ON EUTROPIUS

INTRODUCTION

Delivered at Constantinople on a Saturday or Sunday in either late July or early August 399, the homily represents both a rhetorical tour de force and an example of opportunistic preaching. With a markedly increased attendance for the time of year due to the presence of the deposed consul-eunuch Eutropius cowering behind the veil which hid the altar, John is unable to let the opportunity to draw a moral example from the fate of this much-despised man pass him by. The irony of the man who sought to weaken the laws governing the right of churches to grant asylum himself fleeing to the Great Church in fear for his life on the preceding day was clearly not lost on either John and his clergy or the audience. John’s generosity in providing the asylum that is sought and in turning Eutropius’ shocking plight into a lesson in humility and mercy demonstrates the depth of his pastoral concern, both for a former adversary and for his audience.

Translated from PG 52,391–6.

TEXT

391 A homily on Eutropius – eunuch, patrician and consul.

It is always opportune – but particularly at this moment – to say: ‘Vanity of vanities, and all is vanity’ (Eccl. 1:2). Where now are the splendid trappings of the consulship? Where are the gleaming torches? Where are the outbursts of applause and the choruses and the festivities and the public holidays? Where are the crowns and banners? Where are the uproar of the city and the
acclamations during the chariot-races and the flattering comments of the spectators? They've all gone. A blast of wind has blown away the leaves and revealed the tree to us — naked and shaken to its very root at this moment. For such has been the impact of the wind that it's even threatening to pull the tree up by the roots and to shake its fibres violently.

Where now are those who posed as friends? Where are the drinking parties\(^1\) and the dinners? Where's the swarm of hangers-on, and the undiluted wine\(^2\) that filled glasses all day long, and the varied arts of the chefs, and the cultivators of power who would do and say anything to please him? They were all night and a dream and, when day came, they vanished. They were all spring flowers and, when spring passed, they all withered. They were a shadow and melted away. They were smoke\(^3\) and dispersed. They were bubbles and burst. They were a spider's web and have been torn to shreds. That's why we're chanting this spiritual maxim, saying over and over: 'Vanity of vanities, and all is vanity'. For this maxim should be inscribed permanently on walls and on clothing and in the market-place and in the home and in streets and on doors and in foyers and, above all, in each person's conscience; and it should be studied constantly. Since fraudulent matters and masks and acting are thought to be true by the majority, each of you should address this to your neighbour and in turn hear it from your neighbour at dinner, at lunch and in assemblies every day: 'Vanity of vanities; all is vanity'.

Haven't I said to you constantly that wealth is a runaway slave? But you wouldn't put up with us. Didn't I say that it's an ungrateful servant? But you didn't want to be convinced. Look! Concrete experience has shown that wealth isn't just a runaway slave or an ingrate, but even a murderer — it's responsible for your current trembling and terror. When you objected every time that I spoke the truth, didn't I say to you: 'I love you more than those who flatter you. When I criticise, I care more for you than those who aim to please'? Didn't I say in addition to these words that 'wounds inflicted by friends are more trustworthy than the willing kisses of enemies' (Prov. 27:6)? If you had put up with my wounds, their kisses wouldn't have spawned for you this death; for my wounds result in good health. Their kisses, on the other hand, laid the foundation for an incurable disease.

Where now are the wine-pourers? Where are the people who cleared a path in the market-place and sang your praises
countless times in front of everybody. Because of your struggle they’ve fled; they’ve denied their friendship; they’re contriving safety for themselves. But we’re not like them. On the contrary, while you vented your displeasure we didn’t leap away; and now that you’ve fallen we’re protecting you and taking care of your needs. Indeed, the church that you made war against has opened its arms and taken you in, while the theatres on which you lavished care and on whose behalf you were often angry with us have betrayed and destroyed you. Yet even so we didn’t stop saying over and over: ‘Why do you do these things? You make frenzied attacks on the church, and yet you’re carrying yourself over a cliff.’ But you ignored everything. The chariot-races, too, once they had exhausted your wealth, sharpened their sword; while the church, despite enjoying your untimely rage, runs around in every direction in a desire to snatch you out of their nets.

I’m saying these things at this point, not in order to trample upon someone who’s lying down, but out of a desire to make safer those who are standing; not in order to rip open again the sores of the wounded, but with the intention of preserving in secure health those who haven’t yet been wounded; not in order to drown someone who is being tossed about by the waves, but to teach those sailing with a fair wind how not to end up at the bottom of the deep. How might this come about? – if we bear in mind the changeability of human affairs. I mean that, if this person had been afraid of change, he wouldn’t have experienced change. Instead, since he didn’t improve either of his own accord or on the advice of others, you, who pride yourselves on your wealth, are at any rate profiting from this man’s disaster. For nothing is more trifling than human affairs. For that reason, whatever label one might attach to their inconsequentiality – whether one calls them ‘smoke’ or ‘chaff’ or ‘a dream’ or ‘spring flowers’ or anything at all – it would express less than the truth. They’re so perishable and are more worthless than things that have no value at all. It’s clear from this that they have much of the precipitous about them in addition to being worthless.

