

Homily 50 on Matthew

John Chrysostom

Patristic · Nicene & Post-Nicene · Homily

STROMATA 03

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INTRODUCTION

Among the ninety homilies on Matthew preached in Antioch during the 390s, this one treats Christ's withdrawal to the mountain and the disciples' terror on the storm-tossed sea. Chrysostom, whose epithet "golden-mouthed" was earned in precisely this kind of patient verse-by-verse exposition, reads the episode as a lesson in pedagogy: Christ deliberately delays his rescue, intensifies the fear, and uses absence to deepen longing. The reading here established the pattern for Greek patristic commentary on the Gospels, shaping Byzantine preaching for a millennium afterward. Expect a pastoral exposition that moves steadily from the text to the soul, drawing the reader into Christ's deliberate, sometimes severe, training of those who follow him.

And when He had sent the multitudes away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray. Now when evening came, He was alone there. 24 But the boat was now in the middle of the sea, tossed by the waves, for the wind was contrary. Matthew 14:23-24.

For what purpose does He go up into the mountain? To teach us, that loneliness and retirement is good, when we are to pray to God. With this view, you see, He is continually withdrawing into the wilderness, and there often spends the whole night in prayer, teaching us earnestly to seek such quietness in our prayers, as the time and place may confer. For the wilderness is the mother of quiet; it is a calm and a harbor, delivering us from all turmoils.

He Himself then went up there with this object, but the disciples are tossed with the waves again, and undergo a storm, equal even to the former. But whereas before they had Him in the ship when this befell them, now they were alone by themselves. Thus gently and by degrees He excites and urges them on for the better, even to the bearing all nobly. Accordingly we see, that when they were first near that danger, He was present, though asleep, so as readily to give them relief; but now leading them to a greater degree of endurance, He does not even this, but departs, and in mid sea permits the storm to arise, so that they might not so much as look for a hope of preservation from any quarter; and He lets them be tempest-tost all the night, thoroughly to awaken, as I suppose, their hardened heart.

For such is the nature of the fear, which the time concurs with the rough weather in producing. And together with the compunction, He cast them also into a greater longing for Himself, and a continual

remembrance of Him. Accordingly, neither did He present Himself to them at once. For, “in the fourth watch,” so it is said, “of the night, He went unto them, walking upon the sea;” Matthew 14:25 instructing them not hastily to seek for deliverance; from their pressing dangers, but to bear all occurrences manfully. At all events, when they looked to be delivered, then was their fear again heightened. For, “When the disciples,” it is said, “saw Him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, It is a spirit: and they cried out for fear.”

Yea, and He constantly does so; when He is on the point of removing our terrors, He brings upon us other worse things, and more alarming: which we see took place then also. For together with the storm, the sight too troubled them, no less than the storm. Therefore neither did He remove the darkness, nor straightway make Himself manifest, training them, as I said, by the continuance of these fears, and instructing them to be ready to endure. This He did in the case of Job also; for when He was on the point of removing the terror and the temptation, then He suffered the end to grow more grievous; I mean not for his children's death, or the words of his wife, but because of the reproaches, both of his servants and of his friends. And when He was about to rescue Jacob from his affliction in the strange land, He allowed his trouble to be awakened and aggravated: in that his father-in-law first overtook him and threatened death, and then his brother coming immediately after, suspended over him the extremest danger.

For since one cannot be tempted both for a long time and severely; when the righteous are on the point of coming to an end of their conflicts, He, willing them to gain the more, enhances their struggles. Which He did in the case of Abraham too, appointing for his last conflict that about his child. For thus even things intolerable will be tolerable, when they are so brought upon us, as to have their removal near, at the very doors.

So did Christ at that time also, and did not discover Himself before they cried out. For the more intense their alarm, the more did they welcome His coming. Afterward when they had exclaimed, it is said, “Straightway Jesus spoke unto them, saying, Be of good cheer, it is I; be not afraid.” Matthew 14:27

This word removed their fear, and caused them to take confidence. For as they knew Him not by sight, because of His marvellous kind of motion, and because of the time, He makes Himself manifest by His voice.

What then says Peter, everywhere ardent, and ever starting forward before the rest?

