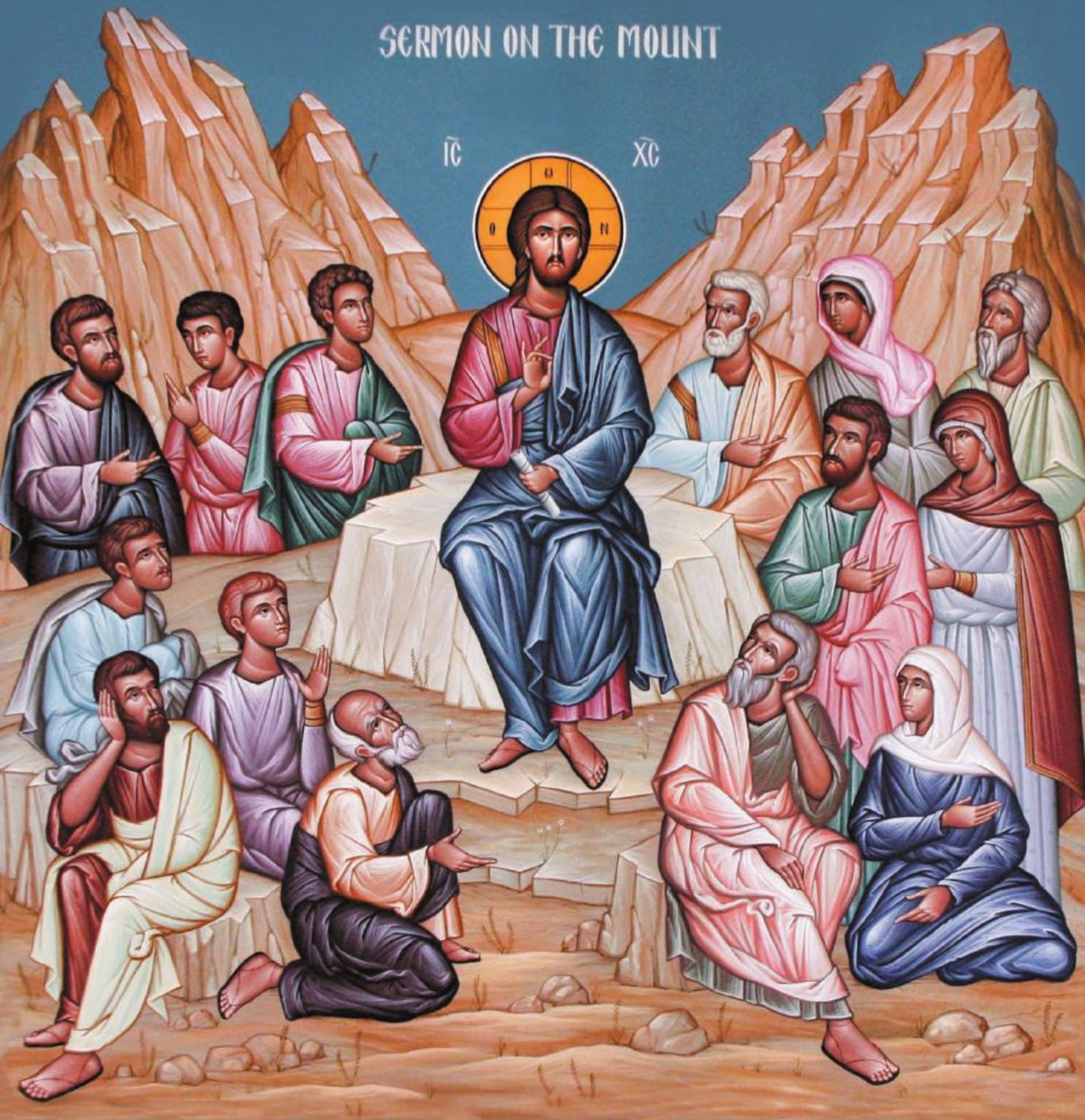


SERMON ON THE MOUNT



ORTHODOX PREACHING AS THE ORAL ICON OF CHRIST

James Kenneth Hamrick

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ORTHODOX PREACHING AS THE ORAL ICON OF CHRIST

by James Kenneth Hamrick

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To the memory of Archpriest Peter E. Gillquist (July 13, 1938–July 1, 2012), a mentor and fellow laborer in Christ who encouraged me in this endeavor, and who truly appreciated the essential place of preaching in the Orthodox Christian faith.

