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- 17 Nineteenth Century Studies p.40f. The words in square brackets are mine.
- 18 ibid., p.42
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Grace and Demand — the heart of Preaching

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The theological task reaches its culmination in effective preaching. This being so, a study of two of the greatest preachers of the past is undertaken. These are John Chrysostom and John Wesley. Although they were active during very different periods in Church History and their circumstances and style are profoundly dissimilar, the deeper structure of their preaching proves to reflect the same fundamentals, which may be summed up in the words, grace and demand. Each age and culture produces its own idiom, but the similarities suggest an area of continuity from which preachers today might profitably learn.

PREACHING is the most appropriate form of theological discourse. This probably unexpected statement could hardly have issued from reflection on current theological literature, but I doubt if it would have occasioned any surprise to the Fathers of the Church, or indeed to John Wesley. For they were aware that the business of the theologian is prayerful interpretation of the Word of God, and the communication of God's message to the people. They produced more homilies and sermons than treatises. Now preaching has always involved both critical reflection on the tradition, often stimulated by engagement with scripture, and an openness to the Spirit, and to the contemporary situation, which ensures appropriation of scripture and tradition in new ways in new circumstances. And this surely is the task of theology. It is a task distinct from apologetics, though it may have apologetic elements. It is a task distinct from historical study, archaeology or investigative research, though it may profit from such activities. It is a task distinct from political prophecy or sociological analysis, though it must relate to immediate issues. It is not philosophical reflection, but creative exposition of the truth of God intended to change people's understanding and their lives. That is the task of theology, and also of the best preaching. Preaching is therefore the most appropriate form of theological discourse, and also the most demanding.

Now if this is so, it is clearly necessary to take preaching very seriously and to endeavour to learn from the greatest preachers of the past. To get to the heart of the matter, let us take the two men in the history of the Church with the greatest reputation in their own time for effective preaching, namely John Chrysostom and John Wesley. What does their preaching have in common — where do the continuities lie? Where do the dissimilarities show? — in what ways is their preaching strikingly different? Did each make the Gospel 'real' for the people of his own generation? If so, what was the essential core of their message? Of course, in undertaking to examine these questions, one works with a difficulty: we have written sermons from each, but the best preaching inevitably has an element of spontaneity and sensitive response to the congregation; a great deal depends on non-verbal communication, inflections, attitudes, the projection of personality. All this is difficult to reconstruct. Most of John Wesley's sermons were extempore, and apart from a few special sermons preached, for example, to the University of Oxford, the published examples were not actual sermons as delivered: rather they were published as 'models' — the sort of doctrines he preached, and the sort of way in which he preached them. To read the published sermons of Wesley is to enter the world of the eighteenth-century Rationalist, ordering his points in beautiful sequence; and one wonders how on earth this could bring people to their knees and provoke mass conversions among the poor and the illiterate. A similar difficulty exists with the homilies of John Chrysostom, though certainly some of his were taken down by stenographers as he spoke, and we even have amusing little asides recorded which give a vivid impression of the kind of conditions under which he preached. Clearly huge crowds packed into the basilica, and Chrysostom even warns people to watch out for pickpockets in the crush! But not all the homilies have come to us in this way, some seem to have been deliberately put together for publication.

Yet, making allowance for these difficulties, it is possible to deduce something of the style and content of the sermons of these two great preachers, one of whom entranced fourth-century Antioch only to offend those in high places in Constantinople, the other of whom swept eighteenth-century England off its feet, but was excluded from the Established Church. What is most surprising is that careful study uncovers a profound similarity in their basic message, underlying the many more obvious differences. The element of continuity can be encapsulated in the twin themes of grace and demand. God's grace, his saving action, his overflowing love, was for each of these preachers the primary reality and the entire basis of their preaching; God's demand that man respond by reformation of life was the burden of their message. Our main purpose is to examine how these features were given expression at two very different stages in the history of the Church and in two very different cultural environments. First let us set each in his own context and allow the contrasting characteristics of each proper emphasis.

