



Saints – Old and New

John Chrysostom

15 November 2015

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Luke 16: 19–end

extract from John Chrysostom's sixth sermon on Lazarus and the rich man

Professionally I am an historian, primarily of the Roman, Medieval and Byzantine worlds. Within that very broad area, my work has focused on the social and economic development of the Roman and Byzantine world from the age of Constantine the Great onwards, and the historical background to the violent expansion of Islam in the seventh century. Throughout my work, I have attempted to capture the voices and life experiences of the urban poor, the peasantry, and the artisans, whose taxes helped to support the Roman and Byzantine state, and whose labours fuelled the lifestyle of members of the Roman and Byzantine aristocracy, the haughty voices of whom dominate the pages of the literary sources on which historians typically rely. These historical interests chime with my more contemporary ones, as I have long been a socialist activist, and am currently a city councillor in Cambridge, with special responsibility for homelessness and refugees. And in my address this evening, I plan to draw upon each of these strands of history and politics.

St John Chrysostom, whose vivid denunciations of the wealthy you have just heard in the second reading, was, alongside St Basil of Caesarea and St Gregory Nazianzus, one of the Three Holy Hierarchs – or three ‘doctors’ or ‘teachers’ of the Church, as they are often described in the Western tradition – whose theological interventions in the fourth and fifth centuries were fundamental to the formation of Christian Orthodoxy as we understand it today. St Basil, also known as Basil the Great, made a fundamental contribution to the Church, firstly through his contribution to the debate over Trinitarian doctrine (the relationship between the God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit); secondly, through his role in giving shape, form and coherence to the emergent monastic movement, that would prove to be so central to the life of the Orthodox Church in the centuries ahead; and thirdly through the intellectual and spiritual justification he gave for Christian students to continue to study Classical Greek literature, which some within the Church regarded as little more than the morally corrupting detritus of a now smashed pagan past.

Gregory of Nazianzus, or St Gregory the Theologian, as he is often described, also made a fundamental contribution to the doctrinal development of the imperial Church through his intervention in the Trinitarian disputes of the fourth century. Like St Basil, he sought to harness and marshal the inherited intellectual traditions of the Classical Greek world for the purposes of Christian faith, in his case by deploying his philosophical training and rhetorical skills to give greater clarity of intellectual definition to the Faith and blast his opponents. Such writings, we should note, rate amongst the best surviving

examples of the ancient Greek art of rhetoric in action. Along with the other so-called 'Cappadocian Fathers' (including Basil), Gregory also drew upon the uniquely rich tradition of speculative philosophy in Greek to construct a tradition of speculative theology that would be central to the Christological dispute in the centuries ahead and the ability of the Church to enunciate the mysterious relationship between the Human and Divine in the Person of Christ that was fundamental to a proper understanding of the Economy of Salvation. Again, a synergistic relationship was established between otherwise potentially conflicting intellectual traditions, one that would be central to the development of Eastern Orthodox spirituality.

Lastly, John Chrysostom, who, like St Gregory, served as Patriarch of Constantinople, was (again, like Gregory) a great rhetorician (hence '*Chrysostomos*' – the 'Golden-mouthed'), and, like St Basil, a great champion of monasticism and asceticism. St John argued that the moral rigours of the monastic cell should inform the spiritual attitude and conduct of the laity. Like the later Pope of Rome, St Gregory the Great, John Chrysostom sought to delineate the moral contours of a life that could be both active and contemplative: how to live morally *in the world*, and not just apart from it. Unlike Pope Gregory, however, this led John Chrysostom to sharp and public denunciations of the political, economic and moral conduct of members of the imperial aristocracy, and even of the imperial household itself. Accordingly, part of Chrysostom's great legacy to the Church would be a tradition of fearlessness in the face of authority, and a heightened sense of social criticism, on which I wish to focus.

Christianity had begun in the first and second centuries AD as in many ways a deeply anti-institutional and anti-societal religion, which advocated casting off ties of kindred, of property, and of political society as it would traditionally have been understood by the Greek mind. But with the adoption of Christianity by the Emperor Constantine in the year 312, and the eventual establishment of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman state by the late fourth century, the Church had found itself increasingly institutionalized, as its leaders found themselves accorded honours and authority, and as the opportunistic rich and the politically powerful, eager to court the favour of Christian emperors, increasingly filled their congregations. The drawing of members of the Roman governing classes into the embrace of the Church would be vital to its future political success, which is one reason why we see St Basil and others going to such great efforts to reconcile Christian faith with the intellectual Hellenism that was so central to the self-identity of members of the Roman elite.

But crucially, the Church could not afford to become too comfortable or too at ease with the rich and powerful, for fear that if it did so, it would lose its sense of social mission and the following that it had built up across the third century amongst many of the urban poor of the empire. For the Roman world in the age of the Three Holy Hierarchs was one in which the rich were becoming richer, as members of a new imperial aristocracy, with political careers focused on the new imperial capital of Constantinople, were using their new found connections and wealth to build up large estates and property portfolios at the expense of the peasantry and the poor. In particular, the great landowners and city-councillors of Antioch in Syria, whence John Chrysostom originated, and where he did much of his early preaching, were especially notorious for the injustices they inflicted on their social inferiors, and these injustices were a common theme of the holy man's sermons.

Above all, in his remarkable series of sermons on the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, from which you have heard an extract tonight, St John compares the rich of his day to highway robbers, and thieves, advocating that they give their surplus wealth to the poor or suffer retribution, both in this life and beyond.

