

„SPEAKING COMES NOT BY NATURE BUT BY INSTRUCTION” WHY DID CHRYSOSTOM ELABORATE SO MUCH ON THE DIFFICULTIES OF PREACHING IN THE *ON THE PRIESTHOOD*?

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Abstract

Chrysostom elaborates on what the preacher is and how the spoken word works, which are the advantages of using it in the life of the Church, and what is the relation between the preacher and the Word. The first two aspects of this question on which we will stop are the importance and complexity of preaching. These two represent one of the reasons why Chrysostom elaborated so much on the difficulties of preaching.

Keywords: Chrysostom, preacher, sermon, bishop, priest, minister, study, rhetoric.

The dignity of the sermon implies dignity from the preacher. All the homiletic treatises, from the most ancient times until today, speak about the necessity for the preacher to have certain features, as one that takes over himself the responsibility of serving the flock of God by word. This importance is due to the fact that one of the qualifications of the church leaders is to know how to preach. In this context, my aim is to give an answer to the question „Why did Chrysostom elaborate so much on the difficulties of preaching in the *On the Priesthood*”. Thus, I will provide an analysis 1) of the difficulties that are discussed by Chrysostom in his treaty *On the Priesthood*, 2) of the reasons why difficulties exist, and 3) of the solution offered by Chrysostom for them. Alongside the direct statements made by Chrysostom about preaching I will extract some other indirect references to the subject of preaching from the facts he relates in his work. Nonetheless, the references to other instances of Chrysostom as preacher will help us to better understand his view about the difficulties encountered in his life by the preacher. Chrysostom elaborates to such an extent on the difficulties of preaching due to many reasons. First, Chrysostom

discusses these difficulties due to their great importance and to his experience gained from struggling with them. He says that „they are truly enough to quench zeal and to paralyze the powers of the mind” and only the incorporeal powers could be free from them¹. Second, a source of these difficulties is the audience by its complex nature and mixed feeling regarding the preacher. Then, preaching involves many dangers and risks concerning both the preacher and the Christians that are taught by the preacher. To all these difficulties Chrysostom offers the solution represented by the effect that the study is able to cause. And, as a rhetorical technique to make the things even clearer, Chrysostom discusses the possibility/impossibility of comparing ourselves with the ideal preacher – the Apostle Paul.

The importance and complexity of the work of preaching

Moving from the more general but personal problems from the first three books in the next two we find a more specific question. We find ourselves to the point where one is already the minister of God and received His sheep to care and guard on its way to salvation. The books IV and V from John Chrysostom’s *On the Priesthood* discuss the aspects and features of the preacher.

First, he compares Christ’s body with the human body and shows that the former is more fragile than the latter. If in the case of the human body we have a multitude of means by which we can treat it, in the case of the Christ’s body the options are not so numerous. In fact, we have but one way of treatment and that is the „powerful application of the Word”². But this is not the only difficulty. Compared with the human body Christ’s body can be more rapidly corrupted and the process of healing is much slower. This treatment can be found best applied in the cases of the „spurious doctrine”³. One example from his own life is the case of the *Homilies on the Statues* when he used the pulpit for polemical purposes⁴.

¹ *On the Priesthood* V.8.

² *On the Priesthood* IV.3.

³ *On the Priesthood* IV.3.

⁴ David G. Hunter, „Preaching and Propaganda in fourth century Antioch: John Chrysostom’s «Homilies on the Statues»”, in *Preaching in the Patristic Age: Studies in Honor of Walter J. Burghardt, S.J.*, ed. by David G. Hunter, Paulist Press, New York, 1989, p. 132.

Even if we had the power to perform miracles the power of the word would not be cancelled. For this we have the example of the Apostles, especially in Paul's case. Though he had the power to perform miracles he used the word in his mission and encouraged the obtaining of the power of the word in order to avoid the difficulties that its lack would bring. Much more this piece of advice is addressed to those who do not possess this power and thus by studying they should gain it.