Chrysostom was a priest at Antioch from 386-398, and from then until 404, Patriarch of Constantinople. His sermons give a very vivid picture of the corrupt life of both cities and the problems of the Church in that particular society. There was a reaction towards worldliness after the rigours of the persecutions, and as the Church became the established religion of the Empire, a vast influx of new Christians who had the name of Christ in their

mouths rather than their hearts.' Society was no longer simply heathen, but neither was it Christian. Crowds flocked to the churches to applaud Chrysostom's rhetoric and behave as if at the theatre; and they no longer flocked if there was the counter-attraction of a real theatre production or circus races. Social conditions were hard; at one end of the scale was extreme poverty, and slavery was by no means yet a dead letter; at the other end of the scale was the acme of riches coupled with greed, cruelty and exploitation of the poor. The situation was even more severe in Constantinople where the imperial court set the tone. With these conditions in mind, the prevailing moralistic tone of Chrysostom's preaching is hardly surprising, even though at first sight it appears that works not faith is his emphasis, and agapē like charity, has been reduced to almsgiving.

Chrysostom's primary purpose, then, was to educate an essentially pagan society in the Christian way, and this meant a great deal of straightforward instruction. Most of his sermons are series of exegetical homilies, preached commentaries which took his congregations through books of the Bible, sometimes covering quite extensive passages in one go. His listeners had to be introduced to the content and meaning of scripture, often starting from scratch. For the most part the homilies are diffuse and unplanned. Chrysostom seems to have picked up the text of the book he was preaching on, read out a few words, spoken a general introduction and then followed the text, carefully explaining words and phrases, expounding it verse by verse. After a time, particularly if a theme or phrase struck him as pertinent to the current situation, he would digress on to a long exhortation which bore little relation to the content of the exegetical section of his sermon. This would usually be moralistic — on the evils of riches, on almsgiving, on voluntary poverty, on the immoralities of the theatre — though sometimes it dealt with an issue that was alive at the time, for example, whether repentance was possible after baptism.

This method of preaching meant that Chrysostom often dealt with a vast range of topics, sometimes entirely unrelated, within the compass of a single sermon. This method was regarded as unusual even in his own time; rhetorical convention expected a particular speech to cover a particular topic, with all the tricks of the trade employed to embellish it to maximum effect. Chrysostom's

hearers once asked him why he often spoke of entirely different things in one and the same sermon. He justified himself by saying that as a physician did not treat all diseases with the same medicine, but administered to each one what was most useful, so the preacher did not venture to offer the same medicine to all his listeners, but must prepare several so that each one might go home with a suitable means of salvation. 'Therefore', he said, 'I speak now of avarice and reproach the sensual life; then I touch on incontinence, and after that praise almsgiving and encourage everyone to it and all other good works.'²

This diffuse and unplanned method of sermon construction is hardly to our taste; S. L. Greenslade's judgement was that a good many of Chrysostom's final exhortations 'would be crossed out by anyone taking a sermon class.'3. Yet in educational terms it had its advantages in Chrysostom's day, and it

apparently did not turn off his hearers. It communicated the content of scripture to largely ignorant congregations; and it communicated a range of basic moral attitudes as well as practical advice on the decent ethical standards to be expected in a supposedly Christian society. One of the things Chrysostom tried to do was to bridge what was then a widening rift between the perfectionist ideals of the monks and the daily lives of ordinary Christian people. Whether or not we may call what Chrysostom was doing 'preaching the Gospel' is a deeper question to which we will return later.

John Wesley became notorious for open-air evangelism. Yet he did not take to field preaching easily. It was only after scores of pulpits in England had been closed to him and he was summoned to it by George Whitefield. Wesley was preaching in an England whose social conditions were not entirely unlike those of Chrysostom's Antioch; the gap between rich and poor, the respectable gentleman and the inmate of the workhouse or prison, was a wide one. It was the England of Hogarth in which Wesley preached the Gospel of Christ; he faced savage, brutal, poverty-stricken masses, and on the edge of the crowd the curious rich conspicuously hidden in their carriages. Is it any wonder that it was a deep ethical concern that motivated both these preachers; and that it was the Christian way of true $agap\bar{e}$ that was the basis of a real attempt to preach practical Christian morality in their respective contemporary situations?