It is not what he says which is important,
but the Spirit which animates it, the
Spirit which nourishes his heart and
tongue, which gives shape to his sayings
and transforms the stones of his speech
into icons.

— Archimandrite Vasileios,
*Hymn of Entry: Liturgy and Life
in the Orthodox Church*

Foreword

I had the pleasure to work with Father James Kenneth Hamrick on his Master Thesis entitled, “Orthodox Preaching as the Oral Icon of Christ.” This oral icon of Christ is very dear to all the faithful, and forms an essential function of our mission in the Church. It is extremely important to resort to preaching that enables the deprived people to reach the depth of the Orthodox doctrine. This book in hand serves as a very useful tool toward reviving evangelization in the Orthodox Church. Many persons, clergy and laity, will benefit greatly by taking heed to the significant material presented in this book.

Clergy and lay persons alike should consult this book to find inspiration for a clearer grasp of the rich tradition of preaching which is our legacy and an expression of our vital spiritual life in Christ. The insights and contributions of Father James will not go unnoticed or unappreciated. Therefore, clergy looking into proclaiming the Gospel in an Orthodox way will be enriched with this work. He has in view the edification of all our churches in declaring the message of Christ within Liturgical context.

Finally, in return I would extend my heartfelt and unqualified endorsement of this project.

The dissemination of this material should be encouraged throughout the Orthodox world.

V. Rev. Michel Najim, Ph.D.

Saint Nicholas Cathedral, Los Angeles, California

Preface

My appreciation for fine preaching began to develop during my childhood years under the preaching and nurture of my father, the late Reverend Kenneth Carl Hamrick, a Methodist minister for over 30 years. In my own journey of faith from the Protestant tradition to the Orthodox Church, I have been exposed to a broad array of preaching styles: from firebrand revival and Pentecostal preaching, to traditional African American preaching, to the oratorical and solemn style of “high church” preaching, and to the less formal teaching-style of expository preaching that is typical in much of the evangelical Christian tradition. While my own preaching skills have been shaped and influenced by a number of fine preachers from a variety of these traditions, in the years of my pastoral ministry leading up to my conversion to Orthodoxy, I grew increasingly alarmed and dismayed with the trajectory of Christian preaching in our time.

Drifting further and further from its Orthodox roots, the preaching of Christ crucified in our society has given increasing ground to the militant liberalism and pluralism inherent in most mainline seminaries, as well as to the egomaniacal showmanship and antics of preaching charlatans more interested in self-promotion and the emotional manipulation of

crowds than in true theological and spiritual integrity. Undeniably, a crisis of preaching presently exists. And while, on the one hand, much of Protestantism has exalted the importance of preaching over the Eucharist, on the other hand, quality preaching in the liturgical traditions, including Holy Orthodoxy, has suffered for a lack of significance and emphasis given to the holy work and discipline of effectively preaching the Good News of God in Christ. This crisis of preaching ranges from otherwise accomplished preaching and oratory within Protestantism plagued by a detachment from the dogmatic and patristic moorings of Orthodoxy to preaching that is Orthodox and theologically correct but that is nevertheless so dry and unimaginative that even the worst sufferer of insomnia is capable of nodding off. Therefore when I set out to complete my master's degree through the Antiochian House of Studies and the University of Balamand, I immediately realized that my thesis research and writing should focus on preaching.

Early on in my research, I discovered an obvious lack of books and articles written on preaching from an Orthodox perspective. Quite frankly, I was stunned. How could the Church of Saint John Chrysostom, Saint Ephraim, Saint Peter Chrysologus and the other great patristic preachers have grown so silent and sidelined within modern scholarship on such a vital aspect of our Christian witness? It would be tantamount to Orthodox theologians having little

to say about the Holy Mysteries or the liturgical life of the Church. My own assessment concerning a lack of materials on Orthodox preaching was further reinforced during my recent visit to the Institute for Orthodox Christian Studies at Cambridge University. Professor David Frost, the principal of the Institute, told me that Metropolitan Paul Yazigi (currently an abductee in Syria) had visited a couple of years earlier in order to obtain books and materials on Orthodox preaching for his priests. Professor Frost told me that he had to respond to the Metropolitan, “Your Eminence, I’m afraid we have very little in our library on that subject.” Where is the Orthodox voice among the plethora of homiletical research and writings being produced by Protestant and Roman Catholic scholars and practitioners? Yes, we may certainly benefit from the work of our brethren, but surely Holy Orthodoxy has something to offer in the discipline of homiletics.

