

St. Chrysostom and His Profound Understanding of Paul

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[0 : 00] Well, it certainly is a great joy to have Olive's introduction, but at the same time very embarrassing. But it's lovely that we have such long roots together as I've had with Olive since the 50s.

I think in view of the introduction I should read to you what John Chrysostom, who we're going to speak on this morning, would approve of. Because what he was in pursuit of was what he called the angelic life.

That the identity of a Christian is to live the angelic life. And so perhaps the appropriate passage is Isaiah 6, where we find that the prophet saying that in the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty, and the hem of his robe filled the temple.

Seraphs were in attendance above him. Each had six wings. With two they covered their faces.

With two they covered their feet.

And with two they flew. And one called to the other and said, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts.

The whole earth is full of his glory.

[1 : 21] This is so anti-cultural to our concept of Christian leadership that we would say, why in the world does God, with his seraphim, and obviously his cosmic duties are vast and very busy indeed, does he impede the flight of his ministers.

Because to cover the feet means that they don't use their feet. And to cover their faces, they don't use their wings. And they also cover their, only with two they fly.

So, what velocity they could attain in busyness. Now, I think the person who meditated on this after Chrysostom, because he did also, was actually the wise successor to Francis of Assisi, Bonaventura, who has a beautiful meditation on this passage.

And he associates the covering of the face as evidence that humility is one of the significant traits of Christian service.

And that covering their feet, the great virtue is also patience, that we have to live patient lives.

[3 : 01] Sometimes we spend a whole lifetime waiting for the fulfillment of the promises that God may have given to us to fulfill. And only with two did they fly.

And so, he meditates on the fact that there's the wing of righteousness, that we are ministers of God's righteousness, righteousness, and that we therefore and always seek for right relatedness.

And also, he meditates on the fact that perhaps the other wing which we fly is the whole ministry of mercy, of fraternal love, brotherly love, as Bonaventura calls it.

And so, these are some of the basic virtues of being a Christian leader. So, what we're going to speak about today is so totally counter-cultural to what all of us in our culture today are facing. But this is seraphic life. And after the death of my own dear wife, after 62 years last October, I have realized there is a thin membrane between this life and the life to come.

[4 : 25] Which means that you're much more, as you get older and facing your own mortality, as I am now, that you are living at a time where there's really very little difference between the human life and the angelic life.

In other words, heaven and earth are much closer to each other than ever before. And so, it's in the light of some of these meditations that I want us now to consider this remarkable man, John Chrysostom.

We're not here to celebrate the liturgical feast of John Chrysostom, which in the Eastern Church occurs on November the 13th, just prior to the Advent season, but rather we're here to celebrate the role of these early fathers of whom he's a very significant representative in our own post-modern

millennial culture.

Perhaps to have a new seriousness for the well-being of Christianity in the 21st century. As we well know, we're entering now into its third millennium and it's bringing unprecedented changes. I shall talk more about this later. There have been in the history of the Church three phases of a renaissance of classical life.

[5 : 58] We know, of course, the classical renaissance of the 14th, 16th century, when, of course, the recovery of the languages and the recovery of the literature of the classical world revived scholarship in the Western world.

Perhaps the second renaissance was after the 1840s in Oxbridge, when, now, with the new colonial empire of India and the Sudan to a lesser extent, young men were being trained in Oxford and Cambridge to equip themselves to be the equivalent of the classical rulers.

In other words, to train them in classical philosophy and the languages and to have a classical education was to equip them for colonial leadership.

And so, the colonialism was a kind of replica of the Roman Empire. It was going back to that culture. But now, today, since the 1960s, there's been a new revival of classical scholarship. But this time, it's not come from well-known documents that have been held in our libraries and archives throughout Europe, carefully recopied time and again by monks, scribal copyists.

[7 : 35] But in the Egyptian rubbish dumps, just small scraps of papyri have revealed ancient classical plays of Sophocles, of Menanda, of Sophos and others that were never known to have existed before.