Wesley's published sermons are for the most part isolated sermons on congenial texts. Wesley did not face the same congregation day after day as Chrysostom did, and in any case his intention in publishing the sermons was to indicate his stance and approach on various doctrinal and practical issues which were to the fore in the evangelical revival. There is one set of exegetical sermons from Wesley's pen, namely the series on the Sermon of the Mount; in the course of our discussion, it will be fruitful to make comparisons between these and Chrysostom's sermons on the same chapters of Matthew's Gospel.

The structure of Wesley's sermons provides a striking contrast to those of Chrysostom. His preaching is thematic and follows a prepared plan whose subdivisions are often announced in advance. Even within the subdivisions, it is not hard to discern the outline. This obvious care over the structure of the sermon, sometimes with paragraphs of different sections beautifully balanced, sometimes with paragraphs arranged in a magnificent logical progression, is a real joy to anyone with a tidy mind, and provides a clear and obvious contrast to the muddled sermons of Chrysostom. Yet this too had its dangers; texts may be broken down into over-schematized components, or a treatise may be constructed which is far removed from the text to which it is nominally attached. Perhaps the most notorious example of the latter problem is the sermon on 'The Almost Christian': the text is 'Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian' (Acts 26:28), and the sermon consists of a powerful contrast between the 'Almost Christian' and the 'Altogether Christian'. No one can deny the effectiveness of the sermon, but 'Wesley's warmest admirer must admit that this is an example of how not to treat a text.'4

Structure and style, then, are so different that the two preachers hardly appear at first sight to have much in common. The contrast remains even when their material and method is more similar, as in their treatment of the

Sermon on the Mount. Both are now preaching in the exegetical tradition, and dealing with texts as they stand, interpreting them for their hearers. The fact that the text is ethical in content means that Chrysostom's exhortations are much more integrated with his exegesis than usual, and his sermons therefore give a greater impression of unity, clarity and dependence on the text before him. Wesley, too appears in a different light in many of these sermons. He is now concerned with following through the text, sometimes like Chrysostom covering a very lengthy passage in one sermon. But even here, his preaching never becomes chaotic or diffuse. His careful plan is ever before us; it may be a simple plan whereby he carefully follows the verses in order, showing their relation and dealing with each in turn, but always there is a feeling of systematization of a kind Chrysostom never attempted.

The superficial impression on first reading the sermons of these two preachers is therefore one of contrast. This is further enhanced by the differences in their approach to sermon illustration. Chrysostom uses the stock tropes of Greek rhetoric: storms at sea, competitors in chariot-races, and many others. One of Wesley's most characteristic methods of illustration is to compose character sketches — the pictures of the Almost Christian and the Altogether Christian are typical. These sketches, however, are mostly based on scriptural allusion and couched in scriptural language, and since Chrysostom's most frequent illustrative method is to use cross-reference to scriptural texts, stories and characters, there is a common source and a common approach to dramatic and telling use of the basic material they shared.

This is typical of the situation: a first impression of utter dissimilarity, but a deeper consonance revealed by more careful study of the content. Both preachers were obviously soaked in scripture. The Greek of Chrysostom is steeped in phrases from the Greek Old and New Testaments, and his work full of quotations from scripture. John Wesley's language has similar characteristics: scriptural phrases are built into sentences, scriptural sentences into paragraphs. Exegetical procedures are also similar: when a text is expounded by either, it is broken down into distinct ideas and then put together again to form a full picture of what the text is getting at. A clear example of this is the exposition of the Beatitudes. Each asks, 'Who are the poor in spirit?' Each answers in terms of humility and dependence on God, as distinct from pride, the attempt to be equal with God, the sin of Adam. Each asks the same question of each beatitude, and each beatitude is then interpreted in terms of Christian virtues and stages in the Christian life. The words are related to the effects of God's gracious gift of salvation. Thus the individual elements are expounded and then put together to form a complete picture of life in Christ, culminating in the inevitability of persecution. The details of the exposition produced by each preacher may be different, but their method of tackling it is very much the same. Chrysostom sums up:

Therefore, you see in each instance, by the earlier precept making way for the following one he has woven a sort of golden chain for us. So first he that is humble will surely mourn for his sins; he that so mourns, will be meek and righteous and merciful; he that is merciful, righteous and contrite, will, of course, be also pure in heart; and such a one will be a peacemaker too; and he that has attained to all these will be moreover

arrayed against dangers, and will not be troubled when evil is spoken of him and he is enduring trials innumerable.

