

Homily 8 on Matthew

by St. John Chrysostom

St. John Chrysostom's homily explores the faith and obedience of the Magi and Joseph in the context of God's divine plan for Jesus' early life.

Scripture: Genesis 49:7, Exodus 16:3, Joshua 24:2, Matthew 2:12-13

Topics: "Christ's Birth", "Divine Providence"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches on the events surrounding the birth of Jesus, emphasizing the divine foreknowledge and prophetic order behind every detail, from the humble circumstances of His birth to the worship of the wise men. He highlights the faith and obedience displayed by Joseph, the wise men, and the angelic guidance received in dreams, showcasing the fulfillment of prophecies and the protection of Jesus from Herod's wrath. Chrysostom draws parallels between the Old Testament prophecies and the events surrounding Jesus' birth, emphasizing the significance of Egypt in the fulfillment of God's plan and the importance of self-command and readiness for trials in the Christian journey.

Transcript

Matt. II. 2.

And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother.

How then says Luke, that He was lying in the manger? Because at the birth indeed she presently laid Him there (for, as was not unlikely, in that large assemblage for the taxing, they could find no house; which Luke also signifies, by saying, Because there was no room, she laid Him there); but afterwards she took Him up, and held Him on her knees. For no sooner was she arrived at Bethlehem than she brought her pangs to an end, that you may thence also learn the whole dispensation, and that these things were not done at random, or by chance, but that they all were in course of accomplishment, according to some Divine foreknowledge, and prophetic order.

But what was it that induced them to worship? For neither was the Virgin conspicuous, nor the house distinguished, nor was any other of the things which they saw apt to amaze or attract them. Yet they not only worship, but also open their treasures, and offer gifts; and gifts, not as to a man, but as to God. For the frankincense and the myrrh were a symbol of this. What then was their inducement? That which wrought upon them to set out from home and to come so long a journey; and this was both the star, and the illumination wrought of God in their mind, guiding them little by little to the more perfect knowledge.

For, surely, had it not been so, all that was in sight being ordinary, they would not have shown so great honor. Therefore none of the outward circumstances was great in that instance, but it was a manger, and a shed, and a mother in poor estate; to set before your eyes, naked and bare, those wise men's love of wisdom, and to prove to you, that not as mere man they approached Him, but as a God, and Benefactor. Wherefore neither were they offended by ought of what they saw outwardly, but even worshipped, and brought gifts; gifts not only free from Judaical grossness, in that they sacrificed not sheep and calves, but also coming near to the self-devotion of the Church, for it was knowledge and obedience and love that they offered unto Him.

And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return unto Herod, they departed into their own country another way. Matthew 2:12

See from this also their faith, how they were not offended, but are docile, and considerate; neither are they troubled, nor reason with themselves, saying, And yet, if this Child be great, and has any might, what need of flight, and of a clandestine retreat? And wherefore can it be, that when we have come openly and with boldness, and have stood against so great a people, and against a king's madness, the angel sends us out of the city as runaways and fugitives? But none of these things did they either say or think. For this most especially belongs to faith, not to seek an account of what is enjoined, but merely to obey the commandments laid upon us.

2. And when they were departed, behold, an angel appears to Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise, and take the young Child and His mother, and flee into Egypt. Matthew 2:13

There is something here worth inquiring into, both touching the magi, and touching the Child; for if even they were not troubled, but received all with faith, it is worthy of examination on our part, why they and the young Child are not preserved, continuing there, but they as fugitives go into Persia, He with His mother into Egypt. But what? Should He have fallen into the hands of Herod, and having fallen, not have been cut off? Nay, He would not have been thought to have taken flesh upon Him; the greatness of the Economy would not have been believed.

For if, while these things are taking place, and many circumstances are being ordered mysteriously after the manner of men, some have dared to say that His assumption of our flesh is a fable; in what degree of impiety would they not have been wrecked had He done all in a manner becoming His Godhead, and according to His own power?

