

# The life and writings of St John Chrysostom



# Introduction

- What do you know about St John Chrysostom?
- We will cover:
  - Major events in his life
  - His spiritual character
  - Overview of his writings



# Why learn about St John Chrystosom?

- Learn from his life and spiritual struggles
- Learn about his writings to direct your reading
- Who thinks they know more about Christ than St John Chrysostom?
  - If not, you have something to learn from him...

# Youth and training: 347 - 370

- Born in 347 AD in Antioch
- Father (Secundus) a military officer and pagan, died during John's infancy
- Mother (Anthusa) a devout Christian
- Widowed at 20 yrs, vowed to not remarry and devoted life to raising John and his elder sister
- At home, taught him the scriptures and planted in him the seeds of holiness
  - Role of parents and servants

# Youth and training: 347 - 370

- John received an excellent education with the best teachers
- Received literary training under Libanius, principal scholar and rhetorician of his age, and avid heathen → John was his best student
- When Libanius was asked who should be his successor he replied: “John, if only the Christians had not stolen him from us”

# Youth and training: 347 - 370

- After completing his studies, John became a highly successful rhetorician and lawyer
- His speeches in the law courts attracted admiration and he was expected to continue with a prosperous political life
- However, he was not satisfied...

# Youth and training: 347 - 370

- Gradual character change influenced by his:
  - Personal study of scripture
  - Mother
  - Best friend Basil who was pious and an ascetic, and
  - Bishop Meletius of Antioch
- Joined catechumens in approx 367 for 3 yrs and baptised in 369-370
- After baptism he rejected the world and dedicated his life to serving Christ

# Ascetic and monastic life: 370-381

- Wanted to become a monk immediately, but Anthusa begged him to wait until she died:
  - “My son....I ask only one favour from you: do not make me a widow a second time; wait at least until I die; perhaps I shall soon leave this world. When you have buried me...nothing will then prevent you from retiring into monastic life” (*On the Priesthood*)
- John lived as a monk at home, living a secluded life with rigid asceticism



# Ascetic and monastic life: 370-381

- Two fellow pupils under Libanius joined him in the ascetic life: Maximus (who became Bishop of Seleucia) and Theodore (became Bishop of Mopsuestia)
  - Who are your friends?
- At one stage Theodore became attached to a young lady, and resolved to leave the ascetic life to marry her
- The brothers fasted and prayed for him, and John wrote one of his earliest surviving letters:

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## AN EXHORTATION TO THEODORE AFTER HIS FALL

TRANSLATED WITH INTRODUCTION AND NOTES BY

REV. W. R. W. STEPHENS, M.A.,

PREBENDARY OF CHICHESTER, AND RECTOR OF WOOLBEDING, SUSSEX.

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- “.... Having considered all these things, shake off the dust, get up from the ground, and you will be formidable to the adversary; for he himself indeed has overthrown you, as if you would never rise again; but if he sees you again lifting up your hands against him, he will receive such an unexpected blow that he will be less forward in trying to upset you again, and you yourself will be more secure against receiving any wound of that kind in future.”



# Ascetic and monastic life: 370-381

- Theodore again renounced the world and his intention to marry and returned to the ascetic life
- In 383 (aged 33yrs) he was ordained a priest, and in 392 he was ordained Bishop of Mopsuestia where he died in 428 (aged 78yrs)

# Ascetic and monastic life: 370-381

- Approx 377, a number of bishoprics in Syria were vacant and bishops were needed
- Basil and John were considered suitable
- They were not willing but they made a pact that either they both accept or both reject
- John then tricked Basil into accepting the office saying he also accepted
- Basil was ordained Bishop and then found John had escaped

# Ascetic and monastic life: 370-381

- John wrote one of his most famous works to Basil called “On the Priesthood”
- Here he defended his actions saying he was unworthy , while Basil was needed
- Ultimately he writes about the tremendous responsibilities of the ministry
  - NOTE – All services to God should also be taken very seriously