For Wesley, too, the sum of the Beatitudes characterizes what Christians are to be and what they are to do — how inward holiness is to exert itself in outward conversation.

Both preachers assume the unity of scripture and make indiscriminate use of passages from one context or author to illuminate passages found elsewhere. Wesley explains that the merciful who are to obtain mercy are those who love their neighbours as themselves. This opens the way to full-scale exegesis of Paul's hymn to love in I Cor. 13. That chapter is also a favourite of Chrysostom's to which he easily digresses when expounding other texts. Sometimes this procedure produces unacceptable results — as when Wesley imports the whole of the Pauline theology into the Beatitudes. Yet at other times it is this kind of technique which enables each preacher to proclaim the Gospel message for the congregations of his own time.

I have suggested that the central core common to both and underlying the many differences we have been observing, is to be summed up in the twin emphases: grace and demand. John Wesley, who had learned the doctrine of justification by faith alone from the Reformers, explicitly centres a good deal of his preaching on this theme. Man cannot earn his salvation; he can only accept it from God. 'Justifying faith . . . is a sure trust and confidence that Christ died for my sins, that he loved me, and gave himself for me'; 'acceptance must depend, not on us, but on him that calleth us.' John Chrysostom, living centuries earlier, did not focus on this theme so explicitly. S. L. Greenslade once said about patristic preaching:

Broadly speaking, justification by faith was obscured. Instead there was taught, on the one hand, a doctrine of salvation by sacraments, baptism, eucharist and penance, which went beyond the properly objective aspect of sacraments and must have been widely misunderstood in a mechanical or magical way; on the other, judgement and justification by works, merit and reward, were the most familiar commonplaces of preaching... I feel sure that in this respect there was a widespread failure to communicate the Gospel.⁶.

This is an understandable interpretation of the situation, but it is not, I think, entirely fair to Chrysostom. It is as well to remember that his near contemporary, the historian Socrates, found his preaching inexplicable, precisely because it offered the possibility of repentance over and over again. This seemed to Socrates incompatible with Chrysostom's own zeal for ascetic virtues and holiness of life, as well as contrary to the synod of bishops who had decreed that only once was repentance possible after baptism. Chrysostom

did not scruple to say, 'Approach, although you may have repented a thousand times.' For this doctrine, many of his friends censured him....⁷

Socrates clearly thought that Chrysostom's judgmental attitude to the court and to his fellow-clergy lay at the root of his downfall; yet he recognizes that

his sermons imply that God in his mercy always holds the invitation to repentance open. In fact the most persistent theme in Chrysostom's preaching was God's philanthropia, his love towards men. One reason for his popularity was that he could lash the rich and hypocritical with cruel wit while offering the poor and the sinner the mercy of a kind and loving Father. God's philanthropia meant that men were called upon to show love and consideration to all. God's mercy (eleëmosynē) should induce Christians to eleēmosynē — the sense has now shifted to almsgiving, but this was the practical outworking of Christian agapē in the environment to which Chrysostom was preaching. It was God's eleēmosynē which reconciled us; Chrysostom in one passage pictures her as a dove interceding on our behalf at the judgment, taking us under her wings.

Let us beloved, strive after her through whom we are saved. Let us love her, let us value her more than money. . . .

God prizes her more than sacrifice, he goes on. Nothing is more characteristic of a Christian than *eleēmosynē* (almsgiving). But it does not stem from us first; for God had already shown his mercy (*eleēmosynē*) towards us.⁸

In this passage we can see how very much aware Chrysostom was that neither God's grace nor human effort was sufficient for salvation without the other. He often coupled both emphases: 'In willing lies everything, with grace from above.'9

Chrysostom's moral exhoratations may give the impression that he preached a doctrine of salvation by works; but he was a great admirer of Paul, and it would be surprising if he had entirely failed to appreciate what Paul says on this subject. In fact, the homilies on Romans indicate that Chrysostom clearly did grasp something of what Paul was getting at: on Romans 1:17 he points out that it is 'not your own righteousness, but that of God. . . For you do not achieve it by toilings and labours, but you receive it as a gift from above, contributing only one thing from your own store, "believing".' On Romans 3:24-25, Chrysostom asks, 'What is the "declaring of righteousness"?' And he replies,

Like the declaring of his riches means not merely that he is rich himself, but also makes others rich; or of his life, not only that he himself is living but also that he makes the dead to live; and of his power, not only that he is powerful but also that he makes the feeble powerful; so also is the declaring of his righteousness, not only that he is himself righteous, but that he also makes them that are filled with the putrefying sores of sin suddenly righteous. . . Doubt not then; for it is not of works, but of faith.

