WHEN THE SAINTS…

8TH of SEPTEMBER THE BIRTH OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

13TH of SEPTEMBER ST JOHN CHRYSOSTOMOS

THE BIRTH OF MARY is celebrated perhaps more in the Eastern churches than in the west, as a kind of prelude to the birth of Jesus, the idea being that today represents the moment between the two covenants, and that the old law is at an end.

It was John Duns Scotus, one of the most interesting of the mediaeval theologians, who seems to have proposed the notion that Mary herself was born without sin – the doctrine of the immaculate conception. This doesn’t mean that Mary herself was conceived by the Holy Spirit, but that instead of inheriting original sin, God engraced her with the protection normally given to Christians at baptism; given that she couldn’t be baptised. For those who believe in the virgin birth of Jesus, it probably makes sense that Jesus’ mother would need to be made free of original sin in this way, which is obviously something God could have done had he so willed.

This is, by a country mile, the least interesting achievement of Duns Scotus, who was known as the Marian Doctor. He wrote [of God]:

POSUIT = HE COULD [DO IT]

DECUIT = IT WAS SEEMLY [IF HE HAD DONE IT]

FECIT = [LET US BELIEVE, THEN, THAT] HE DID IT

 The Eastern church has an entire liturgy for the day.

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ST JOHN CHRYSOSTOMOS [golden mouthed] was born in Antioch [the third city of the Roman Empire] in about 347 and died in exile in 407. He was Bishop of Constantinople, and earned the epithet ‘Golden mouth’ in the sixth century, because of his powerful and fearless preaching, which enabled him to connect with all ranks of society, and which eventually got him exiled to Armenia, when he pushed his luck and upset Empress Eudoxia more than once. His other claim to fame, though, is the liturgy he devised, which is still used in the Eastern church today.

John was born of rich and noble parents, and trained by Libanios, the most famous rhetorician of his day; and Diodorus of Tarsus, the finest Antiochene exegete of the fourth century taught him theology. He was made lector in the main Christian church in Antioch while in his 20’s, and after two years in the desert, which permanently undermined his health, John was ordained deacon by Bishop Meletius in 381, and priest in 386,with a mandate to preach. In 398, and against his will, he was created Bishop of Constantinople, and exiled in 404 to Armenia.

Like most of the very greatest preachers, Chrysostom was a thorough-going showman, and some of the events in his life gave him a backdrop that others could only dream of; we’re fortunate that many of his sermons and homilies have come down to us, and their simplicity and directness demonstrate the power he must have wielded in his lifetime and can still inspire us today.

One of the factors that instilled confidence in his preaching was John’s very high view of the priesthood, on which he wrote a treatise:

‘For the office of the priesthood is executed on Earth, yet it ranks among the things that are heavenly, and with good reason. For it was neither an angel nor an archangel, nor any other created power, but the Paraclete himself who established that ministry and commanded that men yet abiding in the flesh should imitate the function of angels. Wherefore it behoves the priest to be as pure as if he stood in heaven itself amidst those powers. … For the priest stands not bringing down fire, and he prays long not that fire may descend from heaven and consume the oblation, but that grace may descend upon the victim and through it inflame the souls of all, and render them brighter than silver fire-tried…

It is to priests that spiritual birth and regeneration by baptism are entrusted. By them we put on Christ, and are united to the Son of God and become members of the blessed head. Hence we should regard them as more august than princes and kings, and more venerable than parents. For the latter begot us of blood and the will of the flesh, but priests are the cause of our generations from God, of our spiritual regeneration, of our true freedom and sonship according to grace.’

John’s Easter sermon is still used as part of the Easter liturgy in the Eastern church today, with its invitation to sheer joy and feasting. There is a sermon ‘against publishing the errors of the brethren,’ in which he speaks of the Word as working like medicine, but, unlike medicine, being available to poor people as well as the rich…

‘And the rich and the poor man share the benefit alike, or, rather it is not alike that they share the benefit, because the poor man goes away with the enjoyment of more. Whatever can be the reason? It is because the rich man, possessed beforehand by many thoughts, having the pride and puffed-up temper belonging to wealthiness; living with carelessness and lazy ease as companions, receives the medicine in the hearing of the scriptures not with much attention, nor with much earnestness. But the poor man, far removed from delicate living and from gluttony and indolence, spending all his time in handicraft and honest labours, and gathering, hence, much love of wisdom for the soul, becomes thereby more attentive and free from slackness and is wont to give his mind with more accurate care to all that is said. [?] …

