John Chrysostom and the Preachability of the Word

What rushes to mind when we think of Chrysostom preaching is Eutropius, the powerful Byzantine minister fallen into disgrace and clinging to the columns of the altar in Hagia Sophia where he had found refuge; overturned statues in Antioch while the preacher excoriates the excesses of the crowds and invokes the humanity (philanthropia) of the emperor, in what Frans van de Paverd calls “one of the most moving products of Chrysostom’s oratorical skills”; a tongue-tied empress listening to herself (if Socrates and Sozomenus are to be believed) being compared to Herodias dancing and asking for John the Baptist’s head. Chrysostom’s exegetical homilies are however much less likely

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3 Kelly, Golden Mouth, 76-79.


6 Kelly, Golden Mouth, 238-240. One need only compare how Chrysostom explains that
to fire our fantasy. The first which actually did strike the present author was the one on the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 28, in which Chrysostom comments on St Paul’s arrival in Malta, then called Melita (melith). Chrysostom’s approach may be called “interlinear,” blending the words of the text in such a manner-of-course tone with his explanations that you imagine him right there before you, if not exactly as a compatriot than at least as a contemporary. As Adalbert G. Hamman put it: “Among all the Fathers of the Church perhaps no one has the same quality of modernity as John ... Chrysostom. The style is the man, vibrant, with a keen understanding of man and an even keener one of the intransigence of God. His sermons have not become dated. They are closer to our times than many of the sermons of the nineteenth century.” It is not through any risky Horizontverschmelzung, or fusion of the speaker’s and the listener’s horizon that Chrysostom makes us feel at home when preaching, but in the sense that he encourages us to ask him questions about our concerns.

And here is our question, one that seeks eloquence more in the art of persuasion than in flights of rhetoric; but, even then, an eloquence made to fit the object, which precisely for this reason overcomes distances. What conditions must the word as word fulfill in order to deliver a message which, as such, cannot be adequately expressed in words?

Though Chrysostom never formulated the question in this abstract way, there are enough indications in his preaching and writings to warrant our posing it, so long as we distinguish carefully between Chrysostom and our own question. This short paper is thus theological rather than historical. Even then, our question is restricted to the nature of the word in preaching, not to its sociological, psychological or purely rhetorical ramifications. I will seek to do this over three stages: first, by taking a look at the same text in a particularly turbulent time near the end of his ministry in Constantinople and does not seem to have revived the text. Robert Alan Krupp, Shepherding the Flock of God: The Pastoral Theology of John Chrysostom (New York: Peter Lang, 1991), 59.

As a student of the pagan orator Libanius, Chrysostom was certainly well versed in the oratorical techniques of his style, coupled with the purest Atticist style, as is rightly pointed out in Kelly, Golden Mouth, 7-8, 81-82. (Frans van de Paverd is more cautious: “Libanius, perhaps Chrysostom’s teacher,” Paverd, St John Chrysostom: The Homilies on the Statues, xxi), but at any rate Chrysostom was certainly under Libanius’ influence. And yet, a contrast can be made. Whereas dramatic occasions are likely to deflect attention from a text to rivet it on the outside situation which calls for a comment, the text in a preached exegetical commentary acts like ballast on the attention tempted to be distracted.

"Ironically, John’s reason for writing his homilies in a form other than the most common of the day - his lack of enthusiasm for the allegorical interpretation employed by most other homileticians - makes them more accessible to people today than most other patristic preaching.” Otis Carl Edwards, A History of Preaching, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2004), 73.

The Question to Chrysostom

If such is the question, it is not a priori obvious that Chrysostom is the best qualified to answer it. Insofar as he enjoys the greatest renown as a preacher, then, of course, he has the best claim on our attention. As Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet (d. 1704) put it: “I should wish to combine St Augustine and St Chrysostom. The former elevates the mind to great and subtle thoughts, the latter brings it down to the level of the capacity of the people.” But here is the rub: it seems as if John Chrysostom is good for the more direct questions like morality rather than for the more intricate issues of dogma. Since, however, there is a relation between the truths of Revelation as they are organized by dogmatic theology and the preached word in its bid to proclaim them all without exception, Chrysostom would be insufficiently comprehensive and therefore not representative enough for our purpose.

