**John Chrysostom**

*Proclaiming the Gospel*

So we come today to the final of our 5 early Christian figures. What I hope to have done through the course of this series is show how in the early centuries of Christianity, the Gospel was radical, subversive and transformative – a far cry from the middle-class respectability which we associate with the Church today. Today, Christianity is often felt to have little really to offer, a relic of a bygone age. But over the course of this series so far we’ve seen that that was far from the case in the beginning. As in every age, Christians varied in how well they lived out their faith – they were flawed humans like us. But as faltering as their commitment to Christ was, the Gospel transformed the lives of men and women, and created communities who challenged the norms of Roman society, and drew more and more to join the movement of Jesus-followers for themselves.

So, to remind us of the journey we’ve been on so far. We began with Clement and his letter to the Corinthians, written just a few decades after the apostle Paul’s own letters to the same church, wrestling with some of the same issues, but calling them in obedience to the Gospel to live together as a sacrificial community that transcended social hierarchies. We then moved a hundred years later, to a time when the Church was growing significantly enough that it started to become more and more of a threat to the Roman authorities. Persecution of Christians became more widespread, and increasingly driven by the authorities. This led to many Christians publicly losing their lives for their faith, such as the noblewoman Perpetua. But their fearlessness, even joy, in the face of death had a profound impact on many of those who saw them meet their end. As persecution increased, so did the pressure on ordinary Christians, many of whom didn’t have the courage of a Perpetua, and gave in to the authorities. We saw Bishop Cyprian’s attempts to shepherd his flock through these dark days, and then also to lead them in caring for the very people who’d persecuted them during times of plague. Then last week, we moved into the early days of a Christianised Roman Empire, when the opponents were not pagan authorities trying to eradicate Christianity, but false teachers undermining the very truth and goodness of the Gospel.

**John Chrysostom**

Which brings us to our final early Christian figure, and my personal favourite, John Chrysostom. Many of you will know that John Chrysostom was the subject of my doctoral research, so I’ve spent many years in his company. He’s not very well-known in the West today, but the volumes of his works are not dissimilar in size to Augustine, and in the Eastern Orthodox Church, he’s very much a key figure. He was born around the year 350, in the city of Antioch, in modern-day Syria, the city you may remember where Christians were first called Christians in the Book of Acts. Antioch had become by this point a major centre for Christianity. He grew up very much in the thick of all those debates we saw last week around the Arian Controversy, and at a time when Christianity was now much more firmly established as the religion of the Roman Empire, though traditional pagan religion still very much flourished. But it was now much more comfortable, even desirable, to be a Christian, and this led, as we’ll see, to Chrysostom needing to challenge his people to live out their faith with more whole-hearted commitment.

He was born simply as John, and during his lifetime he would have been known, for most of it, as John of Antioch. ‘Chrysostom’ was not his surname. There were no surnames in the Greek-speaking world – think of Jesus of Nazareth, or Paul of Tarsus. The name ‘Chrysostom’ is in fact a Greek word meaning ‘Golden Mouth’, an adjective which was bestowed on him only many years after his death in recognition of the great eloquence and power with which he preached, and it is as a preacher that he is most well-known today. Crowds flocked to hear him preach, and the people rioted when he was eventually sent into exile (we’ll come onto that later). People loved his sermons so much that they took transcripts of them, and preserved them from one generation to the next, such that today we have around 800 of his sermons still in existence. There’s an apocryphal story about his tutor in rhetoric, the distinguished orator Libanius. He is one of the most well-regarded non-Christian authors of this time. Libanius is supposed to have been asked on his death-bed who should succeed him in the Chair of Rhetoric at Antioch, and he is said to have replied: ‘it ought to have been John, had not the Christians stole him from us.’

