

Homily 22 on the Acts of the Apostles

by St. John Chrysostom

God chooses Cornelius, a devout Gentile, to receive the Gospel, demonstrating His desire to include all nations in His salvation.

Scripture: Acts 10:1-21

Topics: "Faithfulness", "Almsgiving"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches about the conversion of Cornelius, a devout man who feared God, emphasizing the importance of piety over high rank. The sermon highlights the significance of almsgiving, prayers, and righteous living, showcasing Cornelius as an example of faithfulness. The narrative unfolds with divine interventions through visions and angelic visitations, leading to the encounter between Cornelius and Peter. Chrysostom underscores the virtues of almsgiving, portraying it as a powerful act that opens the gates of heaven and delivers from eternal death.

Transcript

Acts X. 1-4

There was a certain man in Cæsarea called Cornelius, a centurion of the band called the Italian band, a devout man, and one that feared God with all his house, which gave much alms to the people, and prayed to God always. He saw in a vision evidently about the ninth hour of the day an angel of God coming in to him, and saying unto him, Cornelius. And when he looked on him, he was afraid, and said, What is it, Lord? And he said to him, Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God.

This man is not a Jew, nor of those under the Law, but he had already forestalled our manner of life. Observe, thus far, two persons, both of high rank, receiving the faith, the eunuch at Gaza and this man; and the pains taken on behalf of these men. But do not imagine that this was because of their high rank: God forbid! It was because of their piety. For that the Scripture mentions their dignified stations, is to show the greatness of their piety; since it is more wonderful when a person being in a position of wealth and power is such as these were.

What makes the praise of the former is, his undertaking so long a journey, and this when there was no (festival) season to require it, and his reading on his road, and while riding in his chariot, and his beseeching Philip, and numberless other points: and the great praise of the latter is, that he makes alms and prayers, and is a just man, holding such a command. The reason why the writer describes the man so

fully, is, that none may say that the Scripture history relates falsehoods: Cornelius, he says, a centurion of the band called the Italian band.

Acts 10:1 A band, στρατιωτα, is what we now call a numerous. A devout man, he says, and one that feared God with all his house Acts 10:2: that you may not imagine that it is because of his high station that these things are done.-- When Paul was to be brought over, there is no angel, but the Lord Himself: and He does not send him to some great one, but to a very ordinary person: but here, on the contrary, He brings the chief Apostle (to these Gentiles), not sends them to him: herein condescending to their weakness, and knowing how such persons need to be treated.

As indeed on many occasions we find Christ Himself hasting (to such), as being more infirm. Or (it may be) because (Cornelius) was not able himself to leave his home. But here again is a high commendation of alms, just as was there given by means of Tabitha. A devout man, it says, and one that feared God with all his house. Let us hear this, whoever of us neglect them of our own house, whereas this man was careful of his soldiers also. And that gave alms, it says, to all the people.

Both his doctrines and his life were right. He saw in a vision evidently, about the ninth hour of the day, an angel of God coming in to him, and saying unto him, Cornelius. Acts 10:3 Why does he see the angel? This also was in order to the full assurance of Peter, or rather, not of him, but of the others, the weaker ones. At the ninth hour, when he was released from his cares and was at quiet, when he was engaged in prayers and compunction. And when he looked on him, he was afraid.

Acts 10:4 Observe how what the angel speaks he does not speak immediately, but first rouses and elevates his mind. At the sight, there was fear, but a fear in moderation, just so far as served to fix his attention. Then also the words relieved him of his fear. The fear roused him: the praise mitigated what was unpleasant in the fear. Your prayers, says he, and your alms have come up for a memorial before God. And now send men to Joppa, and call for one Simon, whose surname is Peter.

Acts 10:5 Lest they should come to a different person, he designates the man not only by his surname, but by the place. And the same, says he, is lodging with one Simon a tanner, who has his house by the seaside. Acts 10:6 Do you mark how the Apostles, for love of solitude and quiet, affected the retired quarters of the cities? With one Simon a tanner: how then if it chanced that there was another? Behold, there is another token, his dwelling by the seaside. All three tokens could not possibly coincide (elsewhere).

He does not tell him for what purpose, that he may not take off the intense desire, but he leaves him to an eager and longing expectation of what he shall hear. And when the Angel which spoke unto Cornelius was departed, he called two of his household servants, and a devout soldier of them that waited on him continually; and when he had declared all these things unto them, he sent them to Joppa. (v. 7, 8.) Do you see, that it is not without purpose that the writer says this? (it shows) that those also who waited on him continually were such as he.