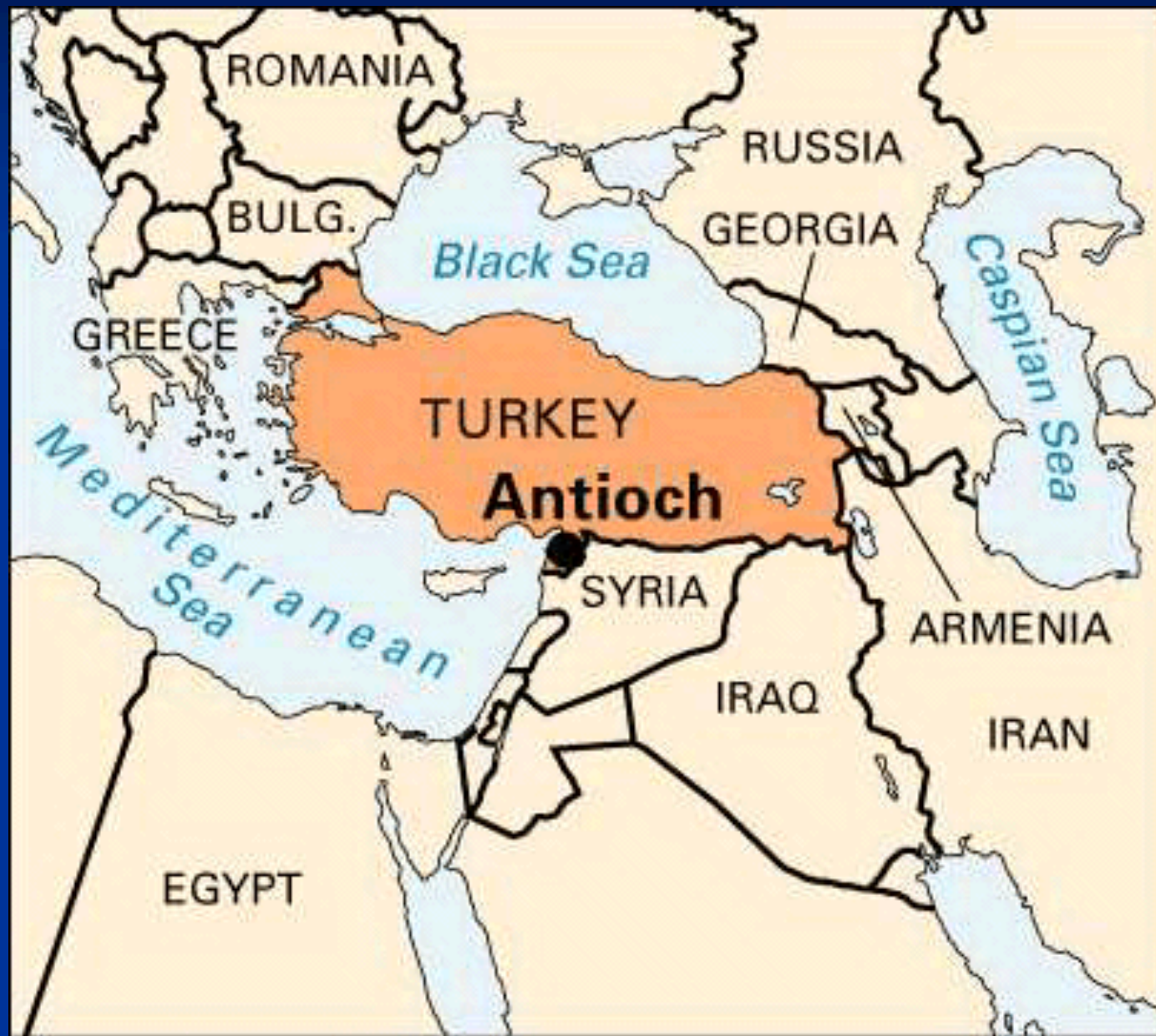
# Ascetic and monastic life: 370-381

- In 374 after the death of his mother, John fled the city and spent 6 years in a monastery
- John then became a hermit for 2 years and practiced severe asceticism
- He became unwell and returned to the city for care in 381AD

