰ Amos 5:21–24.

²¹ Micah 6:6–8.

Orthodox worship are the pinnacle examples of “putting on Christ”²² 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."²³

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.”²⁴ 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.”²⁵ It is not merely Jerusalem that will be restored upon proper advocacy for 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.²⁶

²² Galatians 3:27.

²³ Isaiah 1:16–18.

²⁴ Isaiah 1:21–22.

²⁵ Isaiah 1:27.

²⁶ Amos 5:14–15.

If Israel allows “justice to roll down like waters” then God “will be with you.”²⁷ 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.”²⁸

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 is 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.²⁹ 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 time and space 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 eucharistic 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.³⁰ 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.’³¹ 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

²⁷ Amos 5:24, 15.

²⁸ Amos 5:23.

²⁹ Genesis 2:17.

³⁰ Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1962), 74.

³¹ Hosea 1.

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 divine husband. God looks forward to the day when once again he will court his 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."³²

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.³³

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.³⁴ 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."³⁵

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.³⁶ 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*.³⁷ "I desire love," says God, "and

³² Hosea 2:14–15.

³³ Hosea 2:16–20.

³⁴ Hosea 2:22–23.

³⁵ Hosea 12:6.

³⁶ Heschel, 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)."

³⁷ Heschel, 62.

not sacrifice, attachment to God rather than burnt offerings.”³⁸ And if the “new betrothal” to Israel is a betrothal “in righteousness and justice,”³⁹ 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.⁴⁰

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 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.”⁴¹ 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.”⁴² 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

³⁸ Hosea 6:6.

³⁹ Hosea 2:20.

⁴⁰ Genesis 1.

⁴¹ Luke 4:18–18.

⁴² Luke 4:18–21.

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!⁴³

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":

Righteousness and justice are the foundation of thy throne; steadfast love and faithfulness go before thee.⁴⁴

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.⁴⁵

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.⁴⁶

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

⁴³ Psalm 27:13–14.

⁴⁴ Psalm 89:1.

⁴⁵ Psalm 103:2–6.

⁴⁶ Psalm 146:3–10.

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.”⁴⁷

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.⁴⁸

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 as the noonday. Be still before the LORD, and wait patiently for him.⁴⁹

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.⁵⁰

Clouds and thick darkness are round about him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Psalm 34:14, 18.

⁴⁸ Psalm 10:16–18.

⁴⁹ Psalm 37:1–7.

⁵⁰ Psalm 89:14.

⁵¹ 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!⁵²

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!⁵³

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."⁵⁴

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 king and God. 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.⁵⁵

Who can utter the mighty doings of the LORD, or show forth all his praise? Blessed are they who observe justice,⁵⁶ who do righteousness at all times!⁵⁷

⁵² Psalm 99:4-5.

⁵³ Psalm 72:1-2.

⁵⁴ Psalm 82:1-4.

⁵⁵ Psalm 37:27-28.

⁵⁶ 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."

⁵⁷ Psalm 106:2-3.

This calls to mind the frightful commandment in Matthew's gospel "to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."⁵⁸ Luke goes on to bring greater precision by recording Christ's commandment as "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful."⁵⁹ 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."⁶⁰ 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.'⁶¹ 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?"⁶² God answers his own question negatively.

⁵⁸ Matthew 5:48.

⁵⁹ Luke 6:36.

⁶⁰ Luke 4:19, Isaiah 61:2.

⁶¹ See entry for *qôl*, in G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, Heinz-Josef Fabry, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament, Volume 12*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Press, 2003), 576.

⁶² Genesis 18:17–18.

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.⁶³

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: she and her daughters had pride, surfeit of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy.”⁶⁴ 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.⁶⁵

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 not then enables 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

⁶³ Genesis 18:19.

⁶⁴ Ezekiel 16:49.

⁶⁵ Exodus 23:6–8.

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.⁶⁶

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.

⁶⁶ Luke 1:46–55.

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 term of mutual affection used by the lovers in their declarations to one another.⁶⁷ 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.⁶⁸

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.

⁶⁷ Song of Songs 2:9, 7:3.

⁶⁸ 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 sisters Mary and Martha, suggests a meaning such as 'house of misery' or 'house of affliction.' Bethany, some scholars suggest, may have been one of a collection of colonies to which the sick and suffering were taken for relief and convalescence. (See the discussion and references at <<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bethany>>, August 1, 2019.)

Lazarus and his sisters, we know, 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 would have been among the caretakers in Bethany, if indeed it were a place of refuge for the sick. The evidence is not conclusive, but context suggests that perhaps Mary, Martha, and Lazarus labored to bring relief to the sick and suffering. Like Tabitha, they too were "full of good works and acts of charity." Like Tabitha, they were 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.

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