And when he had declared the whole matter unto them: observe the unassuming character of the man: for he does not say, Call Peter to me: but, in order also to induce him to come, he declared the whole matter: -- this was so ordered by Providence;-- for he did not choose to use the authority of his rank to fetch Peter to him; therefore he declared the matter; such was the moderation of the man: and yet no great notion was to be formed of one lodging with a tanner. And on the morrow, as they journeyed, and drew near to the city Acts 10:9-- observe how the Spirit connects the times: no sooner than this, and no later, He Causes this to

take place -- Peter about the sixth hour went up upon the housetop to pray: that is, privately and quietly, as in an upper chamber.

And he became very hungry, and would have eaten; but while they made ready, there fell upon him a trance. Acts 10:10 What means this expression, ■ κστασις, trance? Rather, there was presented to him a kind of spiritual view (θεωρησις): the soul, so to say, was caused to be out of the body (■ ξιστη). And saw heaven opened, and, knit at the four corners, a certain vessel descending unto him, as it had been a great sheet, and let down to the earth: wherein were all manner of fourfooted beasts of the earth, and wild beasts, and creeping things, and fowls of the air.

And there came a voice to him, Rise, Peter; kill, and eat. But Peter said, Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean. And the voice spoke unto him again the second time, What God has cleansed, that call not thou common. This was done thrice: and the vessel was received up again into heaven. Acts 10:11-16 What is this? It is a symbol of the whole world. The man was uncircumcised: and -- for he had nothing in common with the Jews-- they would all accuse him as a transgressor: you went in to men uncircumcised, and ate with them: Acts 11:3 this was a thing altogether offensive to them: observe then what is providentially managed.

He himself also says, I have never eaten: not being himself afraid -- far be the thought from us -- but it is so contrived by the Spirit, in order that he may have it to say in answer to those accusing him, that he did object: for it was altogether necessary for them to observe the Law. He was in the act of being sent to the Gentiles: therefore that these also may not accuse him, see how many things are contrived (by the Providence of God). For, that it may not seem to be a mere fancy, this was done thrice.

I said, says he, Not so, Lord, for I have never eaten anything common or unclean.-- And the voice came unto him, What God has cleansed, that call not thou common. ch. 11:8, with 10:14 It seems indeed to be spoken to him, but the whole is meant for the Jews. For if the teacher is rebuked, much more these. The earth then, this is what the linen sheet denotes, and the wild beasts in it, are they of the Gentiles, and the command, Kill and eat, denotes that he must go to them also; and that this thing is thrice done, denotes baptism.

What God has cleansed, says it, call not thou common. Great daring! Wherefore did he object? That none may say that God was proving him, as in the case of Abraham, this is why he says, Not so, Lord, etc. not gainsaying -- just as to Philip also He said, How many loaves do you have? Not to learn, but tempting, or proving him. And yet it was the same (Lord) that had discoursed above (in the Law) concerning things clean and unclean. But in that sheet were also all the four-footed beasts of the earth: the clean with the unclean.

And for all this, he knew not what it meant. Now while Peter doubted in himself what this vision which he had seen should mean, behold, the men which were sent from Cornelius had made enquiry for Simon's house, and stood before the gate, and called, and asked whether Simon, which was surnamed Peter, were lodged there. But while Peter, it says, doubted in himself (v. 17, 18), the men come at the right moment to solve his doubt: just as (the Lord) suffered Joseph first to be perturbed in mind, and then sends the Angel: for the soul with ease accepts the solution, when it has first been in perplexity.

His perplexity neither lasts long (when it did occur), nor (did it occur) before this, but just at the moment when they asked whether he were lodging there. While Peter thought on the vision, the Spirit said to him, Behold, three men seek you. Arise therefore, and get you down, and go with them, doubting nothing: for I

have sent them. (supra, p. 142, and 145, note 7; v. 19, 20.) And this again is a plea for Peter in answer to the disciples, that he did doubt, and was instructed to doubt nothing.

For I, says He, have sent them. Great is the authority of the Spirit! What God does, this the Spirit is said to do. Not so the Angel, but having first said, Your prayers and your alms have ascended, for a memorial before God, to show that he is sent from thence, then he adds, And now send men, etc.: the Spirit not so, but, For I have sent them. Then Peter went down to the men which were sent unto him from Cornelius; and said, Behold, I am he whom you seek: what is the cause wherefore you have come?

And they said, Cornelius the centurion, a just man, and one that fears God and of good report among all the nation of the Jews, was warned from God by an holy angel to send for you into his house, and to hear words of you. (v. 21, 22.) They speak his praises, so as to persuade him that an Angel has in fact appeared unto him. Then called he them in, (b) that they may suffer no harm, and lodged them: thenceforth he without scruple takes his meals with them. And on the morrow Peter went away with them, and certain brethren from Cæsarea accompanied him. And the morrow after, they entered into Cæsarea. (v. 23, 24.) The man was a person of note, and it was in a city of note that he then was.