A second application of this treatment is a twofold one. The power of the word is both needed for not letting ourselves wounded by the darts of the enemy and to wound him⁵. The former is a measure of defence. Once mastered, the power of the word helps the minister to keep himself at distance from the attacks of the enemy. The preacher knows which sides are vulnerable, where to protect himself and where the attacks come from. The latter is a way in which the preacher can attack, wound, and even defeat the enemy. Skilfully applied, the power of the word can frighten the enemies and reduce the frequency of their attacks. The importance of this power of speech is underlined also by the effects that it has and lists four of these effects. Chrysostom says that it can „rouse the soul when it sleeps”, „reduce it when it is inflamed”, „cut off excesses”, and „fill up defects”⁶. These four effects show that Chrysostom saw the power of speech as a way of keeping the Christians on the middle way and that it can be used both for activating and for calming the soul. The effects prove once again both the importance and complexity of the power of speech.

Difficulties from the audience

Now, many difficulties in the preacher's life come from the audience. First and foremost, the audience present at sermon is not static or homogenous but rather a „constantly changing entity”⁷. Chrysostom had as audience all categories of people, from rich to poor, from different social areas, old and young, man and woman

⁵ *On the Priesthood* IV.3.

⁶ *On the Priesthood* IV.3.

⁷ Wendy Mayer, „John Chrysostom: Extraordinary preacher, ordinary audience”, in *Preacher and Audience. Studies in Early Christian and Byzantine Homiletics*, Allen and M. Cunningham (eds), Brill, Leiden, 1998, p. 122.

etc. All these differences among people make preacher's life a hard one. For example, the poor are much easier to teach than the rich who are an easier prey for the devil⁸. The preacher has to adapt his speech, and very often to express the unfamiliar through familiar, in order that all understand and take benefits from it.

Then, some people do not listen the priest preaching as one from whom they came to learn something but they come only to critique and evaluate his power of speech. They divide themselves and, with a view to favour or spite, they take sides and become partisans either of one preacher or the other⁹. This was the case when, on a certain Sunday, Chrysostom let a bishop that was his guest preach in his place and people expressed their disappointment by leaving the church¹⁰, and showed that they did not come to listen for profit but for pleasure. Chrysostom talks about this fact because in his time there was possible for having more than one homilist preach¹¹. For example, after a priest would preach a bishop followed¹² and people faced with two distinct sermons and preachers between whom they would choose one or the other to like more.

This dissociation creates another difficulty. People stop to listen for their profit and begin to listen for pleasure or for other worldly reason, other than their spiritual benefit. For example, this thing happened in time of Chrysostom when the emperor would attend to hear the sermon and people came to see him and to be seen by him doing the same things as he¹³. If people attach themselves to a certain preacher, the other preachers are in danger to be regarded as thieves if they use in their sermons elements that were heard at other preachers and not only that but they are not even „permitted

⁸ Chrysostomus Baur, *John Chrysostom and his time*, translated by M. Gonzaga, Sands, London, 1959-1960, p. 83.

⁹ *On the Priesthood* V.1.

¹⁰ Chrysostomus Baur, *John Chrysostom and his time...*, p. 84.

¹¹ Wendy Mayer, „John Chrysostom: Extraordinary preacher, ordinary audience”..., p. 136

¹² Pauline Allen and Wendy Mayer, „Accessing the Everyday Life of Early Christians”, in *Vigiliae Christianae*, 1993, 47 / 3, p. 262.

¹³ Wendy Mayer, „John Chrysostom: Extraordinary preacher, ordinary audience”..., pp. 118 and 120.

to use their own resources without variety". This being the case, it is the preacher's duty to correct and make them follow him not for pleasure but for their spiritual profit and be indifferent to their praise, especially if he is one of the favourites, and by having a good power of speech in order to persuade them to change this kind of attitude¹⁴.

The praise is the greatest difficulty that comes from the audience, one that can harm both to the preacher and to the audience. If the preacher is skilful but is driven by the praise of the audience, his only aim will be to please them by his word. In this way he will not bring them any profit and will also ruin himself¹⁵. Not only the praise is perilous but it's opposite too – the slander and the envy. People do not possess the sense of criticality and they do not always discern between what it is true and what it is not. In this case, if the preacher's arguments against their accusations do not persuade them the only option left is indifference. Cares and concerns from the preacher would only make the things worse. Even if it is hard to behave along these lines, the only option a preacher has is to have the same indifference that a father has before his children and not be „puffed up by the promises of these persons nor cast down at their censure, when it comes from them unseasonably”¹⁶.