After all, who was loftier than this man? Didn’t he surpass all the world in wealth? Didn’t he ascend to the pinnacles of the honours? Didn’t everyone tremble before him and fear him? Yet, see! He has become more wretched even than prisoners, more miserable even than servants, more needy even than
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beggars who are wasting away with hunger. Each day he's gazing at sharpened swords and the pit and executioners and being led away to his death. Nor does he enjoy the memory of past pleasure, nor even perceive sunlight itself. On the contrary, in his enclosed space he's deprived of sight in the very middle of the day, as if he were in the densest night. Rather, however hard we try, we couldn't present in words the suffering which he's likely to be enduring as he expects with each hour that passes to be executed. But then, what need is there of words from us when his own affairs are clearly sketched out for us as on an icon? For when on the previous day they came after him from the emperor's palace with the intention of dragging him away by force and he fled towards the sacred vessels, his countenance — as even now — was for once no better than that of a corpse. His teeth were chattering, and his whole body was rattling and trembling, and his voice kept faltering, and his tongue was slack, and his appearance suggested that his heart had turned to stone.

I'm saying these things, not in order to reproach him nor trample upon his disaster, but out of a desire to soften your minds and induce them to pity and persuade them that what has happened is sufficient punishment. For there are many among us who are so inhuman that they nevertheless criticised us too because we received him in the sanctuary. I parade forth this man's suffering from a desire to soften their lack of compassion with my comments.

Tell me, beloved! Why are you annoyed? 'Because', you say, 'the man who fled to the church is a person who constantly warred against it.' So, then, we should glorify God on that account most of all — that God let him fall into such depths of necessity that he's come to know both the power and the generosity of the church. (He's learnt) its power from the enormous change in circumstance that he's undergone from his battles against it. (He's come to know) its generosity from the fact that the church he warred against is now putting forth its shield, and has taken him under its wings, and has set him in complete security. Nor has it borne any grudge for past injuries, but has opened its arms to him with much compassion. For this is more magnificent than any trophy; this is a manifest victory; this undermines pagans, this shames Jews too; this shows the church with a radiant face — that it spared its enemy when it took him captive and that, when everyone else overlooked him
in his isolation, it alone hid him beneath its veils\(^8\) like a compassionate mother, and stood up to the emperor's anger and popular rage and unbearable hatred. This is an adornment for its altar. 'What kind of an adornment is it', someone says, 'to have that accursed, greedy robber clinging to the altar?' Don't say that, since even the prostitute, who was exceedingly abominable and impure, touched the feet of Christ (cf. John 12:3); and what happened wasn't accounted to Jesus as a fault, but as a miracle and great anthem of praise.\(^9\) The point is that she who was unclean didn't harm him who is pure. Instead he who is pure and faultless rendered the accursed prostitute pure through the contact.

Don't bear a grudge, fellow!\(^{10}\) We're servants of him who was crucified and who says: 'Forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing' (Luke 23:34). 'But', someone says, 'he blocked flight here through documents and various laws.' But look, through experience he's learnt what he did and, through what he's done, is the very first to break the law. He has become a spectacle for the world and, though silent, from this experience utters words of advice to all: 'Don't do this kind of thing, in case you experience the same fate!' Through the disaster he's shown himself to be a teacher and the altar emits a great radiance — particularly fearsome at this moment — and shows by this that it holds the lion tied up. After all, in the case of an imperial icon too, considerable ornament occurs not just when the emperor is seated on the throne dressed in purple and wearing a diadem, but also when barbarians with their hands bound behind their backs are lying beneath the emperor's foot with their heads bowed.

Through your zeal and racing here together you are witnesses that no persuasive speeches were used. For today our theatre is magnificent and the assembly radiant and I see as great a crowd assembled here now as I saw at holy Easter. Though silent, he has summoned you all in this fashion, through his experiences uttering a voice louder than a trumpet. And you virgins deserted your chambers, and you women your women's quarters, and you men the market-place and all raced together to this spot to see human nature put on trial and the feebleness of worldly affairs exposed and that whorish face (the state of well-being that derives from acts of greed is such that it comes across as more deformed than any old crone with wrinkles) as if by a sponge wiped clean of its rouge and makeup by a change in

\(^8\) veils

\(^9\) great anthem of praise

\(^{10}\) Don't bear a grudge, fellow!
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circumstance — (a face) which yesterday or a few days ago beamed radiantly.