# Deacon and Priest: Antioch (381-98)

- On returning to Antioch he was immediately ordained a deacon in 381, and then priest in 386
- He now began the most significant work of his life which was his preaching:
  - Thousands would attend the service to hear him
  - He frequently would ask them to stop applauding
    - “You praise what I have said, and receive my words with tumults of applause; but show your approval by obedience; that is the only praise I seek”
  - Many would leave the service after the sermon and not stay for holy communion and he chastised them
  - “The pulpit was his throne, and he adorned it as much as any preacher in ancient or modern times” (CCEL Prolegomena)

# Deacon and Priest: Antioch (381-98)



# Deacon and Priest: Antioch (381-98)

## ■ Antioch:

- Believers first called Christians in Antioch (Acts)
- Established by Paul, visited by Peter, and Apostolic father St Ignatius of Antioch
- 3<sup>rd</sup> city of the Roman Empire until the rise of Constantinople
- 200,000 people of which approx 50% Christians

# Deacon and Priest: Antioch (381-98)

## ■ Problems in Antioch:

1. Society, including Christians, were driven by greed, luxury, sensuality and love of the theatre and circus
  - “So great is the depravity of the times, that if a stranger were to compare the rules of the gospel with the actual practice of society, he would infer that men were not the disciples, but the enemies of Christ” (St John Chrys.)
2. There was a large divide in the classes between the poor and the rich
3. The church in Antioch for many decades was torn by heresy and schism (Arians and Meletians). The people were confused.



# Deacon and Priest: Antioch (381-98)

- John's approach:
  - Constantly pressured the congregation to abstain from worldly entertainment and to be separate and holy
  - Central theme was against the greed of the rich, teaching them a responsibility towards the poor
  - He did not often delve into deep theology, but taught the people how to live a Christian life
- John was deeply loved by the people because of his sermons
  - After his departure he was given the name "Chrysostom" meaning "The Golden Mouth"

# Deacon and Priest: Antioch (381-98)

## ■ Writings in Antioch:

### ■ “On wealth and poverty”:

- 7 sermons on Lazarus and the rich man

- Three main points in the sermons were:

- How can the rich enjoy their luxuries while the poor starve?

- While the rich may appear happy, they are in danger of eternal condemnation

- The rich must see that they are stewards of their wealth, holding it on behalf of the poor. They will need to give an account of what they did with their wealth.

ST JOHN CHRYSOSTOM



ON WEALTH  
AND POVERTY

# Deacon and Priest: Antioch (381-98)

## ■ Writings in Antioch:

### ■ “On the Statues” – 21 sermons

- A riot occurred in Antioch against higher taxes, and the statues of the Emperor and his family were demolished in the riots. The Emperor threatened to destroy the whole city, and Bishop Flavian went to Constantinople to intercede for the city
- The people greatly feared the destruction of the city and flocked to the church where John gave 21 sermons
- He comforted the people, exhorted them to overcome their sins, to see judgment day as much more terrifying
- He repeatedly preached against wealth and luxury, believing it was the desire for wealth that precipitated the rebellion:

# Deacon and Priest: Antioch (381-98)

- “Abraham was rich, but loved not his wealth....but going forward he looked around for the stranger, or for some poor man, that he might entertain the wayfarer. He covered not his ceilings with gold, but placing his tent near the oak, he was content with the shade of its leaves. Yet so bright was his dwelling that angels were not ashamed to tarry with him; for they sought not splendor of abode, but purity of soul. So let us, beloved, imitate Abraham and bestow our goods on the needy.”  
(On the Statues, II 15)
- These series of sermons delivered almost daily through Lent calmed the panic in the church and brought them together. Bishop Flavian was successful and the Emperor declined to destroy the city
- Thousands of heathens attended the sermons, and were converted and baptised

# Deacon and Priest: Antioch (381-98)

- He used vivid imagery in his sermons to stir the hearts of the people – eg. “God desired a harlot”
- “God desired a harlot and how does He act? He does not send to her any of His servants. He does not send any angels or archangels, cherubim or seraphim. No, He Himself draws near to the one He loves, and He does not take her to Heaven, for He could not bring a harlot to Heaven, and therefore He Himself comes down to earth, to the harlot, and is not ashamed. He comes to her secret dwelling place and beholds her in her drunkenness. And how does He come? Not in the bare essence of His original nature, but in the guise of one whom the harlot is seeking, in order that she might not be afraid when she sees Him...How does He act? He takes the harlot and marries her to Himself, and gives her the signet ring of the Holy Spirit as a seal between them.”