They're still scraps, but at least they're reproducing a whole new revival of new literature that we never had before. And, surprise, surprise, this has become popularized on the stage.

so, in London and New York theaters in the last three decades, many of these new Greek dramas, as well as the well-known established Greek dramas, have been reproduced.

And yet, in the midst of this, there's a great fear that the tech revolution that we're entering into that will threaten to dehumanize us more than we've ever been dehumanized before, does call desperately for a renewal of the humanities.

The humanities that were previously taught and supported in higher education are no longer government policy to finance.

[9 : 01] So, there's a crisis in our universities, especially in the long-established universities, as to whether government policy is thinking more about the vote of the aging population and the health bills that have to be paid, as distinct from new scholarship, which is being underpaid.

and therefore there's a whole new question of what will our cultural policies be for all of this. But in the midst of all of these cultural pressures around us, there is with the rapid growth of secularism today, the realization that Christianity no longer has center stage in our culture.

It's no longer appreciated even as a national heritage. And so we too need to recover the role of the early Christian fathers to witness to the richness of our Christian identity, because the identity of being a Christian is tarnished, and it's far more secularized than most of us as Christians realize where it is today.

I had the privilege when he was becoming a Christian of walking with Malcolm Muggeridge through his early days of conversion. And I remember how mockingly he wrote an essay in 1965 in the New Statesman, which was then a sort of left of center critical journal among intellectuals of that persuasion.

And the title of his essay was, Why should I be a Christian? When the Red Dean of Canterbury is consorting with international communism as fellow travelers, and when Bishop Peck in California is suggesting that every seminarian should read Lady Chatterley's Lover, then in some ways it's a bit of an embarrassment to call oneself a Christian.

[11 : 21] And so, although he was moving towards becoming a Christian, he was then seeing it's no longer a badge of honor at all. It's a mishmash.

Now, one other thing that I want to bring to your attention is that we may be facing in the 21st century what happened with Judaism after A.D.

67. Because it was in A.D. 67, with the destruction of Jerusalem, there was the destruction of the temple. And with the destruction of the temple, for the first time in its millennia of history, Judaism no longer was having animal sacrifices.

If you've ever visited Palestine, as I have done, and gone into the underground chalk caves of the Shefala hills, there seemed far more productive than even Kentucky fried chicken could ever produce.

These dove coats that were for thousands of doves that were to be offered by the simple peasants as their sacrifice, or the sheep on the hills of the Shefala, or indeed the oxen in the pens for the wealthy, everything was based on animal sacrifice, and with one blow, it was swept away.

[12:54] So, this sea change that perhaps we as Christians have not appreciated, though, of course, the epistle to the Hebrews written at the end of the first century is telling us all about it, but now interpreting it in the light of the cross, not the destruction of Jerusalem, but in terms of the cross where the Son of God was our one sacrifice for sins, introducing a new covenant that transforms all of life.

The radicalism of that was less appreciated except by a small group of people that began to call themselves Christians. Christians. But, as far as Judaism concerned, it was such a sea change that by the middle of the second century, the pagans began to imitate it.

They began to stop their animal sacrifices, too. And you see, when you no longer live a sacramental life, in the fact that the prayer book or the liturgy, those things cover you as a Christian, but you stand out and are exposed to meet God himself as Isaiah faced him in the holy temple, then you have to have a new ethical standard.

You can't duck behind the animal sacrifices. You can't duck behind the institutional church. You can't duck behind all the paraphernalia of our religious life.

Now you stand naked. Who am I? Well, in the nakedness of Isaiah, he realized he was undone. And so, this is the sobriety with which I'm communicating to you this morning.

[14:48] We are facing a huge cultural sea change in the 21st century. Now, I've selected John Chrysostom for a number of reasons.

His period, we don't know when he was born, we just guess when it was from other evidence that it might have been about 349.

But he lived in the second half of the fourth century, which was an era of huge cultural change, just like we're facing now. He had lived through the abortive attempt of the Emperor Julian to revert the Christendom of the Roman Empire into paganism.