We know little of John’s early life, but we do know that he came from a well-to-do family, if he had the money and time to study under the great Libanius. We don’t really know much about his childhood faith, but around the time he finished his studies, something seems to have shifted, as he rejected the expected trajectory of a well-to-do young man through the civil service or law courts, and decided instead to devote himself to the Scriptures. He was baptised and appointed a reader in the Antioch church, but soon after he decided to take his religious devotion to another level, and joined a number of other devout men living as a monk in the mountains around Antioch. After a few years, he went further and lived by himself in an isolated cave, and supposedly learnt the Scriptures off by heart. This sort of asceticism – that is, denying yourself all luxuries to devote yourself fully to God – was becoming more and more common, now that there was no longer the possibility of showing your devotion by enduring prison or martyrdom. There is, I think, an admirable side to this single-minded devotion to God, and passionate longing to strip out everything that might distract them from their devotion; but this extreme form of asceticism nonetheless runs counter to the fact that God is a God who longs to shower blessings upon us, that we might enjoy all the good things of this world.

These years in many ways shaped John’s later ministry – as we’ll see, what comes across most clearly in his sermons is his longing for all Christians to live a life of single-minded devotion and obedience to God. And after he returned to the city, he never saw himself as giving up his calling to be a monk. For John, the monastic life was simply that single-minded devotion to God and the Gospel, and that life he believed could be lived out by the married, working man, as much as by those who’ve renounced all to live in isolation – perhaps not unlike some of the modern monastic communities springing up today, which people can join while still being involved in their profession. There may, however, have been a more pragmatic reason for leaving his cave, namely his failing health. His extreme asceticism left him in a weak and frail state, and ill health remained with him for the rest of his life.

So, he returned to the city in the year 378, as he approached the age of 30. He was ordained deacon in the church, and then in 386, in his mid- to late 30s, he was ordained as a priest. One of his most famous works is this book called *On the Priesthood*. It’s written as a dialogue between him and his close friend Basil. The two of them had been coming under pressure to get ordained – it seems it was not unusual at the time for promising young men to be conscripted into the ranks of the clergy. John has pretended to be in favour of the two of them getting ordained, which had reassured Basil. But at the last moment, John disappears, leaving Basil to get ordained alone. And the dialogue of the book is John’s defence of his reasons for fleeing ordination. He basically sets out what an impossible job ordained life is, a job that is so demanding on every level, that only the most mature and wise and godly Christians should ever be considered for such a role – it’s a very humbling book! Basil, he was convinced, was ready and a suitable choice, but he knew that he had much still to learn. This was, unsurprisingly, not much comfort to poor old Basil, but John sought to encourage him, and the work closes with these words:

‘At this [Basil] wept even more, and rose to go. Then I clasped him and kissed his head, and led him out, urging him to bear his fortune bravely. ‘For I trust in Christ,’ I said, ‘who called you and set you over his own sheep, that you will gain such assurance from this ministry that when I stand in peril on that great Day, you will receive me into your everlasting habitation.’

There’s much debate as to how much of the story behind *On the Priesthood* is true, or whether it’s more of a literary fiction. But Chrysostom’s perceptions of the challenges of the ordained life seem so insightful that he almost certainly wrote the work many years later, after his own ordination. These closing words, then, I think were written as much for himself as they were for the fictitious-or-not Basil. He was reminding himself, and others who would read the work, that the ordained task is an impossible one – all that he is said about the difficulty of the task is true. But we do not do it in our own strength, but in Christ who calls us to the task. In him we can trust. As the Church of England ordination service puts it, we can bear the weight of this calling... only by the grace and power of God.

**Popular Preacher**

So, John remained in his role as a priest in the Church of Antioch for the next 12 years, and it was during this time that he began to establish a reputation as a powerful and eloquent preacher. So, what made John, the Golden Mouth, such a popular preacher? The first thing to say is that his style and content were simple and accessible to a wide audience, and his sermons are very readable still today – particularly if you can find a modern translation. Many of his sermons are simply a line-by-line explanation of the Biblical text, followed by an exhortation to the congregation. His explanations of the Bible can often be quite lively: for example, particularly when commenting on his favourite biblical author, the apostle Paul, he’ll often start engaging Paul in conversation, asking him what he really meant when he said such and such, and then would take on the persona of Paul to answer the question. In this way bringing the text to life before the congregation.