From my research, I have found that the Orthodox Church indeed has much to offer on the subject of preaching. It is just a matter of appropriating and constituting those materials in order to make them available to the student, scholar, and layman alike. My hope and prayer is that this book will in some small way help to fill that need, though certainly much more work needs to be done. While this book derives from a peer-reviewed academic paper, I am hopeful that it will nonetheless be accessible to not only my fellow clergymen and

homiletical scholars, but to all who want to better understand the vital importance of preaching from an Orthodox perspective, to those that wish to better appreciate the fullness of preaching in the context of the whole liturgical and Eucharistic life of grace.

Finally, as we consider the world in which the Apostles were sent to evangelize two millennia ago—a pagan world that was largely hostile to Christianity—we find ourselves and the Church in this “post-Christian” age facing a very similar world with very similar challenges. My research will prayerfully convey the truth that regardless of where we are situated in time and place, and that regardless of what particular style of preaching we might employ in heralding the Gospel of Christ, that it is Orthodox preaching by virtue of its iconic nature which mediates the very presence of our Lord whereby lives may be transformed. As a priest and pastor, the research that I conducted in writing this book has helped to transfigure my own preaching ministry. It has helped me to realize the power of God through the Holy Spirit in making manifest His own divine presence through the proclamation of the Gospel, and to more fully recognize and acknowledge the awesome and weighty importance of our sacred call to faithfully herald the Good News of Jesus Christ. For as proclaimed by Saint Paul, “Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!” (1 Cor. 9:16, RSV). May we all who have been called to be bearers and heralds of the precious gift of the Gospel approach our work

PREFACE

with diligence and faithfulness, with thanksgiving
and reverent fear.

Father James K. Hamrick

June 13, 2014

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank my wife, Pamela Hamrick, who has lovingly stood by me during the many years of my formal theological education, especially when it has required the sacrifice of much time and money. I wish to acknowledge the leadership of the Very Rev. Father Joseph Allen, Ph.D. and the knowledge and wisdom imparted by the gifted and devoted faculty and mentors of the Antiochian House of Studies which serves as the solid educational foundation upon which I crafted this thesis. Among those faculty members, I especially wish to thank and acknowledge my first reader, the Very Rev. Father Michel Najim, Ph.D., and my second reader, the Very Rev. Father David Hester, Ph.D. I also want to thank my friend and former mentor, the Rev. Father John Worgul, Ph.D., Dean of Holy Trinity Theological College & Seminary, who led me to the doorsteps of Holy Orthodoxy; and His Grace Bishop Thomas Joseph who brought me safely home to the Church. Finally, in all things, I offer thanksgiving, praise, and glory to the Holy and Undivided Trinity: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, from Whom all life and blessings flow.

Introduction

Preaching from the pulpits and platforms of many twenty-first century Christian churches and assemblies has devolved and degraded into something that is considerably removed from the sacred vocation of faithfully proclaiming the Good News of God in Jesus Christ, the Gospel of the crucified, resurrected, and ascended Lord and Savior. Much preaching rather panders to the relativism, consumerism, hedonism, political-correctness, and profound skepticism of our so-called postmodern society. As such, a dominant yet divergent preaching landscape of personality-centered showmanship, syncretistic social gospel, sentimentalism, motivational speaking, philosophizing, and moralizing (perhaps sprinkled with some scriptural references) subsists as the homiletical¹ order of the day in far too many churches. While such preaching may avoid offense, satisfies “itching ears,” and at times instructs, delights, and even inspires the listeners, it remains spiritually