The redistribution of surplus wealth from rich to poor was a common theme of John Chrysostom's sermons, delivered to an increasingly unequal society, and which can be seen to have formed the basis of a consistent Patristic opposition to class-based society, which we find most forcefully expressed in the early fifth century in an anonymous treatise 'On Wealth'. In that work, the author takes the remarkably radical and intellectually precocious position that poverty was a direct result of the existence of the rich. 'Get rid of the rich man', the author declares, 'and there will be no more poor.'

Across the writings of the Church Fathers as a whole, and Chrysostom in particular, a relatively clear analysis of wealth and the wealthy emerges. As the Anglican theologian Peter Heslam has put it, Chrysostom in particular insisted that wealth was evil, because God, who is the ultimate owner of everything, had created all material goods to be held in common. To claim sole possession of such goods, therefore, was to be guilty of theft, both against God and against other human beings. 'Thus emerges a line of teaching', Heslam concludes, 'which may be considered an antecedent to Proudhon's famous dictum that *property is theft*'. As we see from both of today's readings, the poor were often regarded in the Early Christian tradition as more favoured by God than the rich, and were to be identified with Christ. This stood in marked contrast to traditional Graeco-Roman thought as expressed by members of the elite, in which the poor, and especially the destitute, were regarded either with disgust, or as objects of ridicule, to be mocked. It is in such terms, for example, that they are treated in the Latin poems of Martial. Charity in the Roman world was something which the wealthy targeted almost entirely at the wealthy, in a manner vaguely reminiscent of the attitude of some donors to the wealthier American universities today.

At the same time, however, the Fathers in general, and Chrysostom in particular, taught that the private ownership of property could be legitimized if such property were put to proper use. As Heslam has again noted, for example, in the same sermon in which Chrysostom declares the root of all wealth to lie in injustice, he also declares that wealth may be redeemed, 'so long as the rich do not hoard it for themselves, but *share it with the poor*'. Crucially, from the concept that all material possessions were meant to be commonly owned, 'and that the possession of private wealth by the few is therefore theft *against* the poor, [*there*] emerged [*in Patristic thought*] the idea that when the rich give to the poor this is a matter of *just redistribution* rather than of charity. It is simply rendering the poor their *due*, a matter of *obligation* rather than of *bounty*.' The redistribution of wealth from rich to poor was simply *restorative justice*.

So what is Chrysostom's message to us today? Or to those of us, at least, who would regard ourselves as Christians? Especially from the perspective of many members of Trinity College, it is not perhaps a comfortable one. And it is here I take off my historical hat and put on my contemporary one.

As a former Steward of the College, it is probably not for me to lecture anybody on 'wreathing wine-bowls with garlands', to use the words of the second reading, or 'faring sumptuously every day', although in my defence, I would point out that given the frequency of the complaints I received, managing catering here could hardly be described as 'feeding flatterers.' But I will say the following:

Firstly, in the context of recent government policies, such as the Bedroom Tax (voted for by our last MP) and the proposed Benefit Cap, and through the medium of television programmes such as 'On Benefits Street', we have seen the return into public discourse of concepts such as the 'deserving' and 'underserving poor', which John Chrysostom would have regarded as deeply un-Christian. As he declared in another of his sermons on the Parable of Lazarus: 'The poor man has one plea, his want and his standing in need: do not require anything else from him; but even if he is the most wicked of all men, and is at a loss for his necessary sustenance, let us free him from hunger ... When you see on earth the man who has encountered the shipwreck of poverty, do not judge him, ... but free him from his misfortune.'

Secondly, St John Chrysostom would have had choice words to say to the many members of this College, often from comfortable or *very* comfortable backgrounds, who enjoy access to massively subsidized accommodation and massively subsidized meals, yet who, if the opinion polls in the student press before the last election are to be believed, recently chose to support the imposition of austerity, and hardship, and benefit caps on those less fortunate than themselves.

Cambridge is a very wealthy city, but you do not need to go far within it to encounter individuals, families, or communities, who are struggling desperately to make ends meet, or for who have already been pushed into poverty and the hands of loan sharks by a bout of ill health, or the misfortune of the cost of a car breaking down, or *policies* such as the Bedroom Tax.

If you walk just half an hour from here, to the ward that I represent, East Chesterton, a ward in one of the fastest growing urban economies in Europe, you will find that one third of the children resident there currently live in poverty as defined even by this government – a situation that will only get worse as 'Benefit Caps' and Tax-Credit Cuts kick in, and as what remains of our social housing stock is sold off to the vultures and speculators who are circling overhead, as both Housing Associations and Council Housing Departments find themselves asset-stripped. Between the wealthiest wards in Cambridge (such as Newnham) and the poorest (such as Abbey, again, just the other side of Elizabeth Way), the difference in life expectancy between residents currently stands at *twelve years*. This is only going to get worse. In the city where you live, and you eat, 4,000 individuals currently rely on food banks for their sustenance, 2,000 of them children. None of them did so ten years ago. Again, this situation is only getting worse. As St John said of the poor man Lazarus at the rich man's gate, 'He hungered in the midst of prosperity. And where was he lying?', 'He lies at *your entrance*, the *pearl in the mud* and you do not see him? Do you feed parasites, and you do not feed the poor? This happened in the past, and it happens even now.'