“Lord, if it be Thou,” says he, “bid me come unto You on the water.” Matthew 14:28

He said not, “Pray and entreat,” but, “bid.” Do you see how great his ardor, how great his faith? Yet surely he is hereby often in danger, by seeking things beyond his measure. For so here too he required an exceedingly great thing, for love only, not for display. For neither did he say, “Bid me walk on the water,” but what? “Bid me come unto You.” For none so loved Jesus.

This he did also after the resurrection; he endured not to come with the others, but leapt forward. John 21:7 And not love only, but faith also does he display. For he not only believed that He was able Himself to walk on the sea, but that He could lead upon it others also; and he longs to be quickly near Him.

“And he said, Come. And when Peter had come down out of the ship, he walked on the water, and came to Jesus. But when he saw the wind boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink, he cried, saying, Lord, save me. And immediately Jesus stretched forth His hand and caught him, and says unto him, O thou of little faith, wherefore did you doubt?” Matthew 14:29-31

This is more wonderful than the former. Therefore this is done after that. For when He had shown that He rules the sea, then He carries on the sign to what is yet more marvellous. Then He rebuked the winds only; but now He both walks Himself, and permits another to do so; which thing if He had required to be done at the beginning, Peter would not have so well received it, because he had not yet acquired so great faith.

Wherefore then did Christ permit him? Why, if He had said, “you can not,” Peter being ardent would have contradicted Him again. Wherefore by the facts He convinces him, that for the future he may be sobered.

But not even so does he endure. Therefore having come down, he becomes dizzy; for he was afraid. And this the surf caused, but his fear was wrought by the wind.

But John says, that “they willingly received Him into the ship; and immediately the ship was at the land whither they went,” relating this same circumstance. So that when they were on the point of arriving at the land, He entered the ship. Peter then having come down from the ship went unto Him, not rejoicing so much in walking on the water, as in coming unto Him. And when he had prevailed over the greater, he was on the point of suffering evil from the less, from the violence of the wind, I mean, not of the sea. For such a thing is human nature; not seldom effecting great things, it exposes itself in the less; as Elias felt toward Jezebel, as Moses toward the Egyptian, as David toward Bathsheba. Even so then this man also; while their fear was yet at the height, he took courage to walk upon the water, but against the assault of the wind he was no longer able to stand; and this, being near Christ. So absolutely nothing does it avail to be near Christ, not being near Him by faith.

And this also showed the difference between the Master and the disciple, and allayed the feelings of the others. For if in the case of the two brethren they had indignation, much more here; for they had not yet the Spirit vouchsafed unto them.

But afterwards they were not like this. On every occasion, for example, they give up the first honors to Peter, and put him forward in their addresses to the people, although of a rougher vein than any of them.

And wherefore did He not command the winds to cease, but Himself stretched forth His hand and took hold of him? Because in him faith was required. For when our part is wanting, then God's part also is at a stand.

Signifying therefore that not the assault of the wind, but his want of faith had wrought his overthrow, He says, “Wherefore did you doubt, O thou of little faith?” So that if his faith had not been weak, he would have stood easily against the wind also. And for this reason, you see, even when He had caught hold of Him, He suffers the wind to blow, showing that no hurt comes thereby, when faith is steadfast.

And as when a nestling has come out of the nest before the time, and is on the point of falling, its mother bears it on her wings, and brings it back to the nest; even so did Christ.

“And when they had come into the ship, then the wind ceased.” Matthew 14:32 Whereas before this they had said, “What manner of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey Him!” Matthew 8:27 now it is not so. For “they that were in the ship,” it is said, “came and worshipped Him, saying, Of a truth You are Son of God.” Matthew 14:33 Do you see, how by degrees he was leading them all higher and higher? For both by His walking on the sea, and by His commanding another to do so, and preserving him in jeopardy; their faith was henceforth great. For then indeed He rebuked the sea, but now He rebukes it not, in another way signifying His power more abundantly. Wherefore also they said, “Of a truth You are Son of God.”

What then? Did He rebuke them on their so speaking? Nay, quite the contrary, He rather confirmed what they said, with greater authority healing such as approached Him, and not as before.