¹ While the meaning of “homily” (from the Greek *homilia*) and “sermon” (from the Latin *sermō*) denote technical differences in genre and purpose from their usage during the early history of the Church, within the modern vernacular they have become essentially synonymous terms. Therefore for purposes of this paper I use “homily” and its forms interchangeably with “sermon” and its forms.

impotent, incapable of ushering the gathered people into the presence of the Risen Christ where genuine transformation and conversion of life and heart occurs. So how do we address the problem of connecting with the people of this age in a relevant way while remaining faithful and true to the whole Gospel of Christ and to the evangelistic mandate of heralding the Good News? How do we effectively proclaim the Gospel in a manner whereby the preacher is heard and hearts are penetrated?

The answer to our postmodern preaching dilemma lies *not* in Christian fundamentalism and its legalistic preaching that derives from a staunch and rigid biblical literalism. Neither is an effective and satisfying answer found in the atomizing deconstruction of Scripture which tends to occur through a purely expository and deductive approach to preaching, especially when the homiletical task remains distinct and separate from any sense of sacramental and liturgical life. Rather, the ability to effectively engage our postmodern listeners with the truth of the Gospel and to cultivate the possibility of genuine conversion emerges in preaching that is iconic. Specifically, Orthodox preaching that remains faithful to Scripture and to the apostolic and patristic Tradition of biblical interpretation; that is animated by the goal of Orthodox spirituality; and that remains integral to the sacramental and liturgical life of the Church is preaching that truly conveys the Gospel as the oral icon of Christ. It is such iconic

preaching that mystically and sacramentally mediates the presence of the Risen Lord in the midst of the assembly. And from such a holy encounter, eyes and ears are opened, lives are interpreted in light of the Gospel, and repentant hearts, enflamed with the Spirit of Christ, cry out in holy fear, adoration, and Eucharistic thanksgiving.

In order to clarify the scope and meaning of Orthodox preaching as the oral icon of Christ, it is first necessary to define what I mean by “Orthodox preaching.” For purposes of this paper, I define “Orthodox preaching” as liturgical preaching in the historic, canonical Orthodox Christian Church which adheres to the apostolic and patristic Traditions of preaching and biblical interpretation; or, alternatively, any Trinitarian Christian preaching which maintains an orthodox¹ and patristic theological perspective with respect to the interpretation of Scripture, and to the homiletical task as integral to the formation of the Christian faith in the context of a sacramental and liturgical life of grace. From this definition, I avoid being excessively narrow or exclusive, acknowledging the orthodox preaching and the faithful proclamation of the Gospel by our Christian brethren outside of

1 By “orthodox” (small “o”), I refer to a theological perspective which adheres to the essential Trinitarian beliefs of canonical Orthodoxy, especially as articulated by the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, even if from a Christian denomination outside of the canonical Orthodox Church.

the canonical Orthodox Church. On the other hand, this definition of “Orthodox preaching” excludes all preaching that does not adhere to the doctrines, the creeds, and the sacred apostolic and patristic Traditions of the historic Orthodox Church, which unfortunately applies to much of the preaching taking place in many mainline Protestant denominations today, and even within some Catholic churches. “Orthodox preaching” also does not include preaching outside of a liturgical context, such as evangelistic preaching (even though the content may be essentially orthodox in its theology), or any other variety of Christian preaching that is completely divorced from the context of the liturgical life of the Church.

I will rather limit my examination of Orthodox preaching to preaching that is integral to the whole of the sacramental and liturgical life of the Church as possessing the possibility of being iconic, of communicating and sacramentally mediating the presence of Christ in the assembly of the faithful. This is not intended to minimize the value of evangelistic preaching within the mission fields, or catechetical preaching to those desiring to enter the Church, however Orthodox preaching presupposes an Orthodox faith as contextualized, vivified, and enfleshed by the Body of Christ, the Church lived out and made visible and manifest in liturgical and Eucharistic community. Just as not all religious art can be construed as iconic in the Orthodox sense of the term, so not all Christian

preaching is iconic.¹ By maintaining this more limited understanding of Orthodox preaching, we are able to focus upon the critical liturgical task of preaching: facilitating the “congregation’s recognition of the Lord, their discernment of Jesus Christ in the bread and wine....”² It is from this liturgical and sacramental perspective of preaching that we may then begin to carefully examine the iconic nature of Orthodox preaching; that is, what it means in concrete terms for Orthodox preaching to be the oral icon of Christ.