He lived in the thick of ecclesiastical factions as a result of the councils of Nicaea in 325, and then the council of Constantinople in 381.

he lived in the threat of Arianism, which of course is what has been practiced by many of our liberal Christian leaders today, who don't believe that Jesus is the Son of God, who don't believe in his resurrection, who don't believe in our orthodox faith at all, though they are our leaders.

[16:15] Christians, and so he lived with the awareness that those who deny in Arianism the deity of Christ were sowing the seedbed for Islam two centuries later.

It's precisely in the same territory of the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East where Arianism flourished that then it was succeeded by Islam.

So it's sober for us to think of the consequences of that. And then even within the orthodox bishops, Miletius and Eustatius, there were these two factions as to who is the one that we should follow.

And so in the midst of that, also we find that there are also different hermeneutical traditions, that's to say, different ways of knowing the scriptures.

How do we know our Christian faith? And so there were those who, like the Antiochian, were perhaps more concerned with the literal text of scripture and its exegesis, and there were those who were more nuanced in their metaphorical interpretation of the scriptures in the Alexandrine school.

[17:45] Scholars have now recognized, of course, that we can exaggerate the differences, but they were there. And so we today know that there are people in the Bible Belt, culture of the southern states, who as fundamentalists are simply saying, if you're not a Christian, you're going to hell.

and of course, there's a crisis with our young people when you say that, because as one psychotherapist and her husband phoned me in great distress a few months ago and said, our son, who's a doctor, and who has two lovely children, and we love being able to frequent visiting them all the time, they've told us that now the children are getting to the age of discernment, we don't want them to come near you as grandparents, because we don't want them to think that because we're not Christians and the children have rebelled against their Christian heritage and their Christian

morals, that of course we're going to hell, so we don't want our grandchildren to be poisoned by that kind of bad religion.

what do we do? Oh, I say you can always put the shoe on the other foot, you can say, well, you as a materialist, scientist, secularist, do assume, and you're teaching your children that when we go to the grave, we'll just simply be part of the chemistry of the earth, and that we will be reproducing the butter cups that come up the next question, so, which is worse?

Well, of course, that can only be part of the argument, but you see, the fact is, we're in a big crisis. Religion in North America is in a big crisis.

And so, this is why it's helpful for us to then have an understanding that our theological education has to be much more nuanced.

[19 : 55] and the reason why we're in a crisis is because most of us have devoted all our professional skills, all our intellect to our professional careers, and frankly, we play Mickey Mouse with our faith.

It's something for Sunday, but the rest of the week we're seriously engaged in the intellectual scholarship of our professional life. We don't have a Christian identity.

We have a professional identity. And it just so happens that we add on to the fact, oh yes, and by the way, I'm also a Christian, but by the way, I'm only a Christian, is peripheral.

Now, I'm shocking you, but this is the kind of thing that the fourth century was concerned about.

And you see, it's interesting that the site for all of this happening is Antioch, which was the third city of the Roman Empire.

After Rome and Alexandria, this was a city with perhaps, at the time of Chrysostom, about 100,000 people, and within that 100,000, perhaps 50% were pagan still, and then there was the divide with probably a third of the population was Aryan, or a quarter rather, the population was Aryan, perhaps a quarter was Orthodox Christian, so it was even divided as a Christian identity at that time.

[21 : 29] Now, it's significant as you read, of course, in the Acts of the Apostle, chapter 11, verse 26, that it was in the city of Antioch, where as a result of the missionary work of Peter, that the name Christian was first used.

and then later, we discover that in the time of Ponticus, in the second century, he reports to us that it was in Antioch that the word Christianity was first used.

So, Antioch has the distinction of being the source of both the title Christian, and then the later understanding of a society called Christianity, both arising from that same city.

So, in this highly politicalized city, Chrysostom was realizing that he had to somehow navigate between the various rival political identities of being a Christian, and rather to seek to understand the identity of a Christian much more in the grand purposes of theanthropology.

Now, perhaps the word theanthropology is new for many of us, but it simply is based on the reality that all mankind is created in the imago dei, in the image of God.