“And when they had gone over,” so it is said, “they came into the land of Gennesaret. And when the men of that place had knowledge of Him, they sent out into all that country round about, and brought unto Him all that were diseased; and besought Him that they might touch the hem of His garment; and as many as touched were made perfectly whole.”

For neither did they approach Him as before, dragging Him into their houses, and seeking a touch of His hand, and directions from Him in words; but in a far higher strain, and with more of self-denial, and with a more abundant faith did they try to win themselves a cure; for she that had the issue of blood taught them all to be severe in seeking wisdom.

And the evangelist, implying also that at long intervals He visited the several neighborhoods, says, “The men of that place took knowledge of Him, and sent out into the country round about, and brought unto Him them that were diseased.” But yet the interval, so far from abolishing their faith, made it even greater, and preserved it in vigor.

- Let us also then touch the hem of His garment, or rather, if we be willing, we have Him entire. For indeed His body is set before us now, not His garment only, but even His body; not for us to touch it only, but also to eat, and be filled. Let us now then draw near with faith, every one that has an infirmity. For if they that touched the hem of His garment drew from Him so much virtue, how much more they that possess Him entire? Now to draw near with faith is not only to receive the offering, but also with a pure heart to touch it; to be so minded, as approaching Christ Himself. For what, if you hear no voice? Yet you see Him laid out; or rather thou dost also hear His voice, while He is speaking by the evangelists.

Believe, therefore, that even now it is that supper, at which He Himself sat down. For this is in no respect different from that. For neither does man make this and Himself the other; but both this and that is His own work. When therefore you see the priest delivering it unto you, account not that it is the priest that does so, but that it is Christ's hand that is stretched out. Even as when he baptizes, not he does baptize you, but it is God that possesses your head with invisible power, and neither angel nor archangel nor any other dare draw near and touch you; even so now also. For when God begets, the gift is His only. Do you see not those who adopt to themselves sons here, how they commit not the act to slaves, but are themselves present at the judgment-seat? Even so neither has God committed His gift to angels, but Himself is present, commanding and saying, "Call no man Father on earth;" Matthew 23:9 not that you should dishonor them that gave you birth, but that you should prefer to all those Him that made you, and enrolled you among His own children. For He that has given the greater, that is, has set Himself before you, much more will He not think scorn to distribute unto you of His body. Let us hear therefore, both priests and subjects, what we have had vouchsafed to us; let us hear and tremble. Of His own holy flesh He has granted us our fill; He has set before us Himself sacrificed.

What excuse shall we have then, when feeding on such food, we commit such sins? When eating a lamb, we become wolves? When feeding on a sheep, we spoil by violence like the lions?

For this mystery He directs to be always clear, not from violence only, but even from bare enmity. Yea, for this mystery is a mystery of peace; it allows us not to cling to wealth. For if He spared not Himself for us, what must we deserve, sparing our wealth, and being lavish of a soul, in behalf of which He spared not Himself?

Now upon the Jews God every year bound in their feasts a memorial of His peculiar favors to them: but for you, every day, as I may say, through these mysteries.

Be not therefore ashamed of the cross: for these are our venerable things, these our mysteries; with this gift do we adorn ourselves, with this we are beautified.

And if I say, He stretched out the heaven, He spread out the earth and the sea, He sent prophets and angels, I say nothing in comparison. For the sum of His benefits is this, that "He spared not His own Son," Romans 8:32 in order to save His alienated servants.

- Let no Judas then approach this table, no Simon; nay, for both these perished through covetousness. Let us flee then from this gulf; neither let us account it enough for our salvation, if after we have stripped widows and orphans, we offer for this table a gold and jewelled cup. Nay, if you desire to honor the sacrifice, offer your soul, for which also it was slain; cause that to become golden; but if that remain worse than lead or potter's clay, while the vessel is of gold, what is the profit?