Christian preaching indeed has a varied history, but as Gueric DeBona notes, to follow that history is “to follow a veritable road map of variables that has placed a distinctive weight on the importance of either the text, or the preacher, or the hearer (or, in classical terms, the *logos*, *ethos*, or *pathos*), depending on the historical and cultural circumstances.”³ Regardless of the particular historical period and the various emphases of homiletical forms, the unwavering aspects

1 Anton Vrame, citing Philip Sherrard, notes that religious art cannot be considered an icon unless “its form derives from spiritual vision, spiritual understanding, and is fused (although not confused) with this spiritual content.” Anton C. Vrame, *The Educating Icon: Teaching Wisdom and Holiness in the Orthodox Way* (Brookline, Massachusetts: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1999), 13–4.

2 Timothy Clark, “The Function and Task of Liturgical Preaching,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 45, no. 1 (2001): 44.

3 Gueric DeBona, *Fulfilled in Our Hearing: History and Method of Christian Preaching* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2005), 8.

of Orthodox preaching that has remained universally consistent are the apostolic and patristic lenses through which Scripture is expounded and interpreted; the liturgical context of the preaching and its sacramental nature; and the spiritual end of Orthodox preaching: the leading of the hearers toward the healing of the fractured soul and, ultimately, into union with God. It is from these moorings by which we examine the iconic nature of Orthodox preaching, even as the time and culture conditioned sermon style, homiletical form, and theological emphasis of preaching spans the centuries and corners of the globe in as rich of a diversity as humanity itself.

The notion of preaching as the oral icon of Christ is certainly something that may effectively resonate with our highly visual and aural postmodern culture, just as Orthodox iconography has served as an effective visual medium of the Gospel over the two millennia of Christendom. "The icon is a type of 'optical Gospel.' It reminds the observer of the Word made flesh and its salvatory role and awakes in him the wish to achieve salvation in Christ."¹ Drawing from this understanding of iconography, it is an easy step to think in terms of preaching the Gospel as the presentation of an oral icon, especially when sermons are preached as word pictures and as the

¹ Theodor Nikolaou, "The Place of the Icon in the Liturgical Life of the Orthodox Church," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 35, no. 4 (1990): 325.

listeners are receiving and processing the spoken word as images within their own minds' eye. These strong parallels between visual image and word image as conveyers of truth and the transcendent reality beyond the signs themselves lend credence and support for the reasons that I approach the study and discipline of Orthodox preaching from an iconological perspective. It is from such a vantage point that I propose an answer lies to the problem of connecting our postmodern culture with the immutable truth of the Gospel. Such a relativistic culture is largely closed to bare propositional truth, no matter how cogently and logically presented. The same culture, however, is ripe for receiving images and for experientially and inductively appropriating the Gospel as its own (the ability to reject Christ notwithstanding). It is therefore from this iconological dimension that we examine the key aspects of Orthodox preaching which remains closely aligned to the preparation, presentation, and spirituality of Orthodox icons.

In Chapter 1 we will consider the "preparation of the icon" as we examine the work of biblical interpretation by the preacher and the rendering of the Gospel by means of a Christological hermeneutic. We will endeavor to demonstrate how the patristic methodologies of typology and *theōria* served as solid, well-grounded exegetical tools which are still necessary for a thoroughly Orthodox and

Christological understanding of Scripture today. It is indeed this patristic and Christological approach to biblical interpretation that reflects the Orthodox understanding of God's self-revelation. In the words of Florovsky, "The fullness of revelation is Christ Jesus."¹

Chapter 2 considers the "placement of the icon" as the liturgical setting of Orthodox preaching and the place of preaching in the larger context of sacramentally mediating the presence of the Risen Lord in the gathering of God's faithful, especially as encountered in the Eucharist. It is in this context that preaching serves the primary reality of "Christ in the assembly, the People of God."² And from this primary reality we will examine the sacramental role and function of the liturgical sermon as that which integrates and unites Word and Sacrament, for as Thomas Hopko asserts, "There is no Christian liturgy without God's Word."³

Chapter 3 moves into the work of "presenting the icon," that is, the revelatory art of preaching whereby the truth of the Gospel is artfully and imaginatively

¹ Georges Florovsky, *Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View* (Belmont, Massachusetts: Nordland Publishing Company, 1972), 24.