[23 : 08] And the implications of being made in the image of God are what therefore we have to really follow through. Now, one other element that we put into this complicated story about Chrysostom, because we haven't come to his life yet, is that there was a strong classical hermeneutic that was one of the traditions, probably goes back to Egyptian sources, but as you have visited in times past these museums, national museums, and gone into the Department of Classical Antiquities, the museum is full of busts, it's full of sculptured heads, of great philosophers of Rome, or Greece.

busts. And what we don't realize is that these sculptured busts were the equivalent of what we would have as a brochure for the curriculum for teaching in this particular school.

Because often the bust was partly the figure of Zeus, who was of course the god of gods, so that the purpose of being a philosopher was to become godlike.

But at the same time, there was often a face of another god. And one of the most favorite of these gods was Asclepius, who is the god of healing.

And so in the school of Epicurus, which was a famous school in the early Christian period, in the development of Stoicism and Epicureanism, the way of life philosophically was a way of healing of the soul, as well as a way of life that was ascetic in following certain disciplines.

[25 : 17] So, with the loss of animal sacrifice, increasingly, in the second century, with famous philosophers like Epictetus and Celsus, with whom Oregon had to debate, they were challenging Christians, not just simply philosophically, but ethically.

They were saying, who has a better way of life? Who is living more ethically? Because now, you see, as we say, it doesn't depend on animal sacrifice to appease the gods, it now is that it's your own personal behavior that appeases the gods.

And so, now, as a result of this, we discover that we have a whole new culture called the ethics of imitation. In other words, exemplary figures that we should imitate, so that life and text are not separated.

word and way are not separated. In other words, thought and behavior are not separated.

Now, you see, in our hypercognitive culture, we've hugely separated theory from practice. And so, even our Christian faith is communicated to us in a hypercognitive way.

[26 : 49] And the result is, what about our emotions? What about the healing of our own childhood wounds? What about the transformation of our lives as families?

That's ignored under the radar screen of being hypercognitive. And so, the result of, I think therefore I am like René Descartes is, the result is that therefore I'm ultimately withdrawn to being the isolated thinker.

And it's what I think that matters more than anything else. Well, you compound that with John Jack Russo's self-conscious self. You're on the way, the highway to narcissism because you're totally retreating into the I, I, I all the time.

There's no sense of connectedness that is relational. So, in this culture then, and this is what we all have to do, is speak to our culture very critically.

And in speaking to our culture very critically, then we're like the sower that doesn't cast the seed on stony ground, which means the stony ground is the ground that's irrelevant for our cultural needs.

[28 : 13] the deep soil is when we penetrate deeply into the needs of our culture, into understanding with discernment how we should penetrate deeply into the soil of the society that we belong to.

And so, this is how John Chrysostom reaped a hundredfold because it was rich soil. And what he does is to adopt as his hermeneutic, and when we talk about hermeneutic, we're talking about a world of meaning.

What are the categories that make it meaningful or relevantly meaningful? That's a hermeneutic.

And so, now Chrysostom is adopting and saying the Apostle Paul is the archetypal image.

He is the blessed copyist of Christ. because Paul is saying that we are to imitate him as Paul imitates Christ.

So, we have an imitative hermeneutic that, of course, when we have somebody as an exemplar, and he is the blessed copyist of Christ, says John, then, then, of course, we'll start having all sorts of ways of, as it were, like the artist drawing a portrait.

[29 : 49] And so, John, in all his exegesis, is actually using epithets, just a one-sentence description, or one-word description, of the image that he sees, and one of the great heroes of the church, whether it's an Old Testament patriarch, or, indeed, any of the great figures of the Old Testament, but most of all, he sees that it's Paul who's imitating Christ, most of all.

And so, these miniature portraits that he devised give a stunningly verbal picture of the virtues of the Apostle Paul, in vivid, memorable, dynamic ways in their effect.