Chrysostom says of his own work that 'that is our only care day and night, that all of you may become holy and perfect'. This explains the combination of grace and demand in his preaching. All is of God, and we should pray for divine help; yet it is unrealistic to think that people do not need advice and even inducements for the practical outworking of faith in life. So Chrysostom is not averse to suggesting that we may make God our debtor by good deeds—indeed, he suggests that almsgiving is a way of purchasing heavenly

securities! Such a doctrine of merit soon became unacceptable; yet the demand of the Gospel could never be ignored. That was what Wesley grasped, and constantly re-iterated, even as he preached a Gospel based on justification by faith. Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection or scriptural holiness is the eighteenth century parallel to the holiness and perfection that Chrysostom laboured to realize in his congregations.

On 24th May 1738, Wesley's heart was 'strangely warmed' as he listened to someone reading from Luther's Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans. This seems to have been the culmination of a long process whereby Wesley came to accept the doctrine of justification by faith not works. His sermon on Ephesians 2:8, 'By grace are ye saved through faith', was preached at St Mary's, Oxford, a few weeks later, and it is by no means his only exposition of this doctrine. Wesley, of all people, could not be accused of preaching justification by works.

Yet a great many of his sermons are moralistic, and Christian conduct is his main concern. The reason for this is clearly seen in his two sermons on 'Law established through faith', based on Romans 3:31. Here he enquires first: Which are the most usual ways of making void the law through faith? He then deals, amongst others, with those who say that faith supersedes the necessity of holiness. He argues that under the covenant of grace

the manner of man's acceptance is this: the free grace of God through the merits of Christ gives pardon to them that believe; that believe with such a faith as, working by love, produces obedience and holiness.

Now all good works, though as necessary as ever, are not antecedent to our acceptance, but consequent upon it. . .

We are doubtless justified by faith. This is the corner-stone of the whole Christian building. We are justified without the works of the law as any previous condition of justification; but they are an immediate fruit of that faith whereby we are justified. So that if good works do not follow on faith, even all inward and outward holiness, it is plain that our faith is nothing worth; we are still in our sins. . .

We establish the law when we so preach faith in Christ as not to supersede, but to produce holiness. . . Faith itself even Christian faith, the faith of God's elect, the faith of the operation of God, still is only the handmaid of love. As glorious and honourable as it is, it is not the end of the commandment. God has given this honour to love alone: love is the end, the whole end of every dispensation of God, from the beginning of the world to the consummation of all things. And it will endure when heaven and earth flee away; for love alone 'never faileth'. Faith will totally fail; it will be swallowed up in sight, in the everlasting vision of God.

Because his sermons are full of this kind of defence, Wesley's presuppositions about the relation of faith and works are much clearer to us than is the case with Chrysostom. Yet Chrysostom had outlined a not dissimilar position, also referring to Romans 3:31. Christ fulfilled the law in two senses; he fulfilled it himself and

he did the same through us also: for this is the marvel, that he not only fulfilled it himself, but he also granted this to us likewise. . . For since the law was labouring at this, to make men righteous, but had not the power, he came and brought in the way of righteousness through faith, and so established what the law desired; and what the law could not by letters accomplish, this he accomplished by faith. . . ¹⁰

This fulfilling of the law has to be worked out in practical terms. Christ provided the example; Christians have to follow it. Faith is of no avail without works. Both Chrysostom and Wesley realized that neither active antinomianism nor passive waiting for a miracle could produce holiness. The gospel of grace had to be matched by challenging people with its demand.