² United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Fulfilled in Your Hearing: The Homily in the Sunday Assembly* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1982), 4.

³ Thomas Hopko, "The Liturgical Sermon," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 41, no. 2-3 (1997): 177.

proclaimed in a manner that engages the listeners with word pictures which assists them to recognize Christ in their midst, to interpret their own lives in the light of the Good News, and to move them toward repentance and a desire for holy imitation. In this chapter, we will examine the effectiveness of inductive preaching as typified by the parabolic preaching of Jesus. We will also consider this inductive and iconic approach to preaching through select examples of St. John Chrysostom's homilies which artfully incorporated the use of Pauline portraiture as a method for inducing imitation. From the Western Church, we will survey some examples of homilies by St. Peter Chrysologus who skillfully mastered the use of verbal images and word pictures in his preaching as a method of making the truth of the Gospel accessible and relevant to his listeners.

Finally, Chapter 4 presents preaching from the aspect of "engaging the icon," that is, as locating its ultimate center and role in tandem with Orthodox spirituality. Preaching that is truly iconic entails the prophetic dimension of the proclamation the Gospel. It is from the aspect of the sacred office of the clergy *as prophet* by which the listeners are moved beyond the mere spoken word as sign and symbol according to its grammatical and literal meaning into the eternal and transcendent realm of the Divine where the healing and restoration of the broken and diffused soul may occur. In this chapter we will examine how iconic

preaching as a “window into the heavenly world”¹ transports its listeners to a place of mystical anagogy; to a place of divine and holy encounter which results in true, godly repentance necessary for the purification of the heart and for becoming, by grace, “partakers of the divine nature.”² In short, where preaching begins with *theōria* as a contemplative Christological hermeneutic methodology, so it ends with *theōria*, the vision of God produced by the mystical encounter with the Risen Lord via Orthodox preaching, the oral icon of Christ.

¹ Linette Martin, *Sacred Doorways: A Beginner's Guide to Icons* (Brewster, Massachusetts: Paraclete Press, 2002), 78.

² 2 Pet. 1:4, RSV.



Father James K. Hamrick is a priest in the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America and currently serves as the founding pastor of St. John the Baptist Mission in Lewistown, Maryland. During his two decades of pastoral ministry, Father James has received numerous invitations to preach and speak at various venues. His sermons are aired each Sunday morning on The Source Christian Radio (AM 1450 and at www.wthu.org) where he had previously served as a founding member of the radio station's Board of

Directors. Father James holds masters' degrees from Holy Trinity Theological College & Seminary and from the University of Balamand. He is a life member of the Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi, a Knight of the Order of St. Ignatius of Antioch, and a member of the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius in Oxford, England. Father James and his wife, Pamela, reside in Thurmont, Maryland, and enjoy visits from their four grown children and young granddaughters. Father James may be reached at frjameshamrick@gmail.com.



In a relativistic postmodern age that is skeptical of propositional truth claims but that is “wired” for images and stories, the iconic nature of Orthodox preaching offers a compelling answer for effectively communicating the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Though preaching styles have varied widely across history and cultures, it is Orthodox preaching, by virtue of its faithfulness to the sacred apostolic and patristic traditions, its integral connection to the sacramental and liturgical life of the Church, and its functioning in tandem with Orthodox spirituality which conveys itself as iconic. *Orthodox Preaching as the Oral Icon of Christ* addresses the current crisis of preaching in our age and approaches the homiletical discipline from an iconological perspective, revealing how Orthodox preaching sacramentally mediates the presence of the Risen Lord in the midst of the assembly through artful and imaginative word images whereby lives are personally touched and transformed. Just as Orthodox icons are understood to be “windows into heaven,” so effective Orthodox preaching may be understood to transport the listener into the realm of the Holy where lives may be interpreted and transfigured in the light of the Gospel and indeed in the very presence of Christ.

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