It is not as absolutely bringing an accusation against those who are wealthy that I say all this, nor as praising the poor without reference to circumstances; for neither is wealth an evil, but the having made a bad use of wealth: nor is poverty a virtue, but the having made a virtuous use of poverty. That rich man who was in the time of Lazarus was punished not because he was rich but because he was cruel and inhuman; and that poor man who rested in the bosom of Abraham was praised not because he was poor, but because he had born his poverty with thankfulness.

… For of things – now attend carefully to this saying, it will avail to put into you sufficient religious knowledge, and to cast out all unsound reasoning and to bring about your having your judgement right concerning the truth of things. Well, some things are by nature morally good and others the contrary; and others neither good nor evil, but they occupy the intermediate position. … But wealth and poverty in themselves are neither one nor the other, but from the will of those who use them they become either one or the other.

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Eutropius was a slave, born in Mesopotamia, who had passed through the hands of many owners, performing the most menial tasks; but, having been bought by a military officer, he was made over as part of a dowry to his daughter. Eventually she threw him out of the house, and whilst homeless and on the streets of Constantinople, somebody had pity on him and procured him a very low-ranking job at court, from whence he rose in time, having attracted the attention of the emperor’s father, by means of the occasional witty saying and false piety, he was sent on some delicate missions and finally made it to the very top of the greasy pole as first minister to the emperor; a real fairy tale, you might say, but ‘goblin’ might fit the bill better.

Eutropius, a eunuch, worked his way up to sole power by eliminating anybody who stood in his way, and finally extinguished their last hope of refuge by making it illegal to seek sanctuary in the church. By indulging an already weak emperor, he became sole ruler of the empire, but, as often happens, his time came and he fell abruptly from power and, hoisted with his own petard, hesitated to take refuge in Hagia Sophia. Eventually, having nowhere else to go, he sought sanctuary with John, who welcomed him warmly.

Now! Picture John, who was, apparently, quite short, climbing into the great pulpit at Hagia Sophia; the curtain behind him is raised to reveal this wretch Eutropius clinging abjectly and in absolute fear for his life, to the altar behind John: What an opening for his homily:

‘Vanity of vanities; all is vanity! It is always seasonable to utter this, but especially at the present time; where are now the brilliant surroundings of thy consulship? Where are the beaming torches; where is the dancing, and the noise of dancers’ feet; the banquets and the festivals? Where are the gardens and the curtains of the theatre; Where is the applause that greeted thee in the city; where the acclamation in the hippodrome, and the flatteries of the spectators? They are gone – all gone! A wind has blown upon the tree, shattering down all the leaves, and showing it to us quite bare, and shaken from its very root. For so great has been the violence of the blast, that it has given a shock to all these fibres of the tree, and threatens to tear it up from the roots.

‘Where now are your friends: where are your drinking parties and your suppers? Where are the swarms of parasites, and the wine that used to be poured out all day long, and the manifold dainties that were invented by your cooks? Where are they who courted your power, and did and said everything to win your favour? They were all mere visions of the night and dreams that have vanished with the dawn of day! They were spring flowers, and when the spring was over they were all withered. They were a shadow which has passed away: they were a smoke which has dispersed; bubbles which have burst; cobwebs which have been rent in pieces. Therefore we chant continually this spiritual song; Vanity of Vanities: all is vanity.’

Truly wonderful stuff, but behind it was a very courageous and forgiving saint, who didn’t hesitate to preach forcefully against the abuses of the government and of the church, but who, when his enemy came to the church begging for refuge which he himself had forbidden, stood against angry soldiers, refusing to give the man up, and, marched between two columns of troops to the emperor, insisted to him that he would not give Eutropius up for as long as he remained within his sanctuary.

Eventually, though, Eutropius left Hagia Sophia and chanced his arm in Cyprus, from whence he was tried, sentenced to death and beheaded.

To paraphrase John’s own words, his ‘golden mouth’ was, in itself, neither good nor evil, but the use he made of it was almost entirely for good, and he is celebrated as one of the teachers of the faith in the Greek church.