In fact, John has a gallery of some 65 epithets concerning his beloved saint. And so, when he's commenting on 1 Corinthians 4, verse 4, John writes, for Paul the Apostle, the vessel of election, the temple of God, the mouth of Christ, the liar of the Holy Spirit, the teacher of the word, the one who circumnavigates the land and sea, the one who scatters the seeds of piety, the one who is wealthier than kings and more powerful than the rich and stronger than soldiers and wiser than the philosophers and better spoken than rhetoricians, the one through who, having nothing possessed at all, the one who was snatched up into the third heaven, that one says, he claims to speak to all the world, but he speaks as the chief of sinners, yet being all things to all men.

And so each epithet is a condensed narrative of all the amazing stories that we have of Paul's life, and the records that we have, especially in the Acts of the Apostle, but are hinted at in all of his epistles.

So, I don't think, as I go back to the early fathers, I've ever seen anyone who more portrays what it is to be Christ-like than what John is saying the Apostle is.

[32 : 16] And so when he exhorts in 1 Corinthians 13, verses 3 and 4, imitate or copy me as I portrait Christ, we have to say, do I portrait Christ?

That's what it means to be a Christian. Wow. This is comprehensive. This is radical indeed. And so one of the things about the beauty of the Christian identity, the nature of beauty is integrity. It's wholeness. And so yes, the beauty of being in Christ is that we're complete in Christ. There's no other need. There's no other way. There's no other truth. There's no other life that we have in this portrait.

portrait. But of course, as we're struggling in our lives, we're like a portrait artist who does a whole series of preliminary sketches, all of which are trial and error to try and catch the true likeness.

[33 : 35] And so really, the journey of our life is struggling at different phases of our life through the cycle of our stages of life sort of preach as we live.

So, the whole role of preaching is living. You can't specialize as a preacher. It's an oxymoron. And so, who do you embrace? Well, recent scholarship has become so enraptured by this. Let me give you a few of the books.

But there's a, of course, my own old friend that I knew at a college nearby where I was at Teddy Hall, St. Edmund's Hall, the principal there, J.N.D.

Kelly, pioneered a book on the biography of John Chrysostom called Golden Mouth, the story of John Chrysostom. There, of course, he's thinking much more about his rhetorical skills.

[34 : 43] And perhaps he didn't quite appreciate the ethical challenges of Chrysostom, as he might have done. But that's one book in 1995. And then in Melbourne, in Australia, Margaret Mitchell has written a very much more powerful book called The Heavenly Trumpet, John Chrysostom and the Art of Pauline Interpretation, which was published in 2002.

And then a Greek Orthodox American young scholar called Demetrius Tonnias, T-O-N-I-E-S, has specialized just simply on Abraham in the works of John Chrysostom, which was just published last year.

So now, there's a whole new industry. Let's discover this wonderful man. So I hope that the result of our morning together will be that you'll get one of these books yourself, especially I would recommend Margaret Mitchell, The Heavenly Trumpet, and really enjoy that book.

Well, it was a century later, about 620, that George of Alexandria was so intrigued that he wrote the first biography of John Chrysostom.

So the biographical data that we do have is really indebted to George of Alexandria. And of course, even at that period, biography was becoming hagiography.

[36 : 23] In other words, you weren't quite sure which was admiration and which was really factual. Fiction and fact. Because sometimes the hagiographers were describing what they would like to be, and what they thought they would like to be, they then depicted the hero, you see.

So that's the subjective element that we have. Anyway, the story is told by George that one night Proclus, P-R-O-K-L-O-S, who was the secretary to John Chrysostom, appeared into his room and found the bishop working hard on his Pauline homilies.

All of a sudden, the apostle Paul appeared himself and he began to whisper exegetical suggestions into Chrysostom's ear.

This, we're told, occurred three times. Well, whether it's true or not, what the tale does summarize is such was Chrysostom's dependence and esteem of the apostle Paul that he just loved him.

He idolized him. He wanted to do everything that the apostle Paul expressed. Christ. And so, as John himself says, I love the saints, but most of all, I love the blessed Paul.

[38 : 01] Now, when we started Regent, I had a similar experience, and it's only recently I've been able to put the recollections together. But the Dean of Sydney, Barton Babbage, whom I had known when he visited Oxford, he came to us to our first summer school.