The objection is based on a misinterpretation. True, Chrysostom often winds up his discourses with moral exhortations loosely related to the foregoing explanation of the Bible, but that should be rather called paraklesis (to exhort

but just as much to leave it behind so as to view it with critical sympathy. In this context, however, we should rather steer clear of some of Gadamer’s methodological presuppositions.

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Hans-Georg Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik (Tübingen: Mohr, 1975), 289-290, 356-357 and 375, speaks of the Horizontverschmelzung, or the “fusion of two horizons” - that of one trying to understand someone or something that belongs to a different age - harking back to the “hermeneutical circle” held to be indispensable by Martin Heidegger for penetrating into a text so as to fully comprehend it. While waiving prejudices is indispensable for the understanding of a text, one needs not only to penetrate into it...
or admonish) an eminently community-building exercise. Although the Greek term occurs only twice in the New Testament (Acts 27:9-22 if we except a variant in Lk 3:18), much of Jesus' and the Apostles' preaching may be subsumed under paraenesis, which Kittel in turn subsumes under paraklesis, a term related to Paraclete, Comforter, “Morale Upholder.” Indeed, paraenesis is the soul of the rhetoric of preaching.

Moreover, this rhetoric is subservient to a “communitarian theology” not to be mistaken with a popular theology, but one that builds community by offering biblical nourishment within the liturgical assembly so as to prod it on to union with God. One need only compare Chrysostom’s two homilies on Pentecost published in PG 50 with the contemporary Fifth Theological Oration, “On the Spirit,” by Gregory of Nazianzus to note furthermore what is specific to Chrysostom. Gregory does not shy off from the speculative heights; Chrysostom, too, tackles the Pneumatomachians, who accepted the unbridged divinity of the Logos, but not of the Spirit, by pointing with Basil to the indispensability of the Spirit for our deification and then expatiating on the fruits of the Spirit. Again, in a catechesis for neophytes, Chrysostom surpasses Augustine on the sin of our first parents not through speculative depth, but by adopting the approach that we baptize children not only because baptism forgives sins but also because it bestows gifts of all sorts.

A Comprehensive Word about the Incomprehensible God

As remote from pastoral concerns as the theme may sound, Chrysostom in his very first year as a priest (AD 386) delivered five homilies on the incomprehensibility of God; or rather, on the incomprehensible nature of God. Actually the theme presents a direct challenge for the preacher bent on talking sense about God. Indeed, it helped place Chrysostom at the centre of theology, and theology at the centre of his life. Chrysostom had been ordained deacon by Meletius of Antioch shortly before the latter left the First Council of Constantinople (AD 381). That the Council was the big ecclesial event in Chrysostom’s life was brought to him by the visible presence in his congregation of the apparent prime target of Constantinople I, the Anomoeans, radical Arians who saw no similarity between the Father and his first creature, the Son. If we approach the Council from the viewpoint of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Symbol (NC) we may easily be led to think that its main agenda was to proclaim the divinity of the Spirit; yet the exact nature of the link of this Symbol to Constantinople I has been a bone of contention for at least more than a hundred years.

Quite different is the impression if we approach Constantinople I from its certainly authentic canons, viz., the first four. Canon 1 says it all: “Let no one undermine the faith of the 318 Fathers gathered here in Bithynia, but let it remain firm and untouched, and let every heresy be anathematized; in particular that of the Eunomians or Anomoeans, that of the Arians or Eudoxians, that of the Semi-Arians or Pneumatomachoi, and that of the Apollinarians.” The hermeneutical key of Constantinople I would thus appear to be Ariantism, especially in its latest variants, the Eudoxians or second-generation Arians named after Eudosios, Bishop of Constantinople in AD 360, and the Eunomians or Anomoeans, the third generation Arians and the most radical.

