

Homily

This morning we pause in our Epiphany journey to honour one of the great Fathers of the Church, John Chrysostom, Bishop of Constantinople and a teacher. John was born in 346 and died in 407.

John was called Chrysostom – the golden-mouth – even though he preached sermons that could last two hours. He would have been right at home in the Diocese of Sydney renowned for long sermons! He is the patron saint of preachers in the Roman Church.

As a lonely hermit, before his time as Archbishop of Constantinople, he spent some years in solitude and silence and memorized the New Testament.

As Archbishop his attacks upon the abuse of riches antagonized the rich and powerful, just as they do today, and he was virtually banished. He died on a forced march in bitter winter weather.

Cardinal John Henry Newman wrote that his strength as a Doctor of the Church lay 'in his intimate sympathy and compassion for the whole world, not only in its strength but in its weakness'. His aim as a teacher was the exposition of the Bible so that ordinary parishioners could know and understand the teachings of the Church with its social and practical implications.¹

¹ Holy Persons and Holy Days – John Watson 1978

No doubt John would have been encouraged by the words in today's reading from the Letter to the Hebrews which urged the early church members to continue to live out the gospel:

But recall those earlier days when, after you had been enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and persecution, and sometimes being partners with those so treated.

John believed strongly in the social dimension of the Gospel and encouraged his listeners to put into practice the teachings of Christ.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus pushed the boundaries of the social and religious customs of his time. He identified with those on the margins of society who were abused by those in power, both civil and religious.

Jesus was a rebel and went into bat for his fellow citizens without regard for his own position. He was prepared to suffer persecution and personal hardship because he believed in justice for all.

He paid the ultimate sacrifice – death on the cross and he reminds us to take up that cross and follow him as 21st century disciple.

In the Gospel for next Sunday we shall hear the list of 'Blesseds' from the Sermon on the Mount, and one is especially relevant for our reflection this morning:

'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you

Sometimes I am asked why the church observes saints such as John Chrysostom. It is because as we reflect on the impact of their lives in the church and wider community they provide inspiration for us on our pilgrimage.

John was a social campaigner. He based his teaching on the example of Christ. He understood that being salt and light to the world was often going to be difficult and that he would suffer because of it.

What about us? Are we prepared to follow John's example and stand with Christ against abuse and all that is evil? There would appear to be as much in the world today as there was in John's time to which we could turn our attention.

Are we prepared to be identified with those on the margins of society? Those with whom we may have little in common, but need to be encouraged by Christ.

Are we prepared to take up our Cross and walk with Christ so all may know the amazing love of God and experience true freedom?

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27 January 2017