But apart from being engaging and dynamic, there are two key features of his preaching that made him so popular, in my opinion. First, he’s very direct. He doesn’t pull any punches in his attempts to challenge his congregation to a whole-hearted commitment to Christ. Consider these two examples, the first from a sermon on the letter to Philemon, and the second from a sermon on Colossians:

‘But you, though you owe so much to God and have been ordered to forgive so that you might receive it in return – do you not forgive? Why ever not, I ask you? Good grief! How much kindness do we enjoy, and how much wickedness do we display? How much drowsiness? How much sluggishness? How easy is virtue? Here there is no need for bodily strength, or wealth, or riches, or power, or friendship, or anything else, but to be willing is alone sufficient, and then the whole deed is accomplished and accompanied with great benefit. Has someone grieved you or insulted you or mocked you? Consider that you too do many such things to others, even to the Lord himself. Let go and forgive.’

John has been speaking about an ancient king who used his wealth to sculpt a plane tree out of gold:

‘Do you see how great wealth makes people mad? How it inflames them? ... But even today there are people who don’t distance themselves from wealth, but are much sillier. How, tell me, do those who make silver pots and vessels and flasks differ in silliness from the golden plane tree? How do the women differ (I am embarrassed, but have to say it) who make silver chamber-pots? Those of you who make them should be ashamed.... I know that many people will make fun of me on this point, but I won’t pay any attention – just let there be a further comment. In truth wealth makes people silly and mad. If they had such abundance, they would wish for the earth to be gold, and walls to be gold, perhaps even heaven and air to be of gold. What madness is this, what transgression of decency, what fever? Another person, made in the image of God, is dying of cold, while you’re equipping yourselves with such things? What arrogance! What more would a mad person do? Do you so revere excrement that you would receive it in silver?’

Turn to a neighbour: what makes this sermon so engaging, and does it speak to you at all personally?

*Discussion*.

* Short sentences and direct questions instil sense of urgency, of needing to make a response. Call to action.
* Stark contrast emphasising radical choice before us. Not just ‘try a bit better!’
* Vivid imagery – what are the silver chamber-pots in my life?

So, his sermons are engaging and direct. The second key feature of his preaching that I think made him so popular is that his sermons are full of the Gospel. Whilst his emphasis is often on a call to the radical life of Christian discipleship, he never loses sight of the Good News of all that God has done for us in Christ. Have a look at these wonderful three passages.

The first comes from a series of sermons he preached to those about to be baptised. In these sermons he often depicts the Christian life as a battle with the devil, but this is how the battle is played out:

‘But as for our contest with the devil, Christ does not stand in the middle [that is, as an impartial judge], but is wholly on our side. That he is not in the middle but is wholly with us, consider from the following. He anointed *us* when we entered the contest, but *him* he bound. He anointed *us* with the oil of joy, but *him* he bound with unbreakable chains so that he might be fettered for the combat. If I happen to trip up, he reaches out his hand and sets me up after my fall and makes me walk again. ‘For you tread,’ he says, ‘upon snakes and scorpions and over all the power of the enemy.’

This contest is in stark contrast to those in the gladiatorial arena, where the judge sits impartially between the two sides, and the stronger man wins. Here the judge is entirely on the side of the Christian. The Christian is anointed and given every help; the devil is bound in chains that cannot be broken. Every time the Christian slips or falls, the Judge steps in to help him up. It is impossible for the Christian to lose the fight – the only way that Chrysostom goes on to entertain, is if the Christian simply gives up and walks out of the arena. It’s a vivid picture of the grace of God sustaining us and supporting us through life’s struggles.