For the Eunomians, God was simple and thus characterized by the one quality of being ingenerate, whereby the simplicity guaranteed the exhaustive character of our knowledge of God. The Spirit-detractions, or pneumatomachoi, are mentioned as the penultimate form of heresy not yet condemned by Nicaea, and then as a sub-section of Semi-Arianism. Indeed, one of the theories about the connection of the Symbol to Constantinople I – dominant until Rudolf Staats

16. Ibid., 161.
17. Surprisingly, there is no entry for “paraenesis,” in Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament (ThWNT), ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1932-1979) 10v.; but there is a short reference to it in ibid., 2:543 and 5:815.
19. PG 50:453-464, 464-470. Only the first of these two homilies in PG 50 is considered genuine.
replaced it - namely, that of John N. D. Kelly and Adolf Martin Ritter, explained the silence of the sources about NC until Chalcedon (AD 451) through the interruption of the dialogue with the pneumatomachians during the very council for which NC had served as a basis. No wonder John eagerly took up the challenge of the Anomeans to join battle; quoting 2 Cor 10:4-5 he wants to fight them with “weapons which heal” and proceeds to distinguish between true and pretended knowledge (sophistry) of God. For the word as word to deliver the divine message it must first of all keep alive the paradox of saying a comprehensible word about the incomprehensible God, and thus retain the tension between the Trinitarian God’s ineffability and his eloquence in the incarnation; the Christian message in a nutshell. The Nazianzen’s Five Orations have been called a sort of third treatise against Eunomius, and with Athanasius’ letters to Serapion and Basil’s and Nyssa’s, form a corpus of writing which represents the cream of the Church’s reflection on the Spirit.

Chrysostom thus builds on the Cappadocians’ sterling work against Eunomius andlocates his own preaching in the mainstream Christian message, as, later on, Palamas, presupposing the same work, offers a new synthesis for the needs of his times. As in the Cappadocians themselves, the Spirit is thoroughly present, but rather as a retiring figure (Vladimir Lossky, drawing on John Damascene, will call Him the “kenotic” person in the Trinity) come to imprint Christ’s image on us, not his own. Ineffable is thus the nature of God, otherwise approachable in the incarnation. The word of preaching lives from this paradox of distance (H.II.304ff) and nearness (HV.Ix.201-315). By grasping this paradox right from the start (Jean Daniélou calls these homilies the first testimony of Chrysostom’s preaching) Chrysostom situates himself at the heart of Christian revelation-proclamation, of which the Spirit is the indispensable presupposition (H.III.1-31) and the inspirer rather than the main theme to respect his kenotic nature (see HV.IV.41-42). Chrysostom himself speaks of the condescending character of the Son (H.XV.55-56), which makes God the Father accessible to us.

27 “These weapons do not inflict wounds; rather they cure those who are sick”; H 1:39:67; XI.4:6:272ff.
28 One may follow here Chrysostom in ibid., V.5.6.15:139, 143-144 in order to arrive at knowledge of God.

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**Given the Need to Communicate Mystery, is Theology Itself Preachable?**

The question is not whether one can introduce theological elements into one’s homily, but whether theology as such may be preached. Put otherwise, what is the relationship between formal theology and public preaching? In the 1930s a dispute on this theme sparked off at Innsbruck University under the name of “kerygmatic theology.” All agreed that theology has to be remodelled on the Fathers, but in concrete this answer took two forms.

The first promoted a kerygmatic theology as a discipline independent of scholastic theology, the second sought to reorder the contents of systematic theology in the spirit of the Fathers. In its attempt to construct a theology closer to life, the first answer destroyed the unity of theology. Indeed, the kerygma harks back to the simple proclamation of the truths based on hearing but before any synthesis is possible (cf. Rom 10:14).

The second, realizing that theology must present the truths necessary for salvation, wanted to present the truths of Revelation in the kerygmatic spirit of the Fathers, whose theology was from the start at the service of the community rather than a théologie savant, and whose venue was the church rather than the lecture hall.

The best commentary on the two models was perhaps afforded by Josef Ratzinger. Kerygmatic theology rightly saw that the principles that regulate theology as a synthesis cannot be the same as those which regulate the proclamation of the Word itself. Dogma addresses itself to the intellectual situation of man, kerygma tries to lead man in faith or towards it. Although the second proposal was so promising, it made a fatal mistake; it failed to exploit its most important example: preaching and its original milieu in baptism.

It was reserved for Karl Rahner to refashion theology on the model of patristic mystagogy, not by identifying the two entities, but by presenting faith contents with constant reference to the experience of the mystery. "Tomorrow’s Christian will either be a mystic or will stop being a Christian.”

