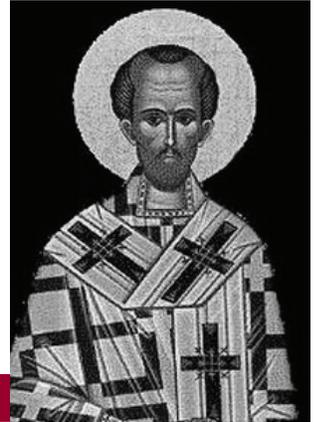


PROFILE IN FAITH

John Chrysostom, The Preacher

by the Rev. Canon Dr. Michael Green

Chaplain to the Oxford Centre for Christian Apologetics



John Chrysostom was one of the greatest preachers who ever lived. Rightly called Chrysostomos, “goldenmouth,” he lived from 344-407 AD. He had enormous influence in his own day, both among the ordinary people and among the nobility. Since then he has been universally recognized as a saint and doctor of the church. If we are to understand the man and his impact, we must begin by looking at the world into which he was born.

The Background

John was born in the middle of the fourth century AD, a critical time of change in the Roman Empire. By the time of his death in 407, he had lived through almost the entire period during which the ancient world was irrevocably changed. When he was born, Christianity had indeed become a major religion of the empire, but it was by no means dominant. It competed with the old pagan faiths, the imperial cult, and Judaism, all of which were flourishing. Even where Christianity was strong, it was divided.

In the secular world the empire was by now irrevocably split between West and East. Initially each had its own emperor and sphere of influence. Constantine had started to build the new capital of Constantinople in 326 and took up permanent residence there. He was tolerant of different religions and very favorable to Christianity, which now rapidly exchanged the age of persecution for the age of political dependence on the state—probably in the long run more dangerous.

As a result, the Episcopal see of Constantinople rose rapidly in prestige and was declared in the Second Ecumenical Council of 381 to be second only to Rome. Consequently it became an enviable prize for ambitious clerics. A new aristocracy arose, promoted

by Constantine and his successors, and became the senatorial class in the East. Increasingly monks and pagans flooded into Constantinople and stayed there to court imperial favor.

Meanwhile places like Antioch and Constantinople remained great Hellenic cities, and life continued much as it had during the earlier empire with careers for the upwardly mobile in the civil service and public office, the use of rhetoric as a major educational tool, and the vast popularity of the circus and theater, while Christianity was nominal for many people. Much of civil life had remained unchanged since pagan days, and much of the Christianity was paper thin. Such was the world into which young John Chrysostom was born, a world in some ways strikingly like our own.

John's Career

We need at least an outline understanding of John's career if we are to understand the power and impact of his preaching. He was born in Antioch to a fairly wealthy family where his father was a high-ranking military officer who died when John was young, and a mother who was probably a Christian but was certainly well connected. She did not marry again after being widowed at the age of 20, but took great care over John's education. We know little of the early years, but thereafter there were two major influences in his education which bore great fruit afterwards.

In his late teens he became a star pupil under the pagan rhetorical teacher Libanius, who later on his deathbed declared that John would have been his successor “if the Christians had not stolen him from us.” Indeed it must have seemed like that when John turned his back on a civil career and indeed on the Hellenic culture in which he excelled, got baptized at

the age of 18, and for three years worked for Meletius, one of the three bishops laying claim to Antioch.

During this period he experienced the other formative teacher of his youth, Diodorus, who ran the famous Antioch School of Theology. Whereas the Alexandrian School, from Origen onwards had delighted in fanciful and allegorical interpretation of the Bible, the Antiochenes concentrated on the plain literal and historical meaning of scripture. This became John's chosen method in his future preaching career.

Perhaps after his mother's death, John became for some time a hermit in a mountain cave near Antioch. His self-discipline was awesome. However, he gave up the life of a hermit after two years and returned to the city where he was soon made deacon, then in about 386 presbyter, and began his life of public ministry—the next twelve years saw him based in the cathedral at Antioch as its leading preacher. Those twelve years of preaching and pastoring the Christians in Antioch were the happiest period of his life, brought him enormous influence among the citizens, and led to the conversion of a great many pagans.

In November 397 John's life underwent an abrupt change. He was actually kidnapped and taken off to Constantinople to be their bishop. The secrecy of the operation was due to the fear of the authorities that the Antiochenes might cause much trouble if their presbyter was parted from them in the normal way—they were devoted to him. So all of a sudden, the powerless little priest of Antioch became the leading bishop of the East, whose job was to give leadership in the capital and preach before the emperor and court.