Then, the work of a learned preacher is much harder than that of the unlearned due to the people that act as critics and do not judge based on what it is said but on the reputation of the speaker. They do not take into consideration the natural causes that could make the preacher have a bad word that day. For them this is not an excuse. The fact that the preacher made one mistake in a long period of time has a greater impact on the audience than the fact he had a very good word and overpassed many greater preachers. However, difficulties do not stop here. If, for example, a preacher has a good name and no faults in his power of speech, this generates envy and those who are envious on him will end by hating and loathing him. They will use others that cannot even utter a word to take revenge on him. They will praise and extol such an unskilled person just to ruin the true good preacher. Ignorance and

¹⁴ *On the Priesthood* V.1.

¹⁵ *On the Priesthood* V.2.

¹⁶ *On the Priesthood* V.4.

patience are again asked in this case because the preacher is not to believe the word to be poor, because of the judgment of the ignorant and unlearned; as he would not consider the word that is really poor to be something wonderful and lovely, because of the astonishment of the unlearned¹⁷. Only the artificer can be the critic of his designs.

The reactions of the audience or the feedback received by the preacher are closely related to the subject of praise. One channel by which praise may come from the audience is the applause. Chrysostom had mixed feelings about this kind of feedback from the audience saying that he first feels a human pleasure in him and afterwards feels pain for the audience because did not receive any benefit from the sermon¹⁸. Then, approval or disapproval could be expressed facially¹⁹. The surprise, the anger, or the amazement have a visible sign on the Christians' faces. Finally, praise in all its forms is expressed verbally²⁰. This feedback offered during or after preaching makes the things difficult for the preacher by generating praise that causes so many troubles for him. „Thus, small and trifling matters have often lessened the glory of many and great doings”²¹ and the preacher has to be trained to be indifferent to all kinds of praise in order to avoid to be controlled by the popular opinion. Or, he will fill himself with the same envy and lose everything in the end. Things become even more difficult for those who are in high positions and their inferior orders appear to be in a better advantage than they are²². Then, the battle with the praise and envy is much harder. Chrysostom compares the public fame with a wild beast with many heads that is hard to kill but not impossible to control. The solution is training and experience in the power of speech.

¹⁷ *On the Priesthood* V.6.

¹⁸ Homily 20, 4 in Act. Ap. (60, 226-28), in Chrysostomus Baur, *John Chrysostom and his time...*, p. 85.

¹⁹ Pauline Allen and Wendy Mayer, „Accessing the Everyday Life of Early Christians”..., p. 263.

²⁰ Pauline Allen and Wendy Mayer, „Accessing the Everyday Life of Early Christians”..., p. 263.

²¹ *On the Priesthood* V.5.

²² *On the Priesthood* V.8.

The dangers and risks

Then, Chrysostom elaborates so much on the difficulties of preaching because of the dangers and risks that this action brings alongside with it. One risk is that an uninstructed preacher may guard all sides of the true teaching but leaves one uncovered. The one that is not guarded is enough for heresy (e.g. either the Greek, or Judaic, or Manichean, or the Fatalism teaching) to enter and devour the flock²³. The only possible option for the shepherd and preacher is to guard from all sides, that is, to be well skilled in refuting them all.

Another risk comes from the lack of experience and training. A preacher who is not trained in this kind of warfare can defeat a heresy but offer in the same time a victory for a heresy that was not even engaged in the battle. Thus he „gets pierced with his own sword”. Chrysostom gives as example a case where the preacher has to maintain a middle course. On the one side there are the heresies of Valentinus and Marcion and on the other that of the Jews. The preacher has to be fully conversant with both doctrines and fight evenly with both that in the end to trodden a middle path. A second example given by Chrysostom is that of the heresies of Sabellius and Arius, case in which the preacher is not allowed anymore to keep the middle course. In this case, a middle course is considered to be pure heresy. Here, it has to be argued „that the Godhead of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, is all one, while we add thereunto a Trinity of Persons”²⁴. From preacher’s great unskillfulness in argument one „can fall into heresy and be cut off from the body of the Church”²⁵. Or, he risks that they will „lay the blame of his discomfiture not on his own weakness, but on the doctrines themselves, as though they were faulty”. Then, doubt will grow among the people, they will become troubled, and finally will meet the shipwreck²⁶. Therefore, the preacher will have to able to fully adapt himself to any condition of fighting when it comes to protect the doctrine of the Church. Because, not