(a) But let us look over again what has been said. There was a certain man in Cæsarea, etc. (Recapitulation, v. 1, 2.) Observe with whom the beginning of the Gentiles is made -- with a devout man, and one proved to be worthy by his works. For if, though the case be so, they are still offended, if this had not been the case, what would not have been the consequence! But mark the greatness of the assurance. (c) To this end all is done (in the way it is done), and the affair takes its beginning from Judea. (d) He saw in a vision, evidently, etc.

Acts 10:3. It was not in his sleep that the Angel appeared to him, but while he was awake, in the daytime, about the ninth hour. He saw an Angel of God coming in unto him, and saying unto him, Cornelius. And when he looked on him, he was afraid. So occupied was he with himself. Implying, that it was in consequence of the Angel's calling him by a voice that he saw him; as, had he not called him, he would not have seen him: so taken up was he with the act in which he was engaged.

But the Angel says to him, Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God, and now send men to Joppa, and call for one Simon, who is called Peter. Acts 10:5 So far, he signified that the sending for him would be for good consequences, but in what way good, he did not intimate. So, neither does Peter relate the whole matter, but everywhere, the narratives are in part only, for the purpose of making the hearers apply their minds to what is said. Send and call for Simon: in like manner the Angel only calls Philip.

And as they went on their journey, and drew near to the city Acts 10:9: in order that Peter should not be in perplexity too long. Peter went up upon the housetop, etc. Observe, that not even his hunger forced him to have recourse to the sheet. Rise, Peter, says the Voice, kill and eat. Acts 10:13 Probably he was on his knees when he saw the vision. -- To me it seems that this also denotes the Gospel (or, the Preaching). That the thing taking place was of God (the circumstances made evident, namely), both that he sees it (descending) from above, and that he is in a trance; and, that the voice comes from thence, and the thrice confessing that the creatures there were unclean, and its coming from thence, and being drawn back there (all this), is a mighty token of the cleanness (imparted to them).-- But why is this done?

For the sake of those thereafter, to whom he is about to relate it. For to himself it had been said, Go not into the way of the Gentiles. Matthew 10:5 * * For if Paul needed both (to give) circumcision, and (to offer)

sacrifice, much more (was some assurance needed) then, in the beginning of the Preaching, while they were as yet weaker. Acts 16:3; 21:16-- Observe too how he did not at once receive them. For, it says, they called, and asked, whether Simon, which was surnamed Peter, were lodging there.

Acts 10:18 As it was a mean looking house, they asked below, they inquired of the neighbors. And while Peter thought, the Spirit said to him, Arise, get you down, and go, nothing doubting, for I have sent them. (v. 19, 20.) And he does not say, For to this end did the vision appear unto you; but, I have sent them. Then Peter went down Acts 10:21-- this is the way the Spirit must be obeyed, without demanding reasons. For it is sufficient for all assurance to be told by Him, This do, this believe: nothing more (is needed)-- Then Peter went down, and said, Behold, I am he whom you seek: what is the cause wherefore you have come?

He saw a soldier, saw a man: it was not that he was afraid, on the contrary, having first confessed that he was the person whom they sought, then he asks for the cause (of their coming); that it may not be supposed that the reason of his asking the cause, was, that he wished to hide himself: (he asks it) in order, that if it be immediately urgent, he may also go forth with them, but if not, may receive them as guests. And they said, etc. into his house. Acts 10:22 This he had ordered them.

Do not think he has done this out of contempt: not as of contempt has he sent, but so he was ordered. And Cornelius was waiting for them, and had called together his kinsmen and near friends. Acts 10:24 It was right that his kinsmen and friends should be gathered to him. But being there present, they would have heard from him (what had happened).

See how great the virtue of alms, both in the former discourse, and here! There, it delivered from death temporal; here, from death eternal; and opened the gates of heaven. Such are the pains taken for the bringing of Cornelius to the faith, that both an angel is sent, and the Spirit works, and the chief of the Apostles is fetched to him, and such a vision is shown, and, in short, nothing is left undone. How many centurions were there not besides, and tribunes, and kings, and none of them obtained what this man did!

Hear, all you that are in military commands, all you that stand beside kings. A just man, it says, fearing God; devout (v. 2, and 22); and what is more than all, with all his house. Not as we (who): that our servants may be afraid of us, do everything. but not that they may be devout. And over the domestics too, so * *. Not so this man; but he was one that feared God with all his house Acts 10:2, for he was as the common father of those with him, and of all the others (under his command.)