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29 Hugo Rahner, Eine Theologie der Verkündigung (Freiburg in Bresgau: Herder, 1939).
30 Ibid.,10.
This brings us to Chrysostom, one of whose main duties in those eleven years that he served as a priest in Antioch (AD 386-397), as bishop of the capital (AD 398-403), was to prepare catechumens for baptism. Neophytes as well as Christians, eager to deepen their initial introduction to the faith, flocked to listen to a preacher confronting the contents of faith with factual experience. Chrysostom speaks the language of the heart by resorting to images, which in the realm of mystery are more precise than concepts. Thus, commenting on “You shall break them in pieces like a potter’s vessel” (Ps 2:9), he says:

Note that the bath is taken in a somewhat mystic sense; for he does not simply say a vessel made of clay but a potter’s vessel. But note this well, for when a vessel of baked clay is broke to pieces, it could not be put together again because of the permanent hardness it has acquired from the fire. The potter’s vessel, however, is not made of baked clay but of muddy clay. Consequently, if it has become distorted, it could be given another shape by the craftsman’s skill. When Holy W rit speaks of an irremediable disaster, it does not speak of the potter’s vessel but of a terracotta one.

For all his colourful language, Chrysostom does not give a “rosy” picture of Christianity; reflecting on the situation at Antioch, he complains that houses were once churches but now churches were just houses. On the other hand, notwithstanding Chrysostom’s seemingly uncompromising tone on moral demands: Christ did not distinguish between monks and lay persons, one need only remember what an ecumenical theology Ireneè Hausherr drew from it as showing the universality of monasticism. In brief, the kind of theology the Saint adhered to in preparing catechumens was a popular, not a popularised, form of theology to build up communion - biblical in inspiration, liturgical in its ambiance and holding up deification as the common goal of Christian endeavour.

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38 Jean Hamman, *Baptism*, 145.

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42 Ibid., 288-290.
43 Ibid., 284-286.
44 Ibid., 334-335.
46 “Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. And, I suppose I should add, it is traditionalism that gives tradition such a bad name,” Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition*, The 1983 Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984).
his listeners: “Why, who suspected this?” Chrysostom demanded skill from a preacher, and he himself possessed it. As master of the word, Chrysostom could do this all too well. At times he had to warn his audience against applauding him; at other times, against their letting themselves be distracted, as in his Homily 4 on Genesis, when he upbraids his listeners for letting themselves be distracted by the sacristan rather than paying attention to his sermon. And all this may ultimately prove to be disappointing, as if the living word of tradition was to be kept alive by keeping the audience awake. If a word which is spoken is in danger of becoming a dead letter by being written down, it is not saved from such a fate by being recorded on tape.

As the German exegete Gerhard Lohfink says, had there been a filming team on Calvary, we would only have witnessed in all detail how the Romans crucified a Jewish insurgent, but that would make no difference to the point of the story; the living truth of the event is found only in the Gospel. Only, with Chrysostom, diversion is the key to conversion; it is the offer of the new gift of life, a new form of living in Jesus Christ, that matters. His “First Homily” as a priest is marked by the wonder that the word of ordination has come true, overnight but not in a dream; being a priest and a preacher in one, one has to offer not only the firstlings of grain and grape (a reference to the liturgy of the Eucharist) but also of the vintage Word (a reference to the liturgy of the Word).

Chrysostom leaves no doubt as to the analogy between the transformation of grain and grape and the transforming power of the Word. By having recourse to the prophet Hosea (Hos 14:3) and Psalm 68:32 he interprets thus the “sacrifice of praise,” as worthier before God than any animal that could be sacrificed. In other words, the effective word of the homily participating in the consecratory force of the Word of God, is not simply a conventional sign, but a real symbol of God at work transforming the world from inside, from within the heart, capable of perceiving and accepting the message with joy.

From our vantage-point of communitarian theology we understand how true it is that theology - understood as community service - is the conscience of preaching; and preaching - as community-building - the conscience of theology; so long as both look towards the Fathers not for phrases to parrot, but for guidelines. For this reason, it would be methodologically imprecise to say that the regula fidei, the norm of faith and truth, is tradition as comprehending Scripture, or Scripture and Tradition, but these must return to their source in the apostolic kerygma. The preacher, as such, is in the line of succession with the Apostles as messengers; Christ, too, is called Apostle (Heb 3:1). Here we find an answer to the impression many have that Chrysostom was primarily a moralist, when they could with equal right say that he was an exegete. As a biblical commentator - therefore anything but a drum-beating moralizer - he understood the word as opening a window on untapped resources and offering an alternative way of living. This in turn captures the unity of dogma and praxis: as a messenger he represented not only an abstract version of the truth, but personified it. The good word for it is “martyr,” a witness to this truth in life and work.