Needless to say he applied himself to this unexpected and unwanted ministry with vigor—too much vigor for the lazy and dissolute local clergy, who found him a stern reformer and disciplinarian. They had been used to extravagant meals offered by his predecessor, but John did little entertaining and when he did it was very simple—as befitted an ex-monk. Such simplicity made him very unpopular with the clergy. Those five years in which he was bishop in Constantinople were not the happiest of his life. He got heavily involved with political events, tried to settle affairs in the diocese of Ephesus (in which he probably had no right to interfere), and fell foul of the crooked Bishop of Alexandria, who had always wanted Constantinople for his own candidate, not John. John handled this fraught relationship badly and before long found that his enemies at court managed to get him exiled. But only for a day or so. Opposition from ecclesiastical and political circles continued, and so did his political in-

eptitude and tactlessness. He fell out with the Empress Eudoxia. And soon after, the weak emperor Arcadius was persuaded to banish him for the final time. Chrysostom gathered his clergy for prayer in the cathedral and then went calmly into exile under military escort. He was moved to a town in Armenia, and then to an even more remote one at indecent haste although he was very ill, and he died en route. His last words were "Glory be to God for everything. Amen."

Goldenmouth

We turn now to John the preacher. We are fortunate to have over 900 of his sermons, and the best ones are expositions of scripture. I believe there were four major elements which made him into such a great preacher. One was the oratorical training he had received under Libanius years earlier. One was his profound study in the Antiochene tradition of expounding scripture by the plain sense of the text, which he learned from Diodorus. One was his passionate commitment to feeding people with the Word of God. And finally, he was fearless in applying scripture with enormous precision to the needs and, more especially, the sins of his hearers.

First and foremost, John was an expounder of the biblical text. For instance, in his *Homily on Ephesians* he quotes "you were called in one hope" and continues:

God has called you for the same purpose. He allots no more to one person than another. He has given everyone the gift of immortality, everyone undying glory, everyone brother or sisterhood, he has made everyone his heir.... Seeing you possess so much equality in spiritual matters, on what grounds then do you feel proud? Is it because one person is rich and another is powerful? Wouldn't that be ridiculous? Tell me, if the emperor happened to take ten individuals and dress them all in purple and sit them on the imperial throne and give all of them the same honor—which of them then would dare to disdain the other, on the grounds that they were richer or had greater prestige? None!

John was also a hard-hitting preacher. Remember that he is operating in two of the most modern cities we could imagine—with poverty, exploitation, immorality, political intrigue, and ostentatious wealth all around him, and a lukewarm church, very like our own, which needs the powerful application of God's standards to be brought home with vivid imagery and pointed application. With that in mind, see how he

turns on the rich women in the congregation, wealthy, wanton, and careless of the needs of the poor.

What could be sillier than the rich? Don't you see how great wealth makes people mad? How it inflames them? What about the women—I am embarrassed, but have to say it—who use silver chamber pots? Those of you who make them should be ashamed. Christ is starving, and you're indulging like that? How stupid you are! Then do you persist in asking why there are robbers, why there are murderers, why there are evils, when the devil sweeps you off your feet in this way? Possessing silver plates is not even in accord with a philosophical spirit, but is total wantonness. Making unclean vessels from silver too is not just wantonness, it is the height of folly. Yes, wealth makes people mad. Here is a man made in the image of God dying of cold, while you are equipping yourself with such things. What arrogance! What more would a mad person do? Do you so revere excrement that you would receive it in silver?

What's this softness, this indulgence, this insolence (it isn't indulgence but insolence). What's this madness? There are so many beggars standing around the church and the church has so many children so rich, it can't come to the aid of a single beggar. One is hungry, the other drunk; one relieves herself in silver, the other doesn't even have bread. Let us readily and patiently avoid all these defects, so that we may live to the glory of God, and be freed from punishment in the hereafter, and may attain the blessings promised to those who love him, through the grace and kindness of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom with the Father and the Holy Spirit be glory, power, and honor for ever and ever Amen.

You will have noticed the warning about hell. Unlike the majority of modern preachers, Chrysostom did not shrink from bringing the reality of heaven and hell before his hearers.

Of course, John got enormous credit for his preaching. How did he handle praise and congratulation? He refers to one of his orations when he was overwhelmed with praise. He says, "Great applause ensued, the theater became fervent, the assembly was inflamed. As for myself, I was delighted, not because I was the one being praised but because my Master was being glorified; that applause and praise showed the love that you have in your hearts for God." What a superbly mature way to handle congratulation.

