

Homily 88 on Matthew

by St. John Chrysostom

St. John Chrysostom's Homily 88 on Matthew explores the profound significance of Christ's crucifixion, the fulfillment of prophecy, and the call to compassionate action among believers.

Scripture: Matthew 12:39

Topics: "The Cross", "Christian Love"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches on the profound events surrounding Jesus' crucifixion, emphasizing the significance of His cry on the cross and the miraculous signs that followed, such as the darkness, earthquake, and the veil of the temple being torn. He highlights the women's unwavering devotion and courage, contrasting it with the cruelty and folly of those who mocked Jesus. Chrysostom urges the congregation to imitate the women's sacrificial love and to show compassion and generosity towards others, reminding them that every act of kindness towards those in need is an act towards Christ Himself.

Transcript

Matt. XXVII. 45-48.

Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, and said, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? That is to say, my God my God, why have you forsaken me? Some of them that stood there, when they heard that said, this man calls for Elias. And straight way one of them ran, and took a sponge, and filled it with vinegar, and put it on a reed, and gave Him to drink.

This is the sign which before He had promised to give them when they asked it, saying, An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas; Matthew 12:39 meaning His cross, and His death, His burial, and His resurrection. And again, declaring in another way the virtue of the cross, He said, When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then shall you know that I am He. John 8:28 And what He says is to this purport: When you have crucified me, and think you have overcome me, then, above all, shall you know my might.

For after the crucifixion, the city was destroyed, and the Jewish state came to an end, they fell away from their polity and their freedom, the gospel flourished, the word was spread abroad to the ends of the world; both sea and land, both the inhabited earth and the desert perpetually proclaim its power. These things then He means, and those which took place at the very time of the crucifixion. For indeed it was much

more marvellous that these things should be done, when He was nailed to the cross, than when He was walking on earth. And not in this respect only was the wonder, but because from heaven also was that done which they had sought, and it was over all the world, which had never before happened, but in Egypt only, when the passover was to be fulfilled. For indeed those events were a type of these.

And observe when it took place. At midday, that all that dwell on the earth may know it, when it was day all over the world; which was enough to convert them, not by the greatness of the miracle only, but also by its taking place in due season. For after all their insulting, and their lawless derision, this is done, when they had let go their anger, when they had ceased mocking, when they were satiated with their jeerings, and had spoken all that they were minded; then He shows the darkness, in order that at least so (having vented their anger) they may profit by the miracle. For this was more marvellous than to come down from the cross, that being on the cross He should work these things. For whether they thought He Himself had done it, they ought to have believed and to have feared; or whether not He, but the Father, yet thereby ought they to have been moved to compunction, for that darkness was a token of His anger at their crime. For that it was not an eclipse, but both wrath and indignation, is not hence alone manifest, but also by the time, for it continued three hours, but an eclipse takes place in one moment of time, and they know it, who have seen this; and indeed it has taken place even in our generation.

And how, you may say, did not all marvel, and account Him to be God? Because the race of man was then held in a state of great carelessness and vice. And this miracle was but one, and when it had taken place, immediately passed away; and no one was concerned to inquire into the cause of it, and great was the prejudice and the habit of ungodliness. And they knew not what was the cause of that which took place, and they thought perhaps this happened so, in the way of an eclipse or some natural effect. And why do you marvel about them that are without, that knew nothing, neither inquired by reason of great indifference, when even those that were in Judaea itself, after so many miracles, yet continued using Him despitefully, although He plainly showed them that He Himself wrought this thing.

And for this reason, even after this He speaks, that they might learn that He was still alive, and that He Himself did this, and that they might become by this also more gentle, and He says, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? Matthew 27:46 that unto His last breath they might see that He honors His Father, and is no adversary of God. Wherefore also He uttered a certain cry from the prophet, even to His last hour bearing witness to the Old Testament, and not simply a cry from the prophet, but also in Hebrew, so as to be plain and intelligible to them, and by all things He shows how He is of one mind with Him that begot Him.

But mark herein also their wantonness, and intemperance, and folly. They thought (it is said) that it was Elias whom He called, and straightway they gave Him vinegar to drink. Matthew 27:48 But another came unto Him, and pierced His side with a spear. What could be more lawless, what more brutal, than these men; who carried their madness to so great a length, offering insult at last even to a dead body?