# Deacon and Priest: Antioch (381-98)

- Other writings during this period:
  - Numerous homilies
  - Biblical commentaries
  - “Treatise on virginity” – defending monasticism
  - “Letter to a Young Widow” – encouraging her to not remarry
  - Homilies on Martyrs
  - Instructions to Catechumens
- Most of his writings which exist until today are from this period

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# Patriarch of Constantinople: 398 - 404

- After death of Nectarius (successor of Gregory Nazianzen) John was chosen as Bishop of Constantinople which had become the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire
- As John was likely to refuse the election and for fear the people of Antioch would riot, he was hurried away under military escort at night and consecrated in 398
- John soon gained the admiration of the people by his eloquent sermons

# Patriarch of Constantinople: 398 - 404



# Hagia Sophia











# Patriarch of Constantinople: 398 - 404

- He sold the expensive furniture of the Bishop's palace and gave the money to the poor, and introduced strict asceticism for the clergy and disciplined them
- A large amount of the income of the diocese was diverted to the poor and he told the rich not to donate to the clergy but to give directly to the poor
- He refused invitations to banquets and gave none
- Constantly exhorted the rich to attend to almsgiving and looking after the poor
- He soon made enemies by his rejection of wealth and luxury, both of the royal family and the clergy

# Patriarch of Constantinople: 398 - 404

- He developed enemies among the clergy and then the Empress Eudoxia
- Empress erected a silver statue of herself in front of the church. John was enraged and said: “Again Herodias dances, again she rages, again she demands the head of John on a platter”
- A series of events started which lead to the banishment of John in 404 from the See of Constantinople on false charges

# Exile and death – 404 - 407

- In a letter after his exile he wrote:
  - When I was driven from the city I felt no anxiety, but said to myself: If the empress wishes to banish me, let her do so; “the earth is the Lord’s”. If she wants to have me sawn asunder, I have Isaiah for an example. If she wants me to be drowned in the ocean, I think of Jonah. If I am to be thrown into the fire, the three men in the furnace suffered the same. If cast before wild beasts, I remember Daniel in the lion’s den. If she wants me to be stoned, I have before me Stephen...If she demands my head...John the Baptist shines before me....Paul reminds me, “If I still pleased men, I would not be the servant of Christ”



# Exile and death – 404 - 407

- For 3 years he was moved from city to city in exile and treated very harshly. He would often be accepted and loved in the city he resided in, and he still had influence in Constantinople, so he would be moved to more remote and desolate towns
- He wrote numerous letters to his bishops and priests during this time, still conducting the affairs of the church, and to the Pope of Rome asking for help
- He was always sick and during one move in harsh weather in 407 he departed
- In 438 his body was moved with great pomp and ceremony to Constantinople to be placed with the bodies of the emperors and patriarchs

# His Writings

- Five classes:
  - 600 homilies and biblical commentaries
  - Ascetic treatises including “On the Priesthood”
  - Approx 250 letters
  - Festal orations
  - Liturgy (used by Eastern Orthodox churches)

# His Character

- Ascetic, simple, rejected luxuries
- Gentle, meek and patient
- The scriptures were his daily food
- He was a practical Christian, not a deep theologian
- He said the duty of all Christians was to seek the salvation of others:
  - “Nothing can be more chilling than the sight of a Christian who makes no effort to save others.” (20<sup>th</sup> Homily on Acts)

# Summary

- Youth, conversion and baptism – 347 - 370
- Ascetic and monastic life – 370 - 381
- Deacon and priest at Antioch – 381 - 398
- Patriarch of Constantinople – 398 - 404
- Exile and death – 404 - 407
- Writings and character



# Questions