But observe what (the soldier) says himself. For, fearing * *, he adds this also: well reported of by all the nation. For what if he was uncircumcised? Nay, but those give him a good report. Nothing like alms: great is the virtue of this practice, when the alms is poured forth from pure stores; for it is like a fountain discharging mud, when it issues from unjust stores, but when from just gains, it is as a limpid and pure stream in a paradise, sweet to the sight, sweet to the touch, both light and cool, when given in the noon-day heat.

Such is alms. Beside this fountain, not poplars and pines, nor cypresses, but other plants than these, and far better, of goodly stature: friendship with God, praise with men, glory to Godward, good-will from all; blotting out of sins, great boldness, contempt of wealth. This is the fountain by which the plant of love is nourished: for nothing is so wont to nourish love, as the being merciful: it makes its branches to lift themselves on high. This fountain is better than that in Paradise Genesis 2:10; a fountain, not dividing into four heads, but reaching unto Heaven itself: this gives birth to that river which springs up into eternal life

John 4:14: on this let Death light, and like a spark it is extinguished by the fountain: such, wherever it drops, are the mighty blessings it causes.

This quenches, even as a spark, the river of fire: this so strangles that worm, as naught else can do. Mark 9:44 He that has this, shall not gnash his teeth. Of the water of this, let there be dropped upon the chains, and it dissolves them: let it but touch the firebrands, it quenches all.-- A fountain does not give out streams for a while and anon run dry -- else must it be no more a fountain -- but ever gushes: so let our fountain give out more copiously of the streams of mercy (in alms).

This cheers him that receives: this is alms, to give out not only a copious, but a perennial, stream. If you would that God rain down His mercy upon you as from fountains, have thou also a fountain. And yet there is no comparison (between God's fountain and yours): for if you open the mouths of this fountain, such are the mouths of God's Fountain as to surpass every abyss. God does but seek to get an opportunity on our part, and pours forth from His storehouses His blessings.

When He expends, when He lavishes, then is He rich, then is He affluent. Large is the mouth of that fountain: pure and limpid its water. If you stop not up the fountain here, neither will you stop up that fountain.-- Let no unfruitful tree stand beside it, that it may not waste its spray. Have you wealth? Plant not poplars there: for such is luxury: it consumes much, and shows nothing for it in itself, but spoils the fruit. Plant not a pine-tree -- such is wantonness in apparel, beautiful only to the sight, and useful for nothing -- nor yet a fir-tree, nor any other of such trees as consume indeed, but are in no sort useful.

Set it thick with young shoots: plant all that is fruitful, in the hands of the poor, all that you will. Nothing richer than this ground. Though small the reach of the hand, yet the tree it plants starts up to heaven and stands firm. This it is to plant. For that which is planted on the earth will perish, though not now, at any rate a hundred years hence. Thou plantest many trees, of which you shall not enjoy the fruit, but ere you can enjoy it, death comes upon you. This tree will give you its fruit then, when you are dead.-- If you plant, plant not in the maw of gluttony, that the fruit end not in the draught-house: but plant thou in the pinched belly, that the fruit may start up to heaven.

Refresh the straightened soul of the poor, lest you pinch your own roomy soul.-- See you not, that the plants which are over-much watered at the root decay, but grow when watered in moderation? Thus also drench not thou your own belly, that the root of the tree decay not: water that which is thirsty, that it may bear fruit. If you water in moderation, the sun will not wither them, but if in excess, then it withers them: such is the nature of the sun. In all things, excess is bad; wherefore let us cut it off, that we also may obtain the things we ask for.-- Fountains, it is said, rise on the most elevated spots.

Let us be elevated in soul, and our alms will flow with a rapid stream: the elevated soul cannot but be merciful, and the merciful cannot but be elevated. For he that despises wealth, is higher than the root of evils.-- Fountains are oftenest found in solitary places: let us withdraw our soul from the crowd, and alms will gush out with us. Fountains, the more they are cleaned, the more copiously they flow: so with us, the more we spend, the more all good grows.-- He that has a fountain, has nothing to fear: then neither let us be afraid.

For indeed this fountain is serviceable to us for drink, for irrigation, for building, for everything. Nothing better than this draught: it is not possible for this to inebriate. Better to possess such a fountain, than to have fountains running with gold. Better than all gold-bearing soil is the soul which bears this gold. For it advances us, not into these earthly palaces, but into those above. The gold becomes an ornament to the

Church of God. Of this gold is wrought the sword of the Spirit Ephesians 6:17, the sword by which the dragon is beheaded.

From this fountain come the precious stones which are on the King's head. Then let us not neglect so great wealth, but contribute our alms with largeness, that we may be found worthy of the mercy of God, by the grace and tender compassion of His only begotten Son, with Whom to the Father and Holy Ghost together be glory, dominion, honor, now and ever, world without end. Amen.

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