Let not this therefore be our aim, to offer golden vessels only, but to do so from honest earnings likewise. For these are of the sort that is more precious even than gold, these that are without injuriousness. For the church is not a gold foundry nor a workshop for silver, but an assembly of angels. Wherefore it is souls which we require, since in fact God accepts these for the souls' sake. That table at that time was

not of silver nor that cup of gold, out of which Christ gave His disciples His own blood; but precious was everything there, and awful, for that they were full of the Spirit. Ephesians 5:18

Would you do honor to Christ's body? Neglect Him not when naked; do not while here you honor Him with silken garments, neglect Him perishing without of cold and nakedness. For He that said, "This is my body," and by His word confirmed the fact, This same said, "You saw me an hungered, and fed me not;" and, "Inasmuch as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me." Matthew 25:42, 45 For This indeed needs not coverings, but a pure soul; but that requires much attention.

Let us learn therefore to be strict in life, and to honor Christ as He Himself desires. For to Him who is honored that honor is most pleasing, which it is His own will to have, not that which we account best. Since Peter too thought to honor Him by forbidding Him to wash his feet, but his doing so was not an honor, but the contrary.

Even so do thou honor Him with this honor, which He ordained, spending your wealth on poor people. Since God has no need at all of golden vessels, but of golden souls.

And these things I say, not forbidding such offerings to be provided; but requiring you, together with them, and before them, to give alms. For He accepts indeed the former, but much more the latter. For in the one the offerer alone is profited, but in the other the receiver also. Here the act seems to be a ground even of ostentation; but there all is mercifulness, and love to man. For what is the profit, when His table indeed is full of golden cups, but He perishes with hunger? First fill Him, being an hungered, and then abundantly deck out His table also. Do you make Him a cup of gold, while you give Him not a cup of cold water? And what is the profit? Do you furnish His table with cloths bespangled with gold, while to Himself you afford not even the necessary covering? And what good comes of it? For tell me, should you see one at a loss for necessary food, and omit appeasing his hunger, while you first overlaid his table with silver; would he indeed thank you, and not rather be indignant? What, again, if seeing one wrapped in rags, and stiff with cold, you should neglect giving him a garment, and build golden columns, saying, "thou were doing it to his honor," would he not say that thou were mocking, and account it an insult, and that the most extreme?

Let this then be your thought with regard to Christ also, when He is going about a wanderer, and a stranger, needing a roof to cover Him; and thou, neglecting to receive Him, deckest out a pavement, and walls, and capitals of columns, and hangest up silver chains by means of lamps, but Himself bound in prison you will not even look upon.

And these things I say, not forbidding munificence in these matters, but admonishing you to do those other works together with these, or rather even before these. Because for not having done these no one was ever blamed, but for those, hell is threatened, and unquenchable fire, and the punishment with evil spirits. Do not therefore while adorning His house overlook your brother in distress, for he is more properly a temple than the other.

And whereas these your stores will be subject to alienations both by unbelieving kings, and tyrants, and robbers; whatever you may do for your brother, being hungry, and a stranger, and naked, not even the devil will be able to despoil, but it will be laid up in an inviolable treasure.

Why then does He Himself say, “The poor always you have with you, but me you have not always?” Why, for this reason most of all should we give alms, that we have Him not always an hungered, but in the present life only. But if you are desirous to learn also the whole meaning of the saying, understand that this was said not with a view to His disciples, although it seem so, but to the woman's weakness. That is, her disposition being still rather imperfect, and they doubting about her; to revive her He said these things. For in proof that for her comfort He said it, He added, “Why trouble ye the woman?” Matthew 26:10 And with regard to our having Him really always with us, He says, “Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.” Matthew 28:20 From all which it is evident, that for no other object was this said, but that the rebuke of the disciples might not wither the faith of the woman, just then budding.

Let us not then bring forward these things now, which were uttered because of some economy, but let us read all the laws, those in the New and those in the Old Testament, that are set down about almsgiving, and let us be very earnest about this matter. For this cleanses from sin. For “give alms, and all things will be clean unto you.” Luke 11:41 This is a greater thing than sacrifice. “For I will have mercy, and not sacrifice.” This opens the heavens. For “your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God.” Acts 10:4 This is more indispensable than virginity: for thus were those virgins cast out of the bridechamber; thus were the others brought in.

All which things let us consider, and sow liberally, that we may reap in more ample abundance, and attain unto the good things to come, by the grace and love towards man of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever. Amen.