The preaching of Chrysostom and Wesley is full of the same ethical concern, the same call to respond to the love and mercy of the God of grace who saves mankind, through a life of good works, a life of love. Neither of them shrinks from the responsibility of giving guidance on how this is to work out in practical terms. Although the practical advice has something of a different flavour in the different cultural contexts, Wesley's call to self-giving and good works is recognizably the same as the preaching and concern of Chrysostom. Both were anxious about the responsible use of wealth and care for the poor. Both were equally prepared to stick their necks out by condemning those in high places who compromised their Christian profession by their style of life. For Chrysostom, problems arose because he insisted on preaching the ascetic and puritanical ideals of the monks as the standard to which all Christians should aspire. Simplicity, purity, holiness, an independence of worldly goods and concerns, concern rather for the poor and the kingdom of heaven — such were the perfections Chrysostom preached, while offering through Christ the promise of God's grace, love and forgiveness if only repentance were forthcoming. For Wesley, true Christianity was a complete change of heart wrought in man by his acceptance of Christ alone in faith, which then worked out in practical terms in the expression of 'love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness' (Gal. 5:22, a favourite text of his); it meant the Christian's involvement with his neighbour and responsibility for him.

It was this deep ethical concern that made him write:

I find more profit in sermons on either good temper or good works than in what are vulgarly called Gospel sermons... Let but a pert self-sufficient animal, that has neither sense nor grace, bawl out something about Christ and his blood, or justification by faith, and his hearers cry out, "What a fine Gospel sermon!"

If we duly join faith and works in our preaching, we shall not fail of a blessing. But of all preaching what is called Gospel preaching is the most useless, if not the most mischievous; a dull, yea or lively, harangue on the sufferings of Christ or salvation by faith without inculcating holiness. I see more and more that this naturally tends to drive holiness from the world.¹²

Noticeably both Chrysostom and Wesley demand holiness. Unless the message of grace produces fruits of repentance and reform, it is shallow and

indefensible; yet moralizing without the compassion of the Gospel has also proved incapable of effecting these fruits. For, as Paul saw, the law simply sets a standard which people cannot live up to. Response to what God has done for us is the only effective 'fulfilling of the law'. Chrysostom and Wesley, each in his own way, recognized that God and man need to participate together in producing a new world. God's gift and man's response both belong to the saving process.

Given the similarities, it is an interesting question how far Wesley was dependent upon Chrysostom. We know that he read him along with other patristic literature listed in various places in his voluminous writings. Furthermore, Wesley was especially interested in the so-called Anglican Homilies, sermons authorized at the time of the Reformaton for use in the English churches. These used patristic proof-texts, and in Wesley's abbreviated version published as a pamphlet in 1738, several quotations from Chrysostom are reproduced, including the following sentence from the Homilies on Matthew: 'Faith is full of good works, and as soon as a man believes he shall be adorned with them.' For all this, direct or specific dependence is improbable. On the whole Wesley read the Fathers through the filters of the Anglican tradition, and apart from the special case of the Pseudo-Macarian Homilies which may well have influenced his doctrine of Christian Perfection, he does not seem to have been stimulated into any distinctive insights by his patristic reading. The wide differences between the preaching of Wesley and Chrysostom to which attention has been drawn preclude more than vague influences. Wesley did, of course, assimilate his reading and make it his own; unconsciously he probably assimilated much from Chrysostom. But the similarities in the 'deep structures' of the preaching of these two must be attributed not to direct dependence but to the natural congruence of those wedded, as these two were, to faithful preaching of the Gospel, irrespective of time, culture and circumstances. So this is surely an important pointer for us, even though like them we shall have to find our own contemporary idiom.

Notes

- 1 Donald Attwater, St John Chrysostom (London 1959), p.12
- 2 C. Baur, John Chrysostom and his time, 2 vols. (ET London 1959-60), p.213
- 3 An unpublished paper on communication in the early church
- 4 John Lawson, Notes on Wesley's 44 Sermons (London 1946), p.11
- 5 Sermon V, on Justification by Faith, IV.2 & 7
- 6 Op. cit.
- 7 Socrates, H.E. vi.21
- 8 Homilies on Hebrews xxxii.3
- 9 ibid. xiii.5
- 10 On Matt. 5.17
- 11 Letter to Miss Bishop, 8 Oct. 1778
- 12 Letter to Charles Wesley, 4 Nov. 1772