Not every preacher is a pastor. Not every preacher cares about the family and about the poor. But this was a prominent side of John's preaching during the Antioch years, and it drew the population to him with deep affection. In his early days of preaching he was scathing about marriage—he had seen too many bad ones. "Incessant quarrelling, mutual hatred, such are the pleasures of marriage! If such is the condition of husbands and wives it is well not to marry." All that changed as he matured. He sees bubbling hormones as the main spur towards marriage, and therefore encourages young men to marry early. He was passionately against divorce, which was common even in Christian circles in Antioch. But his chief concern was to stress the equality of husband and wife, something that appeals very much to our generation but sounded very strange to his. Time and again he repeats that the infidelity of men is just as bad as that of women—and that was saying something very radical in the city of pleasure which Antioch had become.

John had a profound concern for healthy Christian family life. Needless to say, he taught continuously on the need for Bible reading and prayer in Christian families. It seems that this was all rather novel in his day, and so we find him preaching very simply and directly from the scriptures and expecting the father of the family to go through it again in family prayers. Prayer should be pure in intention and from the heart. It should be frequent, and be matched by good deeds.

If the family became one of the passions of this preaching pastor, the poor became another. Leading clerics often concentrated their attentions on the rich. But not John. As we have seen, he reserved his strongest invective for the rich. Judging from one of his homilies, the very rich and the very poor each represented a tenth of the population of the city. He loved to extol the virtues of the humble folk, the shoemakers, smiths, and artisans of all kinds. Chrysostom was greatly influenced by Acts 2, where the church is marked by equality, unity, and generosity. He longs to see in his day some counterpart to the first Christians who "were together and had all things in common. They would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need."

But we must not pretend that John was faultless as a man or as a preacher. He seems to have been strongly anti-Semitic, and the odious stream of anti-Semitism which has disfigured some of Christian history owes not a little to his violent invective. We must put this in context, of course. It appears that in Antioch, where

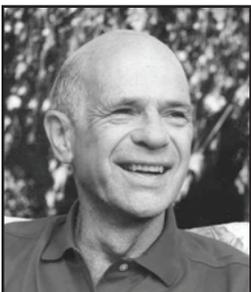
there was a large Jewish population, lax members of his congregation were in the habit of going to Jewish festivals and fasts, conducting business in synagogue meetings—and in pagan temples for that matter. And John, always jealous for the purity of Christian commitment, was passionately against this practice. Even so, we can only bow our heads in shame that a Christian preacher of such distinction and saintliness should have fueled the anti-Semitism which, of course, found its climax in the concentration camps of Hitler's Germany.

But it would be unfair to leave it there. John had a huge heart of compassion towards lost people, and this showed up very clearly in his first year as a bishop in Constantinople. He had urgent matters on hand—reform of the clergy, organization of church charitable organizations, building hospitals, and relationships with the imperial household. Yet he gave himself to the evangelization of the surrounding country districts and in particular the Goths. He sent missionaries as far as the Black Sea, where there was a large colony of Goths. Not only were many of these wild people brought to Christ, but he was able to found the elements of a national clergy among them.

What a man! Frail in body but mighty in spirit. Of course he had his faults. He was impetuous. He did not know how to govern men—only how to direct souls. He did not know the meaning of the word tact. He was naïve to an extreme in affairs of state. He was direct to the point of rudeness, but under it all beat a compassionate,

generous heart. This man loved the poor and was loved by them in return. He was amazingly energetic and enterprising, incorruptible and fearless. His lifestyle was simple, his worship assiduous, his morals pure. Significantly, the Eastern and Western Churches combine in naming him a saint.

As a preacher he was one of the greatest who has ever lived. He broke with the allegorical methods popular in Alexandria and expounded the plain sense of scripture with due respect for its historical context. This was perhaps his greatest achievement. He knew men were spiritually hungry, and he knew the Bible was the Word of God with which they needed to be fed. "I cannot let a day pass without feeding you with the treasures of the scriptures," he said. His preaching was bold and utterly fearless. He applied the scriptures with great accuracy to the needs he perceived among his congregation. He was a skilled orator and yet mostly spoke very simply. He was not interested in philosophical or theological niceties, but in seeking to conform the lifestyles of his parishioners to the life of Christ. So there was a lot of moral application in his preaching, a lot of vivid imagery, a lot of broken sentences as he spoke impromptu and directly into the situation before him. He was like one of the Old Testament prophets in New Testament dress. In a word, he wanted to use his great gift of preaching to see a revival of the loving Christianity of the first century in fourth century Antioch and Constantinople. Thank God for Goldenmouth, his powerful preaching and his godly example.



Michael Green has written more than 50 books and is considered one of the most influential evangelists and Christian writers living today. He and his wife, Rosemary, have been married for more than 50 years, and have four grown children and a gaggle of grandchildren.

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