²³ *On the Priesthood IV.4.*

²⁴ *On the Priesthood IV.4.*

²⁵ *On the Priesthood IV.9.*

²⁶ *On the Priesthood IV.9.*

preparing the discourse before delivering it in public „is a cause of numberless dangers”²⁷.

The last risk discussed here comes from the audience itself. Sometimes, based on hearing the sermon, the audience will inquire and try to understand the depths of God’s judgements and will not stop until they succeed doing that. That is wrong. It is impossible to know what God does not want us to know. Their curiosity and ignorance will cause numerous troubles. In order not to harm himself and not to let the sheep go astray when the preacher stops the search, he needs much tact in using the power of speech²⁸. In these cases, the path of orthodoxy is very narrow and the danger is great. The only solution is a fortification from all sides by contending bravely and carefully.

The instruction needed

Because the preacher’s name is one of the most important aspects of preaching, if not the most important, here I will discuss the difficulties of preaching that are posed by the preacher himself. The most important qualities of the preacher that bring him a good name are the intellectual ones. Chrysostom uses the analogy of a treatment prescribed by the doctor to show how powerful it is and what training one needs to have to reach the healing of one’s patient by using it. I showed in the first section of this paper in what the „powerful application of the Word” consists of. The second analogy that Chrysostom uses is that of a weapon. He urges the preachers to „arm ourselves with this weapon”²⁹. This means to get to know how to handle and acquire its skills. A weapon that is incorrectly used is not better than no weapon at all. He did not use analogies only to speak about what is the power of speech but he used numerous analogies as a technique of the power of speech. Chrysostom himself used numerous references from daily life of the people to show in a clearer way the point of his sermon³⁰. The preparation is needed because this spiritual war is not at all

²⁷ *On the Priesthood* V.1.

²⁸ *On the Priesthood* IV.4.

²⁹ *On the Priesthood* IV.3.

³⁰ Pauline Allen and Wendy Mayer, „Accessing the Everyday Life of Early Christians”..., p. 265.

like any other types of war. It is manifold and it is fought on different battlefields. The preacher has to know each battlefield and not only how to handle his weapons but also how the weapons of the enemy work. Even this is not enough; he has to know how to fight from any position of its army, from archer to general. And finally, he has to be able to guard the body of Christ from all sides leaving no angle uncovered and no door unguarded by way of the „presence of mind and wisdom of the shepherd”³¹. These striking skills have to be achieved in order for the preacher to succeed in his duty.

Another reason why instruction is needed is because both the guardian and the thief take their weapons from the same source. In term of the arguments to defend a certain point of view, Chrysostom states that „all take their weapons from the same Scriptures”³². However, study and knowledge of the Scriptures is not enough. The way in which one’s position is expressed makes an immense difference. Here we can hear again Chrysostom saying that „speaking comes not by nature but by study”. Therefore, not only the study of the Scripture is needed but also the study of the way in which it is either defended or affirmed, namely the power of speech or the „Christian rhetoric”³³ – as Mitchell calls it. To avoid the difficulties posed by the audience is not enough but the preacher also needs the power of good preaching. If he is immune to praise but his word is not solid in every aspect the people will use any weak points of his word to accuse and blame him³⁴. But if he and his speech are irreproachable in terms of nature and exposure, he will be able to correct any of the people’s sins without exposing himself to any dangers. Be ready always to give an answer, says Peter (1 Pet. 3, 15). Once the instruction acquired all the tools for fighting this fight against the enemies of the God’s flock are at hand.

Then, the instruction makes easier and more useful the preparation of sermons that are delivered on each Sunday by the same preacher and sometime in the days of the saints. Baur argues that

³¹ *On the Priesthood* IV.4.