And he had been high-ranking chaplain in the Royal Air Force, and had become familiar with C.S. Lewis, so it was he who invited C.S. Lewis to start preaching at the airfields, though, of course, Lewis says, I've never preached a sermon in my life, I'm not ordained, why in the world are you having me to speak at the services on a Sunday morning and these airfields, very often and conveniently in the remote parts of the country, so he spent all Saturday just getting to the airfield. And that's how his, of course, broadcast talks then took off and became later collated into mere Christianity. So, he had a connection with Lewis. But Barton Barbridge came to our summer school and it so happened that a young journalist, not a Christian, very cynical of Christianity, in fact, flew in from Sydney on his way to China to report on the nuclear developments that were taking place in China for the Western press.

So, he was sitting down at luncheon and I was a shy young man, though in those days I certainly couldn't speak out. I was wanting to be wallpaper on the wall and apologizing to all concerned that I was taking their oxygen supply.

[39 : 50] And he was being cynical of Paul because it was in the age of liberalism when Paul all messed up the simple Jesus, you see.

So, that was the sort of thing that was going on at the time. He was arguing for this. And he said to me, and what do you think of the Apostle Paul? And with a passion that surprised me, I said, I love the guy.

Oh, well, I suddenly thought afterwards, what have I said with such explosion? Passion. I'd better go and browse in the library and see what I can find about the Apostle Paul.

So, I went into UBC Library and of all places, my eye caught the proceedings of the British Academy during the early 1920s, 30s.

And there, in the mid-20s, was the speech as a new fellow to the British Academy of the public orator of Cambridge.

[40 : 59] Just like what John Christophton was trained to be, he was to be the public orator of Antioch, though he never took the position up.

So, that kind of rhetorical skill was, and I forgot the name of the man, but no doubt my brother Jim will remember who it was. But anyway, his whole acceptance speech as a fellow of the British Academy was why he loved the Apostle Paul.

And so he gave me all the ammunition I needed. And it just shows you how God does something in your heart that then becomes your passion.

So, the reason why I love John is because I love his love of the Apostle Paul. and my life has been punctuated and it's been all around the walls of my study of texts from Paul's epistles.

I, therefore, the prison of the Lord beseech you that you walk worthy in all meekness and lowliness of heart. That's powerful for me because I've been in the prison of the Lord.

[42 : 14] I understand what Paul is talking about. And I think of many other passages of what Paul describes. So, what I want you to think about this morning as we close.

Oh, my goodness. I've overshot the time. All I can tell you in summary then about this great man is that he was trained by the official rhetorician, Libanius, who was the official public orator of the city of Antioch, to be his successor.

He said that he was my choice, was John, to be my successor. But in his foolishness he became a Christian.

So, he forfeited all his ambitions in that classical world to become a Christian. And then he moves from being an ascetic in the city to moving out into the Syrian mountains, the areas that are now being tyrannized by the IS today.

You can think of those haunts of Syria. That's where John went into the wilderness and he went into the mountains and lived such an ascetic life that he probably destroyed his health.

[43 : 36] It was just too great. But it was through his ascetic life, his isolated life as a monk, that he became a monk priest.

So, gradually he was brought back into the city to restore his health and in restoring his health as a young man, he was then induced to become a deacon in the church and then he was induced to become a priest.

Not anything that he wanted. This was not a career track for him at all. This was simply being obedient like the seraph to the holiness of God.

And ultimately he probably unwillingly was not going to go to Constantinople as the bishop there, but he was probably kidnapped. So, you know, it's not often we get bishops kidnapped to take up a high calling of being at the new Constantinople, which is the new Rome of Eastern Europe at that time.

And of course, because of his radical spirit, because of his radical asceticism, because of his quest for the angelic life like the seraph of Isaiah 6, he got lots of enemies.

[44 : 53] And they eventually prevailed. And so he was expelled, exiled, and under extreme physical sufferings, he died on his way to further exile in Pontus, way in the wilderness, from all influence that he might have.

Such, then, is our saint today. That's what it is to be a Christian. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.