But mark thou, I pray you, how He made use of their wickednesses for our salvation. For after the blow the fountains of our salvation gushed forth from thence.

And Jesus, when He had cried with a loud voice, yielded up the Ghost. This is what He said, I have power to lay down my life, and I have power to take it again, and, I lay it down of myself. John 10:18 So for this cause He cried with the voice, that it might be shown that the act is done by power. Mark at any rate says, that Pilate marvelled if He were already dead: Mark 15:44 and that the centurion for this cause above all believed, because He died with power. Mark 15:39

This cry rent the veil, and opened the tombs, and made the house desolate. And He did this, not as offering insult to the temple (for how should He, who says, Make not my Father's house a house of merchandise), John 2:16 but declaring them to be unworthy even of His abiding there; like as also when He delivered it over to the Babylonians. But not for this only were these things done, but what took place was a prophecy of the coming desolation, and of the change into the greater and higher state; and a sign of His might.

And together with these things He showed Himself also by what followed after these things, by the raising of the dead. For in the instance of Elisha; one on touching a dead body rose again, but now by a voice He raised them, His body continuing up there, on the cross. And besides, those things were a type of this. For that this might be believed, therefore is that all done. And they are not merely raised, but also rocks are rent, and the earth shaken, that they might learn, that He was able to strike themselves blind, and to rend them in pieces. For He that cleft rocks asunder, and darkened the world, much more could have done these things to them, had it been His will. But He would not, but having discharged His wrath upon the elements, them it was His will to save by clemency. But they abated not their madness. Such is envy, such is jealousy, it is not easily stayed. At that time then they were impudent in setting themselves against the actual appearances; and afterwards even against the things themselves, when a seal being put upon Him, and soldiers watching Him, He rose again, and they heard these things from the very guards; they even gave money, in order both to corrupt others, and to steal away the history of the resurrection.

Marvel not therefore if at this time also they were perverse, being thus altogether prepared to set themselves impudently against all things; but observe this other point, how great signs He had wrought, some from Heaven, some on earth, some in the very temple, at once marking His indignation, and at the same time showing that what were unapproachable are now to be entered, and that Heaven shall be opened; and the work removed to the true Holy of Holies. And they indeed said, If He be the King of Israel, let Him come down now from the cross, Matthew 27:42 but He shows that He is King of all the world. And whereas those men said, Thou that destroyest this temple, and buildest it in three days, Matthew 27:40 He shows that it shall be made forever desolate. Again they said, He saved others, Himself He cannot save, Matthew 27:42 but He while abiding on the cross proved this most abundantly on the bodies of His servants. For if for Lazarus to rise on the fourth day was a great thing, how much more for all those who had long ago fallen asleep, at once to appear alive, which was a sign of the future resurrection. For, many bodies of the saints which slept, arose, it is said, and went into the holy city, and appeared to many. For in order that what was done might not be accounted to be an imagination, they appear, even to many, in the city. And the Centurion too then glorified God, saying, Truly this was a righteous man. And the multitudes that came together to that sight, returned beating their breasts. Luke 23:47-48 So great was the power of the crucified, that after so many mockings, and scoffs, and jeers, both the centurion was moved to compunction, and the people. And some say that there is also a martyrdom of this centurion, who after these things grew to manhood in the faith.

And many women were there beholding afar off, which had followed Him, ministering unto Him, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Joses, and the mother of Zebedee's sons.

These things the women see done, these who were most inclined to feel for Him, who were most of all bewailing Him. And mark how great their assiduity. They had followed Him ministering to Him, and were present even unto the time of the dangers. Wherefore also they saw all; how He cried, how He gave up the ghost, how the rocks were rent, and all the rest.

And these first see Jesus; and the sex that was most condemned, this first enjoys the sight of the blessings, this most shows its courage. And when the disciples had fled, these were present. But who were these? His mother, for she is called mother of James, and the rest. But another evangelist Luke 22:48 says, that many also lamented over the things that were done, and smote their breasts, which above all shows the cruelty of the Jews, for that they gloried in things for which others were lamenting, and were neither moved by pity, nor checked by fear. For indeed the things that were done were of great wrath, and were not merely signs, but signs of anger all of them, the darkness, the cloven rocks, the veil rent in the midst, the shaking of the earth, and great was the excess of the indignation.