³² *On the Priesthood* IV.9.

³³ M. Mitchell, *The Heavenly Trumpet: Trumpet: John Chrysostom and the Art of Pauline Interpretation*, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen, 2000, p. 286.

³⁴ *On the Priesthood* V.3.

during his first years as a bishop, Chrysostom preached almost every Sunday and feast day³⁵. Things are the same for the different types of homilies that a preacher has to deliver as well. Scholars distinguish between six types of homilies but in practice, Chrysostom used a rather mixed type of homilies. He used to start with discussing a scriptural text and afterwards switch to edifying the assembly in terms of their values and morals³⁶. For example, „Chrysostom employed standard rhetorical techniques of his day for the encomium”³⁷. Obviously, these aspects of preaching required a great instruction and preparation before each sermon but also a preparation for the work of preaching when there are so many and different sermons to be delivered. As I previously showed, Chrysostom argues the need for patience and indifference to praise or slander and power of speech against the difficulties that the audience pose. However, he also mentions a consolation that the preacher can have but one that is greater than all³⁸. This also being the case when the preacher should aim to please someone. Consciously „arranging and ordering his teaching with a view to pleasing God” brings preacher a greatest consolation. For example, the sermons of Chrysostom are hymns of praise and „concerned to help the hearers to lead a Christian life”³⁹.

One solution that Chrysostom gives for this „necessity for effective rhetoric”⁴⁰ to be fulfilled is that one „should do all that in him lies, to gain this means of strength”⁴¹. At the same time this will enable the preacher to avoid all the risks and dangers discussed in the last section. By instruction he will become experienced in disputations of this kind. Wherefore it should be our ambition that the Word of Christ dwells in us richly (Col. 3, 16). According to Chrysostom, through study the preacher will acquire three

³⁵ Chrysostomus Baur, *John Chrysostom and his time...*, p. 82.

³⁶ Pauline Allen and Wendy Mayer, „Accessing the Everyday Life of Early Christians”..., p. 263.

³⁷ M. Mitchell, *The Heavenly Trumpet...*, p. 22.

³⁸ *On the Priesthood* V.7.

³⁹ Geoffrey Wainwright, „Preaching as Worship”, in *The Oxford history of Christian worship*, ed. by Geoffrey Wainwright and Karen B. Westerfield, Oxford University Press, Oxford, c2006, p. 329.

⁴⁰ M. Mitchell, *The Heavenly Trumpet...*, p. 27, n. 94.

⁴¹ *On the Priesthood* IV.5.

necessary qualities. First, he will be fully conversant with this middle course. Second, he will contend bravely and carefully. Third, much tact is needed on the bishop's part, in order to lead his people away from unprofitable questions, and himself escape the censures, tact that first will be acquired from study and afterwards from his experience of preaching.

Reaching this power of speech by study does not mean that it is the end of labours. This power has to be cultivated „by constant application and exercise”⁴². As I showed in the second section of this paper, the reason for this is that the people judge based on the reputation of the preacher. Therefore, once he reached great oratorical powers the preacher needs to become a more laborious study man and study greater than others. The expenditure of great labour upon the preparation of discourses is greater when it comes that the discourse has to be delivered in public by a renowned person. The instruction represents also a security measure, in order to fulfil and not injure oneself during the process one has to master the equipment he is working with. For the same reason, the preacher has to master the power of the word in its every aspect.

Another reason why the study is needed is the way of delivering the sermon. It seems that Chrysostom preached both extempore and from notes. One argument for delivering the sermons extempore is represented by the remarks of Chrysostom about the reaction of the congregation⁴³. Nonetheless, he delivered sermons prepared beforehand. The evidence for this last statement is the collection of polished sermons that have been preserved⁴⁴. Therefore, the preacher has to prepare sermons beforehand or to deliver sermons extempore. The sermons delivered extempore being the most difficult ones need more studying and more preparation than the ones prepared beforehand. Chrysostom was able to deal with both situations because he had a deep and sure rhetorical training⁴⁵. From his own experience he argues in favour of acquiring the „powers of eloquence and argumentation in order to effectively refute opponents”⁴⁶. Therefore, the priest has to be moved by the ambition to

⁴² *On the Priesthood* V.5.