The second comes from a series of sermons he preached on the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, on a similar theme of how ready God is to forgive:

‘Why are you ashamed, why do you blush, tell me, to admit your sins? You are not speaking to a human being, are you, who might reproach you? You are not confessing to your fellow servant, are you, who might expose you? No, rather to the Master, who protects and cherishes you, to the physician you are showing your wound. He is not unaware, is he, even if you do not confess, since he understands everything even before it is done. So why do you not confess? The sin does not become more burdensome because of your self-accusation, does it? Rather it becomes easier and lighter. For this reason he wishes you to confess, not in order to punish you, but in order to forgive you; not in order that he may learn your sin (how could that be, since he knows already?), but in order that you may learn how great a debt he forgives you. If you do not confess the greatness of the debt, you do not discover the excess of grace.’

As I’ve often said on Sundays, we don’t confess our sins to beat ourselves up and make ourselves feel miserable about ourselves. We confess our sins to a loving Father, who longs to forgive us and restore us, that we might ‘discover the excess of grace.’

The final passage I wanted to share is a rhetorical tour de force. It comes from his first sermon on the Gospel of Matthew, explaining why it is called a Gospel at all.

‘He called his work a ‘gospel’ for good reason: for he came announcing to all the removal of punishment, release from sins, righteousness, holiness, redemption, adoption, inheritance of the heavens, kinship with the Son of God; to the hostile, the hard-hearted, those sitting in darkness. What, then, could ever be the equal of this good news? God on earth, man in heaven; and everything becoming topsy-turvy. Angels singing with men, men having fellowship with angels, and with all the powers above. And it was possible to see the lengthy war wound up, and reconciliation of God made with our nature, the devil disgraced, demons fleeing, the hold of death loosened, paradise opened, curse destroyed, sin cast aside, error driven away, truth returning, the word of piety being sown everywhere and growing, the citizenship of above planted on earth, those powers having friendly relations with us, and angels dwelling continually on earth, and there being great hope for the future.

Therefore has he called the history a ‘gospel’… For not by toil and sweat, not by fatigue and suffering, but simply by being loved by God have we received what we have received.’[[1]](#footnote-1)

I love this passage, and actually riffed off it in a sermon a couple of months back. It captures so powerfully the topsy-turvy nature of the Kingdom of God and all the blessings we’ve received from God. Not on the basis of our merit or works, but simply through the sheer grace and love of God.

So, turn to someone near you and have a look through these passages. In what ways do these three passages encourage you with the good news of Jesus?

*Discussion*.

So, I’ve spent a fair bit of time on John’s preaching, because that’s what he’s most known for, and most of what we have from him today are his sermons. [Sermons good to read today – exx.]

The later years of his life show no less the determination of his whole-hearted commitment to Christ. After twelve years of serving the people of Antioch, he was appointed as bishop of Constantinople, the new imperial capital and fast becoming one of the major cities of the Eastern Mediterranean. It was a dramatic and sudden appointment, especially for John. He received a message one day in October 397 from the governor of Antioch to meet him outside the city at night. He obeyed the summons, but when he arrived he was put on a coach to Constantinople where he was informed of the news. It’s not fully clear why the appointment was made in such secrecy; but one of his ancient biographers claimed it was because he was so popular with the people, that there was fear of riots if the appointment was made more widely known.

In Constantinople he continued his uncompromising and direct preaching. This again won him lots of popularity among the general public; but it went down less well with his fellow clergy and those in high office in the imperial court. The historian Socrates (not the philosopher) was a young man in Constantinople when John was made bishop, and described him in the following terms:

‘When [John] was selected for the episcopate, he was haughtier than necessary in his relationship with those subject to him, since he was determined to correct the lives of the clergy under him, so it is thought. Consequently, right from the beginning, he came across as severe and was hated by them, and many were hostile to him and shunned him as an irascible man.’

It seems that his zeal for holiness of living drove him to be very uncompromising when it came to reforming the manners of his clergy in the capital. Also, as bishop of the imperial capital, there was an expectation that he would host lavish dinners for the political elite – and it would come as no surprise to learn that this was a practice he refused to even contemplate continuing, and persisted instead with his life of simplicity, once again causing much irritation.