As to the wise men, He sends them off quickly, at once both commissioning them as teachers to the land of the Persians, and at the same time intercepting the madness of the king, that he might learn that he was attempting things impossible, and might quench his wrath, and desist from this his vain labor. For not alone openly to subdue His enemies, but also to deceive them with ease, is worthy of His power. Thus, for example, He deceived the Egyptians also in the case of the Jews, and having power to transfer their wealth openly into the hands of the Hebrews, He bids them do this secretly and with craft; and this surely, not less than the other miracles, made Him an object of terror to His enemies. At least, they of Ascalon, and all the rest, when they had taken the ark, and being smitten, did after that devise their countrymen not to fight, nor to set themselves against Him, with the other miracles brought this also forward, saying, Wherefore harden ye your hearts, as Egypt and Pharaoh hardened? When He had mocked them, did He not after that send forth His people, and they departed? Now this they said, as accounting this fresh one not inferior to those other signs that had been done openly, towards the demonstration of His power, and

of His greatness. And the like ensued on this occasion too; a thing sufficient to astonish the tyrant. For consider what it was natural for Herod to feel, and how his very breath would be stopped, deceived as he was by the wise men, and thus laughed to scorn. For what, if he did not become better? It is not His fault, who marvellously ordered all this, but it is the excess of Herod's madness, not yielding even to those things which had virtue to have persuaded him, and deterred him from his wickedness, but going on still further, to receive a yet sharper punishment for folly so great.

3. But wherefore, it may be said, is the young Child sent into Egypt? In the first place, the evangelist himself has mentioned the cause, saying, That it might be fulfilled, Out of Egypt have I called my Son. And at the same time beginnings of fair hopes were thenceforth proclaimed before to the world. That is, since Babylon and Egypt, most in the whole earth, were burnt up with the flame of ungodliness, He, signifying from the first that He means to correct and amend both, and inducing men hereby to expect His bounties in regard of the whole world likewise, sent to the one the wise men, the other He Himself visited with His mother.

And besides what I have said, there is another lesson also, which we are hereby taught, tending not slightly to true self-command in us. Of what kind then is it? To look from the beginning for temptations and plots. See, for instance, how this was the case even at once from His swaddling clothes. Thus you see at His birth, first a tyrant raging, then flight ensuing, and departure beyond the border; and for no crime His mother is exiled into the land of the barbarians: that you, hearing these things (supposing you thought worthy to minister to any spiritual matter, and then to see yourself suffering incurable ills, and enduring countless dangers), should not be greatly troubled, nor say, What can this be? Yet surely I ought to be crowned and celebrated, and be glorious and illustrious for fulfilling the Lord's commandment: but that having this example, you might bear all things nobly, knowing that this especially is the order of all things spiritual, to have everywhere temptations in the same lot with them. See at least how this is the case not only with regard to the mother of the young Child, but also of those barbarians; since they for their part retire secretly in the condition of fugitives; and she again, who had never passed over the threshold of her house, is commanded to undergo so long a journey of affliction, on account of this wonderful birth, and her spiritual travail.

And behold a wonder again. Palestine plots, and Egypt receives and preserves Him that is the object of the plots. For, as it appears, not only in the instance of the sons of the patriarch did types take place, but also in our Lord's own case. In many instances, we are sure, His doings at that time were prophetic declarations of what was to happen afterwards; as, for example, in the matter of the ass and the colt.

4. Now the angel having thus appeared, talks not with Mary, but with Joseph; and what says he? Arise, and take the young Child and His mother. Here, he says not any more, your wife, but His mother. For after that the birth had taken place, and the suspicion was done away, and the husband appeased, thenceforth the angel talks openly, calling neither child nor wife his, but take the young Child and His mother, and flee into Egypt; and he mentions the cause of the flight: For Herod, says he, will seek the young Child's life.

Joseph, when he had heard these things, was not offended, nether did he say, The thing is hard to understand: Did you not say just now, that He should save His people?' and now He saves not even Himself: but we must fly, and go far from home, and be a long time away: the facts are contrary to the promise. Nay, none of these things does he say (for the man was faithful): neither is he curious about the time of his return; and this though the angel had put it indefinitely thus: Be there until I tell you. But nevertheless, not even at this did he shudder, but submits and obeys, undergoing all the trials with joy.

