

Mathew Ch 5; 13-16

St John Chrysostom

John Chrysostom was born in 347 and died in the year 407. John was a Church father and, among the varied aspects of his life and ministry, served as Archbishop of Constantinople. John was an ardent public speaker and earned the title *Chrysostomos* which, translated means 'golden mouthed', such was the poetic fervour by which he spoke. Among the many stories attributed to John, one that struck me was related to his extreme asceticism which he took around the year 375; John became a hermit and spent two years continually standing, scarcely sleeping, and committing the Bible to memory. Perhaps an advent course in the making for us here at St Andrew's...although as a consequence of these practices, John's stomach and kidneys were permanently damaged and poor health forced him to return to Antioch, so maybe not. As with other writers from the ancient times, some of John's writing might not sit well with us today. John was a firm member of the movement which vilified the Jewish faith as being responsible for the death of Christ, leading to antisemitism and persecution. He also wrote forcefully against same sex relationships. As with other writers from antiquity, we need to bring a level of understanding and humility as we read these texts; repentant for the harm caused, yet humble as we approach a culture and a time different to that of our own, eager to know the movement of the holy spirit as he speaks through the men and women of the deep past.

There are two aspects of John Chrysostom which I would like to spend a little time reflecting upon this morning; The first is John's forceful and ethical vision of Christian discipleship. And second John's 'golden mouth', his subtle and creative use of language.

The emperor Constantine claimed that it was on the 28th October, 312 CE that he converted to become a Christian. One of the lasting impacts of this conversion was the establishment of Christianity as a religion,

cultural and political force in the empire. Christianity and Christians went from being a persecuted minority, to an established and ever-growing majority. This brought with it certain benefits, as you can imagine. Over time Christians and their leaders became more influential and powerful on both a national and local level. Inevitably perhaps, this led to corruption and hypocrisy. Christians prospered and many became rich in commodity and influence. This concerned John Chrysostom greatly, as he saw what he thought was a movement away from the purity of the life and teachings of Christ, particularly Jesus' ministry to the poor, the sick and the outcast. In one sermon, John wrote to his brothers and sisters in Christ, and I quote; *Do you pay such honour to your excrements as to receive them into a silver chamber-pot when another man made in the image of God is perishing in the cold?* In another sermon John powerfully and challengingly said that "Prayer without almsgiving is unfruitful." This second quote powerfully points to the ethical vision that John held. "Prayer without almsgiving is unfruitful." It is not enough to say a prayer and leave one's concern at that; prayer is not just a random petition, it is a self-involving act that necessarily requires that my petitions and actions become closer aligned, that through prayer, I become an agent of God's holy work in this world. For John, following Jesus, Christians and the church were called to be Salt and Light; people and a community of faith called to follow Christ by working to bring fullness of life into the communities in which they lived and served. For John, fulness of life for oneself and oneself only was not enough; the example of Christ was to bring this fulness to those whose lives are empty, impoverished and broken. What use is Salt, if it has lost its taste. What use is the Church, if it has failed in its discipleship to bring fullness of life to all; 'It is no longer good for anything' says Jesus, 'but is thrown out and trampled underfoot'. John Chrysostom, St Francis, other Saints, fathers and mothers of the Church; a life of prayer, contemplation and asceticism is not and must not be an end in and of itself; these spiritual disciplines must necessarily shape and guide our ethical and moral relationships and institutions.

The second element of John I would like to reflect on was this title Chrysostomos; the 'golden mouth'. From the quotes cited earlier, this could perhaps also be kindly referred to as a provocative mouth, as John used keenly crafted words to unpick the hypocrisy's of his time; words to call to account, and words to lift up the human imagination; up and out of our indulgent and acquisitive preoccupations, and towards that beautiful and boundless mind of God. In his own sermon on Mathew Chapter 5, John wrote the following;

For the man who is kindly, modest, merciful and just will not keep his good works to himself but will see to it that these admirable fountains send out their streams for the good of others. Again, the man who is clean of heart, a peacemaker and ardent for truth will order his life so as to contribute to the common good.

Here we hear the ethical force of Johns writing; that our faith in Christ requires us to contribute to the common good of human society. But John does this with such evocative and poetic language that the soul is stirred into acquiescence, not because of the intellectual persuasiveness of the argument, but because of the beauty and the stirring images that John employs; 'these admirable fountains send our streams for the good of others'.

A friend recently shared with me a quote from an unknown Chaplain writing in 1916; 'duty makes us do things well, but love makes us do them beautifully'. I am sure it was in John's power to set out the doctrines and moral vision of Christ in simple, clear and straightforward prose. But for John I suspect that would have missed something of his own experiences and encounters with Christ through his spiritual disciplines; such I believe was Johns encounter with the risen Christ and the enlivening power of the holy spirit, that Johns words went far beyond doing something well; they did it beautifully, and in so being beautiful, carried within them a testament to the eternal and infinite beauty of God.

Johns words cut to the bone; they are no nonsense, very much like the teachings of Jesus himself. And, like Jesus, John does not employ a kind of dry managerial approach to human life or the organisation of the Church; such an approach might do the job well, but it will miss something of the flame of beauty that permeates so much of the Christian tradition, a saltiness that enlivens and enriches; 'duty may well make us do things well, but love makes us do them beautifully'