But Joseph went, and begged the body. This was Joseph, who was concealing his discipleship of late; now however he had become very bold after the death of Christ. For neither was he an obscure person, nor of the unnoticed; but one of the council, and highly distinguished; from which circumstance especially one may see his courage. For he exposed himself to death, taking upon him enmity with all, by his affection to Jesus, both having dared to beg the body, and not having desisted until he obtained it. But not by taking it only, nor by burying it in a costly manner, but also by laying it in his own new tomb, he shows his love, and his courage. And this was not so ordered without purpose, but so there should not be any bare suspicion, that one had risen instead of another.

And there was Mary Magdalene, and the other Mary, sitting over against the sepulchre. For what purpose do these wait by it? As yet they knew nothing great, as was meet, and high about Him, wherefore also they had brought ointments, and were waiting at the tomb, so that if the madness of the Jews should relax, they might go and embrace the body. Do you see women's courage? Do you see their affection? Do you see their noble spirit in money? Their noble spirit even unto death?

Let us men imitate the women; let us not forsake Jesus in temptations. For they for Him even dead spent so much and exposed their lives, but we (for again I say the same things) neither feed Him when hungry, nor clothe Him when naked, but seeing Him begging, we pass Him by. And yet if you saw Himself, every one would strip himself of all his goods. But even now it is the same. For He Himself has said, I am he. Why then do you not strip yourself of all? For indeed even now you hear Him say, You do it unto me; and there is no difference whether you give to this man or to Him; you have nothing less than these women that then fed Him, but even much more. But be not perplexed! For it is not so much to have fed Him appearing in His own person, which would be enough to prevail with a heart of stone, as (because of His mere word) to wait upon the poor, the maimed, him that is bent down. For in the former case, the look and the dignity of Him who appears divides with you that which is done; but here the reward is entire for your benevolence; and there is the proof of the greater reverence towards Him, when at His mere word waiting upon your fellow-servant you refresh him in all things. Refresh him, and believe Him, who receives it, and says, You give to me. For unless you had given to Him, He would not have counted you worthy of a kingdom. If you had not turned away from Him, He would not have sent you to hell, if you had overlooked a chance person; but because it is He Himself that is despised, therefore great is the blame.

Thus also Paul persecuted Him, in persecuting them that are His; wherefore too He said, Why do you persecute me? Acts 9:4 Thus therefore let us feel, as bestowing on Christ Himself when we bestow. For indeed His words are more sure than our sight. When therefore you see a poor man, remember His words, by which He declared, that it is He Himself who is fed. For though that which appears be not Christ, yet in this man's form Christ Himself receives and begs.

But are you ashamed to hear that Christ begs? Rather be ashamed when thou dost not give to Him begging of you. For this is shame, this is vengeance and punishment. Since for Him to beg is of His goodness, wherefore we ought even to glory therein; but for you not to give, is of your inhumanity. But if you believe not now, that in passing by a poor man that is a believer, you pass by Him, you will believe it then, when He will bring you into the midst and say, Inasmuch as you did it not to these, you did it not to me. But God forbid that we should so learn it, and grant rather that we may believe now, and bring forth fruit, and hear that most blessed voice that brings us into the kingdom.

But perhaps some one will say, You are every day discoursing to us of almsgiving and humanity. Neither will I cease to speak of this. For if you had attained to it, in the first place, not even so ought I to desist, for fear of making you the more remiss; yet had ye attained, I might have relaxed a little; but if you have not arrived even at the half; say not these things to me, but to yourselves. For indeed you do the same in blaming me, as if a little child, hearing often of the letter alpha, and not learning it, were to blame its teacher, because he is continually and for ever reminding him about it.

