



John Chrysostom (c. 349-407)

Applying the Scriptures

John Chrysostom once said that he looked like a spider – thin and short but with long limbs. He became the bishop of Constantinople in 398, but he is best-known as the most eloquent preacher in the early Church. Hence he was given the nickname ‘Chrysostomos’, which means ‘golden-mouthed’, an epithet which in later generations came to replace his given name. He was born about the year 349 in Antioch in Syria. John was raised as a Christian, but was also thoroughly educated in the rhetorical and literary traditions of Greek culture.

For some years, he lived in a semi-communal style. Each day began with the chanting of psalms, and was followed by meditating on the Scriptures, observing the rule of silence, carrying out various physical tasks (digging, planting, weaving, copying books – with the profits going to poor relief), and meeting together for the evening meal (which may have only been bread and salt). The lifestyle permanently injured John’s health – he was to suffer from rushes of blood to the head, stomach troubles, and insomnia for the rest of his life.

In 381 Chrysostom was ordained deacon, and five years later was ordained presbyter. He belonged to the Antiochene school of literal, as opposed to allegorical, exegesis. A strict disciplinarian, who could nevertheless preach frankly on the joyous nature of the one-flesh union in marriage, he condemned the circus, slavery, abortion, prostitution, gluttony, swearing, horse-racing, trusting in wealth, and the theatre. He had a golden mouth and an iron will, but some have considered that he was tactless.

Chrysostom was born for the pulpit: ‘I cannot let a day pass without feeding you with the treasures of the Scriptures’. He constantly urged his hearers to meditate on the Scriptures and to obey them. Citing the words of the epistle of James, he said: ‘If you are a Christian, believe in Christ; if you believe in Christ, show me your faith by your works.’ He was especially adept at applying the text to his hearers. In one sermon against the theatre, he railed:

If you see a shameless woman in the theatre, who treads the stage with uncovered head and bold attitudes, dressed in garments adorned with gold, flaunting her soft sensuality, singing immoral songs, throwing her limbs about in the dance, and making shameless speeches ... do you still dare to say that nothing human happens to you then? Long after the theatre is closed and everyone is gone away, those images still float before your soul, their words, their conduct, their glances, their walk, their positions, their excitement, their unchaste limbs – and as for you, you go home covered with a thousand wounds!

So vivid were his sermons that Chrysostom even had to tell his people not to applaud, and to beware of pickpockets while they were engrossed in the sermon!

It is obedience that proves the reality of faith. So Chrysostom told his people. He made a point of hitting home in his sermons: ‘Even if I do not have a knife, I have a word that is sharper than a knife. Even if I am not holding fire aloft, I have a teaching that is hotter than fire, which is able to burn more vigorously.’ But it was his insistence on applying the Scriptures that landed Chrysostom in his final troubles.

Against his will, he was made bishop of Constantinople in 398, and so became enmeshed in imperial and ecclesiastical politics – for which he was eminently unsuited. He fell out with the empress Eudoxia (the wife of Arcadius) mainly because of his disdain for the opulent lifestyle of the court. He apparently made an injudicious reference in a sermon to Eudoxia either as ‘Jezebel’ or ‘Herodias’. When she threatened him, he gave the memorable reply: ‘Go tell her I fear nothing but sin.’

In 403 at the Oak, in a suburb of Chalcedon, a synod packed with hostile Egyptian bishops condemned Chrysostom on a series of charges, some concocted and some more plausible (the latter being that of uttering defamatory and treasonable words against the empress). Found guilty and deposed, John was almost immediately reinstated. Soon after, he was deposed again and exiled under military escort to a place near Antioch, then to an isolated village on the Black Sea. Here he lived out his final years in exile, until his death in 407. His last words were ‘Glory be to God for everything! Amen.’

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