And this because God, who is full of love to man, did with these hardships mingle things pleasant also; which indeed is His way with regard to all the saints, making neither their dangers nor their refreshment continual, but weaving the life of all righteous men, out of both the one and the other. This very thing He did here also: for consider, Joseph saw the Virgin with child; this cast him into agitation and the utmost trouble, for he was suspecting the damsel of adultery. But straightway the angel was at hand to do away his suspicion, and remove his fears; and seeing the young child born, he reaped the greatest joy. Again, this joy no trifling danger succeeds, the city being troubled, and the king in his madness seeking after Him that was born. But this trouble was again succeeded by another joy; the star, and the adoration of the wise men. Again, after this pleasure, fear and danger; For Herod, says he, is seeking the young Child's life, and He must needs fly and withdraw Himself as any mortal might: the working of miracles not being seasonable as yet. For if from His earliest infancy He had shown forth wonders, He would not have been accounted a Man.

Because of this, let me add, neither is a temple framed at once; but a regular conception takes place, and a time of nine months, and pangs, and a delivery, and giving suck, and silence for so long a space, and He awaits the age proper to manhood; that by all means acceptance might be won for the mystery of His Economy.

But wherefore then, one may say, were even these signs wrought at the beginning? For His mother's sake; for the sake of Joseph and of Simeon, who was presently to depart; for the sake of the shepherds and of the wise men; for the sake of the Jews. Since they, had they been willing to mind diligently what was taking place, would from this event also have reaped no small advantage in regard of what was to come.

But if the prophets do not mention what relates to the wise men, be not troubled; for they neither foretold all things, nor were they silent touching all. For as without any warning to see those things coming to pass, would naturally occasion much astonishment and trouble; so also to have been informed of all would dispose the hearer to sleep, and would have left nothing for the evangelists to add.

5. And if the Jews should raise a question touching the prophecy, and say, that the words, Out of Egypt have I called my Son, were uttered concerning themselves; we would tell them, This is a law of prophecy, that in many cases much that is spoken of one set of persons is fulfilled in another; of which kind is that which is said touching Simeon and Levi, I will divide them, says He, in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel. Genesis 49:7 And yet not in themselves did this come to pass, but in their descendants; and Noah's saying again about Canaan, came to pass in the Gibeonites, Canaan's descendants. And that concerning Jacob one may see to have so come to pass; for those blessings which say, Be lord over your brother, and let your father's sons worship you, Genesis 27:19 had no accomplishment in himself (how could they, he being in fear and trembling, and worshipping his brother over and over again? Genesis 33:3), but in his offspring they had. The very same may be said in this case also. For which may be called the truer son of God, he that worships a calf, and is joined to Baalpeor and sacrifices his sons to devils? Or He that is a Son by nature, and honors Him that begot Him? So that, except this man had come, the prophecy would not have received, its due fulfillment. It is worth observing, too, that the evangelist intimates the same by the phrase, that it might be fulfilled; implying that it would not have been fulfilled, unless He had come.

And this makes the Virgin also in no common degree glorious and distinguished; that the very thing which was the whole people's special endowment in the way of praise, she also might thenceforth have for her own. I mean, that whereas they were proud of their coming up from Egypt, and used to boast of it (which

indeed the prophet also was hinting at, when he said, Have I not brought up the strangers from Cappadocia, and the Assyrians from the pit), He makes this pre-eminence belong to the Virgin likewise.

Rather, however, both the people and the patriarch, going down there, and coming up thence, were together completing the type of this His return. Thus, as they went down to avoid death by famine, so He death by conspiracy. But whereas they on their arrival were for the time delivered from the famine, this man, when He had gone down, sanctified the whole land, by setting His foot thereon.

At least it is observable how, in the midst of His humiliations, the tokens of His Godhead are disclosed. Thus, first of all, the angel saying, Flee into Egypt, did not promise to journey with them, either in their descent or return; intimating that they have a great fellow-traveller, the Child that had been born; such an one as actually changed all things immediately on His appearing, and wrought so that His enemies should minister in many ways to this Economy. Thus magi and barbarians, leaving the superstition of their fathers, have come to worship: thus Augustus ministers to the birth at Bethlehem by the decree for the taxing; Egypt receives and preserves Him, driven from His home, and plotted against, and obtains a sort of first impulse towards her union unto Him; so that when in after-time she should hear Him preached by the apostles, she might have this at least to glory of, as having received Him first. And yet this privilege did belong unto Palestine alone; but the second proved more fervent than the first.