Conclusion

What Chrysostom has to offer by way of reflection on the human word as a medium for proclaiming the Word of God is instructive both (1) for the make-up of the human word rendered “capable” of such a divine service through empowering grace, as well as (2) for the divine Word itself willing to lower itself to such an unheard of degree. As for first (1), the human word must try to capture the paradox of God’s coming to word in Revelation - Revelation as incarnation of a message - without collapsing any of the two poles: the Trinity and the incarnation. Chrysostom then sounds to us refreshingly contemporary, because he manages to portray afresh the paradox of the inaccessible mystery now brought home to sinful humanity, God’s self-disclosure without betraying mystery but only asking us to share in it as part of the drama of salvation. As for the same process from the viewpoint of the Revelation, the emptying, kenosis, or self-disclosure of the Creator before his creatures (2), we advert that this kenosis

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52 Malingrey, Sur le sacerdoce, 394.
53 Ibid., 394-396.
is the community’s *plerosis,* or the fulfilment of the community, and that the Word as thus expressed constitutes the community established by God’s self-communication.

This link between the mystagogy of baptism and the fulfilment of Eucharist is thoroughly present in Chrysostom – he addresses both catechumens and the faithful - but as part of that *kenosis-plerosis* which forms the backbone of community; on the part of the revealing God: “the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor” (2 Cor 8:9; NRSV); and, on the part of the proclaiming messenger: “as poor, yet making many rich” (2 Cor 6:10). If we nowadays are at a loss to find a place for baptism in eucharistic ecclesiology, it is because we treat the divine liturgy as if it consisted only of the Eucharist. With the crowds of adults asking for baptism in the early Church now gone, the mystagogic role of the homily has receded into the background. Thank God that Chrysostom gave importance to both!54

We think of Chrysostom when we celebrate the Eucharist and of Chrysostom commenting on much of the Old and most of the New Testament! In this sense, what St Irenaeus said in his balanced eucharistic ecclesiology: “Our teaching is in conformity with the Eucharist, and the Eucharist confirms our teaching,”55 may be interpreted, especially with Chrysostom in mind, as the relationship between the first and the second part of the Eucharist, the liturgy of the Word which is in conformity with the Eucharist celebrated afterwards, and the celebration of the Eucharist, which amply confirms what has just been taught.56 Finally, what is at stake in a homily is well captured by this *kenosis-plerosis.* A homily ought to somehow startle or at least surprise the listeners so that they abandon the habitual defence-mechanisms with which they jam the liberating message of God’s Word and prevent it from reaching them, and prepare them instead for a renewed visit of the Logos in their hearts in grace. The first is done by evoking the nostalgia of paradise lost and regained in baptism; the second concretized by experiencing a hunger for the Eucharist that is heralded by the homily immediately before the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

54 Soon this will no longer be the case. The homily initially had catechumens as one of its major audiences. With the constant rise of infant baptism, the homily lost in catechumens one of its major mainstays and became atrophied. “L’homélie qui, à cause des circonstances historiques, a été omise pendant des siècles, sauf dans des cas exceptionnels, est prononcée souvent aujourd’hui à la fin de la liturgie, après la prière derrière l’ambon, probablement pour donner la possibilité de quitter l’église aux gens qui ne peuvent pas ou ne veulent pas rester,” Juan Mateos, *La célébration de la parole dans la liturgie byzantine: Étude historique* (Roma: Pontificio Istituto Orientale, 1971), 147. At the same time, one of the primordial purposes of the homily was catechetical and this should make us reflect on the catechetical scope of the present-day homily: The homily had best be understood as an evocation of the time of courtesy and longing as a catechumen - or, in the Latin rite, preparing for first communion and confirmation - to become a Christian, and whetting a sober hunger and taste for the Eucharist.

55 St Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 14:18.5.

56 See *Sacrosanctum Concilium,* no. 56. If Vatican II rightly abandoned terms such as mass of the catechumens and mass of the faithful as misleading - the homily is not only for catechumens and therefore the first part of the mass is also mass of the faithful - at the same time these expressions retain a relative historical meaning and remind us of the infancy of the Church and our own.