The most dangerous person, however, that he offended, was the Empress Eudoxia. Much like King Herod with John the Baptist, she had something of a love-hate relationship with the Bishop. But the balance turned firmly to hate when one day a statue of her was erected with much celebration in the centre of the city. The festivities took place on a Sunday, and disrupted the service John was conducting in the Hagia Sophia. In his sermon he criticised the noisy entertainment outside the doors of the church as an insult to the Church. This in turn infuriated the Empress, who moved to plot against him. As these rumours spread, John preached a sermon on John the Baptist, which he began: ‘Again Herodias is enraged, again she dances, again she seeks to have John’s head on a platter.’ This was immediately taken as a thinly veiled assault on the Empress herself, and relations between the two soured dramatically.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, his time as Bishop was relatively short-lived – a mere six years. In 403 a Synod was convened, led by the Bishop of Alexandria, Theophilus, to discuss a long list of charges against Chrysostom. Theophilus had long nursed resentment that someone from Antioch rather than Alexandria had been appointed bishop of the imperial see, and relished the chance to take some revenge. Around 30 charges were levelled, but what’s interesting is that none of them, with only one or two minor exceptions, were charges on points of theological doctrine. Most related to his uncompromising personality and his refusal to engage with the upper-class social calendar that had won him so many enemies among the elite.

He refused to attend the Synod, but in his absence he was condemned and sentenced to exile. The Emperor reluctantly agreed, then changed his mind and recalled him. But the following year, under pressure from the leading clergy, and no doubt from his wife as well, he signed the order once again for him to be taken into exile. As he prepared to go into exile, he preached these words of courageous faith to his congregation:

‘Many are the waves, rough the swell. But we are not afraid that we will be submerged: for we stand upon the rock. Let the sea rage, it cannot smash up the rock. Let the waves rise, they cannot submerge the rock of Jesus. What are we afraid of, tell me? Death? To me to live is Christ, to die is gain. Or exile, tell me? The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it. Or confiscation of property? We brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world.’

He was escorted to Armenia, but even in exile, he continued to try to exercise some ministry, writing many letters of advice and counsel to friends and colleagues. But his health was failing, and when three years later, he was moved to a more remote location, his health deteriorated further, and on the 14 September 407, he died. His final words, supposedly, reflected the aim of his whole life: ‘Glory be to God for everything.’

So, that is John Chrysostom. A man who was not the most diplomatic in how he related to the imperial court, but a man who, in an age when it was becoming much more comfortable to live as a Christian, urged his congregations to a whole-hearted commitment to following Christ. And I think we could learn from him today, in an age that’s still relatively comfortable for Christians here in the UK. My sense is that we have much to learn from Chrysostom’s radical call to holiness. He could at times perhaps be too stern in his preaching; but we today would typically lean to the other extreme. Preachers today are not always so good at issuing that counter-cultural call to holy living, Christ’s call to repent and follow him.

For the Good News of the Gospel is that God, by his grace in Christ, has called us out of the world to be his holy people, his saints, and to be witnesses for him in the world. I fear today that too many Christians see church as simply a hobby to do on a Sunday, and in the odd midweek activity, and faith as merely a private thing, a source of personal comfort. And for many, church is simply irrelevant, a historical relic of times gone by. How different the Church would be today if we sought to live as Christ’s holy people, the Kingdom of God, if we lived as those transformed by the Gospel of Jesus Christ, humbled by his grace to sinners such as us, and committed to following him and serving him in our communities. To live in some way like we’ve seen the early church lived over these past few weeks. Maybe then we might see growth again in the Church.

As we close, let’s take some time to think through our own response to today and the course as a whole, and I’ve put some questions down there to help guide discussions.

1. *In Matt. hom.* 1, PG 57.15.50–16.14. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)