6. And now, should you come unto the desert of Egypt, you will see this desert become better than any paradise, and ten thousand choirs of angels in human forms, and nations of martyrs, and companies of virgins, and all the devil's tyranny put down, while Christ's kingdom shines forth in its brightness. And the mother of poets, and wise men, and magicians, were but inventions of sottish old women, but the real philosophy, and worthy of heaven, is this, which was declared unto them by the fishermen. And for this very cause, together with their so great exactness in doctrine, they exhibit also by their life that extreme seriousness. For when they have stripped themselves of all that they have, and are crucified to the whole world, they urge their course on again yet farther, using the labor of their body for the nourishment of them that be in need. For neither, because they fast and watch, do they think it meet to be idle by day; but their nights they spend in the holy hymns and in vigils, and their days in prayers, and at the same time in laboring with their own hands imitating the zeal of the apostle. For if he when the whole world was looking unto him for the sake of nourishing them that were in need, both occupied a workshop, and practised a craft, and being thus employed did not so much as sleep by night; how much more, say they, is it meet that we, who have taken up our abode in the wilderness, and have nothing to do with the turmoils in the cities, should use the leisure of our quiet for spiritual labors!

Let us then be ashamed all of us, both they that are rich, and they that are poor, when those having nothing at all but a body only and hands, force their way on and strive eagerly to find thence a supply for the poor; while we, having endless stores within, touch not even our superfluities for these objects. What kind of plea shall we have then, I pray you? And what sort of excuse?

Yet further consider, how of old these Egyptians were both avaricious, and gluttonous, together with their other vices. For there were the flesh-pots Exodus 16:3 which the Jews remember; there, the great tyranny of the belly. Nevertheless, having a willing mind, they changed: and having caught fire from Christ, they set off at once on their voyage towards heaven; and though more ardent than the rest of mankind, and more headstrong, both in anger, and in bodily pleasures, they imitate the incorporeal powers in meekness, and in the rest of that freedom from passions which pertains unto self-denial.

7. Now if any man has been in the country, he knows what I say. But if he have never entered those tabernacles, let him call to mind him who even until now is in the mouths of all men -- him whom, after the apostles, Egypt brought forth -- the blessed and great Antony; and let him put it to himself, This man, too, was born in the same country with Pharaoh; nevertheless he was not thereby damaged, but both had a divine vision vouchsafed him, and showed forth such a life as the laws of Christ require. And this any man shall know perfectly, when he has read the book that contains the history of that man's life; in which also he will perceive much prophecy. I allude to his prediction about those infected with the errors of Arius, and his statement of the mischief that would arise from them; God even then having shown them to him, and sketched out before his eyes all that was coming. A thing which most especially (among the rest) serves to demonstrate the truth, that no person, belonging to the heresies without, has such a man to mention. But, not to depend on us for this information, look earnestly into what is written in that book, and you will learn all exactly, and thence be instructed in much self-denial.

And this advice I give, that we not merely peruse what is written there, but that we also emulate it, and make neither place, nor education, nor forefathers' wickedness an excuse. For if we will take heed to ourselves, none of these things shall be an hindrance to us, since even Abraham had an ungodly father, Joshua 24:2 but he inherited not his wickedness; and Hezekiah, Ahaz: yet nevertheless he became dear to God. And Joseph too when in the midst of Egypt, adorned himself with the crowns of temperance; and the Three Children no less in the midst of Babylon, and of the palace, when a table like those at Sybaris was set before them, showed the highest self-denial; and Moses also in Egypt, and Paul in the whole world; but nothing was to any one of these an hindrance in the race of virtue.

Let us then, bearing in mind all these things, put out of the way these our superfluous pleas and excuses, and apply ourselves to those toils which the cause of virtue requires. For thus shall we both attract to ourselves more favor from God, and persuade Him to assist us in our struggles, and we shall obtain the eternal blessings; unto which God grant that we may all attain, by the grace and love towards man of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be glory and victory for ever and ever. Amen.

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