⁴³ Pauline Allen and Wendy Mayer, „Accessing the Everyday Life of Early Christians”..., p. 264.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 264.

⁴⁵ M. Mitchell, *The Heavenly Trumpet...*, p. 27.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 283.

have the Word of God dwelling richly in him⁴⁷ because of the complexity and the importance of it.

We are far from the ideal model

Finally, Chrysostom elaborated so much on the difficulties of preaching in the *On the Priesthood* because we are so far from the ideal model of preacher. Chrysostom saw Paul as a model in many respects and as a model of preacher makes no exception. However, we see Chrysostom arguing against the habit of comparing ourselves with Paul. He makes clear the fact that we are incomparable with Paul visibly based on four distinctions. First, his bare presence was frightening the demons; his handkerchief was doing miracles; and his prayers were raising the dead. Secondly, he had such a power of performing miracles that he was taken as a god and before leaving this life he was considered worthy to „be caught up as far as the third heaven”. Then, his life itself; his zeal and forbearance; his perils, cares, anxiety, sympathy, labours, afflictions, persecutions; and death measure more than we could imagine. Finally, there is one more thing that, according to Chrysostom, surpasses all that was accounted until now – his longing for Christ. He prayed to go in hell so that the Jews who wanted him dead to be saved. Such a „great virtue was manifested in himself”⁴⁸. Therefore, Chrysostom wants to avoid any possibility of comparing ourselves with Paul in terms of rhetorical skills by „putting Paul in a category by himself”⁴⁹.

Nonetheless, this argument against comparing ourselves with Paul is aimed to show that in speech Paul was „unpractised in the tricks of profane oratory”, (thus man’s diction can be poor and his composition simple and unadorned), but not in knowledge (not that Paul was skilled in „accurate statement of doctrine” and not „incapable of contending for the defence of the right faith”) (2 Cor. 11:6)⁵⁰. Only in this case he argued against comparing with Paul. Because Paul said that he was rude in speech (2 Cor. 11:6) people mistakenly understood that he was trying to suggest they do not

⁴⁷ *On the Priesthood* IV.4.

⁴⁸ *On the Priesthood* IV.6.

⁴⁹ M. Mitchell, *The Heavenly Trumpet...*, p. 286.

⁵⁰ *On the Priesthood* IV.6.

have to work for acquiring the power of speech. But we are not at all like Paul and this is why we need instruction.

Both before working miracles and after, Paul appears to have made much use of argument. Evidence is that he was taken as being Hermes, a consequence of his speech and of his miracles. But even having the power of performing miracles Paul still made use of the rhetorical skills. His sermons, disputations, and epistles wondered not only the Christians but also the Greeks and the Jews. They provoked wonder not only in that time but they still continue to do even today, and not only they confirm the true faith but they help people live a good life. Based on all this evidence, Chrysostom proves that Paul was not at all unskilled but „had given himself to the study of which we have been speaking with great diligence and zeal⁵¹”. Paul urges not only the priests to learn but also the lay, and encourages not only teaching but also learning, even though the power of teaching is greater. When he compares himself with Paul, Chrysostom says that Paul's exploits are beyond all powers of description and beyond his in particular, just as the masters of eloquence surpass him. If Chrysostom said that, nothing is left for us to say in our defence. Nothing, only to give ourselves to instruction.

In conclusion, there are five main reasons why Chrysostom elaborated so much on the difficulties of preaching in *On the Priesthood*. Acknowledging the importance and the complexity implied by the work of preaching, Chrysostom discussed the subject in two of the six books of his work. Through these two he mentioned that some difficulties in preaching come from the audience but also from the preacher himself. Thus, he showed why the instruction is needed and to what risks and dangers the preacher exposes himself if he thinks he does not need instruction. And to make the picture even more perfect, he proved that Paul is not at all an example of unskillfulness in the power of speech but he is the ideal preacher, from which we are very far even possessing the power of speech. To all these, Chrysostom sets the way forward by saying that „speaking comes not by nature but by instruction”.

⁵¹ *On the Priesthood* IV.7.