For who from these discourses has become more forward in the giving of alms? Who has cast down his money? Who has given the half of his substance? Who the third part? No one. How then should it be other than absurd, when you do not learn, to require us to desist from teaching? You ought to do the contrary. Though we were minded to desist, you ought to stop us and to say, we have not yet learned these things, and how is it you have desisted from reminding us of them? If it befell any one to suffer from his eye, and I happened to be a physician, and then having covered it up and anointed it, and having applied other treatment, I had not benefited it much, and so had desisted; would he not have come to the doors of my surgery and cried out against me, accusing me of great remissness, for that I had of myself withdrawn, while the disease remained; and if, on being blamed, I had said in reply to these things, that I had covered it up, and anointed it; would he have endured it? By no means, but would immediately have said; And what is the advantage, if I still suffer pain. Reason thus also with respect to your soul. But what if after having often fomented a hand that was lifeless and shrunk, I had not succeeded in mollifying it? Should I not have heard the same thing? And even now a hand that is shrunk and withered we bathe, and for this reason, until we can stretch it out perfectly, we will not desist. Would that you too were to discourse of nothing else, at home and at market, at table and at night, and as a dream. For if we were always careful about these things by day, even in our dreams we should be engaged in them.

What do you say? Am I forever speaking of almsgiving? I would wish myself that there were not great need for me to address this advice to you, but that I were to speak of the battle against the Jews, and heathens, and heretics; but when you are not yet sound, how can any one arm you for the fight? How should he lead you to the array, yet having wounds and gashes. Since if indeed I saw you thoroughly sound in health, I should lead you forth to that battle array, and you would see by the grace of Christ ten thousands lying dead, and their heads cast one upon another. In other books at any rate, many discourses have been spoken by us touching these things, but not even so are we able thoroughly to triumph in the victory, because of the remissness of the multitude. For when we conquer them ten thousand times over in doctrines, they reproach us with the lives of the multitude of those who join our congregations, their wounds, their diseases in their soul.

How then shall we with confidence show you in the battle array, when you rather do us mischief, being straightway wounded by our enemies, and made a mock of? For one man's hand is diseased, and shrunk so as not to be able to give away. How then should such a one hold a shield, and thrust it before him, and avoid being wounded by the jeers of cruelty. With others the feet halt, as many as go up to the theatres,

and to the resorts of the harlot women. How shall these then be able to stand in the battle, and not to be wounded with the accusation of wantonness? Another suffers and is maimed in his eyes, not looking straight, but being full of lasciviousness, and assailing women's chastity, and overthrowing marriages. How then should this man be able to look in the face of the enemy, and brandish a spear, and throw his dart, being goaded on all sides with jeers. We may see also many suffering with the belly not less than the dropsical, when they are held in subjection by gluttony and drunkenness. How then shall I be able to lead forth these drunken men to war? With others the mouth is rotten; such are the passionate, and revilers, and blasphemers. How then shall this man ever shout in battle, and achieve anything great and noble, he too being drunk with another drunkenness, and affording much laughter to the enemy?

Therefore each day I go about this camp, dressing your wounds, healing your sores. But if you ever rouse yourselves up, and become fit even to wound others, I will both teach you this art of war, and instruct you how to handle these weapons, or rather your works themselves will be weapons to you, and all men will immediately submit, if you would become merciful, if forbearing, if mild and patient, if you would show forth all other virtue. But if any gainsay, then we will also add the proof of what we can show on our part, bringing you forward, since now we rather are hindered (at least as to your part) in this race.

And mark. We say that Christ has done great things, having made angels of men; then, when we are called upon to give account, and required to furnish a proof out of this flock, our mouths are stopped. For I am afraid, lest in the place of angels, I bring forth swine as from a stable, and horses mad with lust.

I know you are pained, but not against you all are these things spoken, but against the guilty, or rather not even against them if they awake, but for them. Since now indeed all is lost and ruined, and the church has become nothing better than a stable of oxen, and a fold for asses and camels, and I go round seeking for a sheep, and am not able to see it. So much are all kicking, like horses, and any wild asses, and they fill the place here with much dung, for like this is their discourse. And if indeed one could see the things spoken at each assemblage, by men, by women, you would see their words more unclean than that dung.

Therefore I entreat you to change this evil custom, that the church may smell of ointment. But now, while we lay up in it perfumes for the senses, the uncleanness of the mind we use no great diligence to purge out, and drive away. What then is the advantage? For we do not so much disgrace the church by bringing dung into it, as we disgrace it by speaking such things one to another, about gains, about merchandise, about petty tradings, about things that are nothing to us, when there ought to be choirs of angels here, and we ought to make the church a heaven, and to know nothing else but earnest prayers, and silence with listening.

This then let us do at any rate, from the present time, that we may both purify our lives, and attain unto the promised blessings, by the grace and love towards man of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be glory world without end. Amen.

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