I say this because such is the strength of this misfortune: it has made him who was bright and illustrious above all appear rather paltry now. Were a rich person to enter, they would derive considerable benefit. For, when they saw the man who used to shake the entire world brought down from such a height and in straitened circumstances, and become more timid than a hare or a frog, and nailed to this column without bonds, and squeezed tight by fear instead of a chain, and filled with fear and trembling, they would check their arrogance, expunge their conceit, and depart, after reflecting upon human affairs in the philosophical way that they should. The scriptures express these thoughts through sayings and teach through experience that: *All flesh is grass, and all human glory is like a grass-flower. The grass withers and the flower falls off* (Isa. 40: 6, 7). For example: *They will quickly wither away like grass and will swiftly fall away like green herbs* (Ps. 37:2); or *His days are like smoke* (Ps. 102:3); and similar sayings. In turn, were a poor person to enter and look at this vision, they wouldn’t utterly despise themselves nor feel distress at their beggarly state. Instead, they would feel grateful that their poverty affords them a protected place, a wave-free harbour, a secure wall; and, on viewing these things, would choose over and over to remain where they are, rather than to have everything for a brief period and later be at risk of shedding their own blood.

Do you see how this man’s flight here affords no small benefit for both rich and poor, both lowly and lofty, both slaves and free? Do you see how each person receives medicine and departs from here after being treated by this sight alone? Have I softened your passion and cast out your anger? Have I quenched your inhumanity? Have I drawn you into sympathy? I very much think so — the faces indicate it and the fountains of tears. Come, then, let’s now prostrate ourselves before the emperor, seeing that for you the rock has become deep soil and the land fertile (cf. Matt. 13:1—8), and we have also sprouted the fruit of charity and shown that the stalks of sympathy are ripe. Rather, let’s ask God, who loves humankind, to soften the rage of the emperor and make his heart gentle so that he’ll grant our favour in its entirety. Already there has been no small change since the day on which this person fled here. For,
once he knew that he had run to this inviolate place, in the army’s presence, while it was growing inflamed at this person’s misdeeds and was demanding him for slaughter, the emperor made a long speech and quashed the soldiers’ rage. He invited them to consider not just this person’s failings but, if he had any virtue, to take this into consideration too; and he professed himself thankful for the latter, while he pardoned the characteristics that were of contrary character as failings that were human. But when they were inclined again towards revenge for the insult to the emperor and were shouting, jumping, baying for death, and shaking their spears, from that point on he let fountains of tears fall from his most gentle eyes and reminded them of the holy table to which he’d fled, and in this way put an end to their anger.

Even so, let’s also add our own advice. For what pardon would you deserve if you, who’ve experienced nothing of the kind, were to display such vehement anger, when the emperor who’s been insulted bears no grudge? How will you touch the mysteries, when this spectacle is finished, and say that prayer through which we’re commanded to say: ‘Forgive us, just as we too forgive those who are in debt to us’ (Luke 11:4), when you’re demanding a penalty from the one who’s in debt to you? Did he wrong you greatly and insult you? There’s nothing we can say in reply. No, at the moment it isn’t the time for a lawcourt, but for mercy. It isn’t the time for demanding an account, but for generosity, not for interrogation but for concession, not for a ballot and penalty, but for pity and grace. So then, let no-one get heated or become upset, but rather let’s ask God, who loves humankind, to grant this person an extension of life and snatch away the threatened slaughter so that he might shed his misdeeds. Let’s also approach the generous emperor and plead that, for the sake of the church, for the sake of the altar, he favour the sacred table in respect of this one man. If we do this, both the emperor himself will approve and God, before the emperor even, will applaud and will give us in return a considerable reward for our generosity. I mean that in the same way as God hates and turns away a person who’s cruel and inhumane, he admits and loves a person who’s merciful and generous. Whether such a person is righteous, he weaves them crowns that are more radiant; whether a sinner, he bypasses their sins and gives them in return this reward for their sympathy towards their fellow slave. ‘For I want pity’, it says, ‘and not sacrifice’
(Hos. 6:6); and everywhere in the scriptures you see him constantly seeking this and saying that this deliverance from sins exists.

By this means, then, shall we too render him merciful, in this way shall we discharge our misdeeds, in this way shall we adorn the church. In this way too the generous emperor will approve, as I said a moment ago, and the entire populace will applaud, and the ends of the earth will marvel at the humanity and gentleness of the city and, when they learn what’s happened, people all over the world will cry out our name. So that we may enjoy such blessings, then, let’s prostrate ourselves, let’s plead, let’s request, let’s snatch from danger the captive, the fugitive, the supplicant, so that we too may attain the blessings that are to come, through the grace and love for humankind of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory and the power now and always, for ever and ever. Amen.
ON: ‘I OPPOSED HIM TO HIS FACE’
(GAL. 2:11)

INTRODUCTION

In the brief extract from this homily we observe the tension which existed at one point in John’s life at Antioch between the need to serve his own congregation in the Old Church as preacher and the demands of his bishop. As we learn from the title and John’s opening comments, Flavian had recently required John’s presence at another church at the same time that he would ordinarily have been preaching before his regular audience. Being replaced by a locum in such a situation was always risky in case a preacher was outshone and the audience transferred its attention and loyalties. In the opening to the homily John gives rein to two of his favourite metaphors – the language of hospitality and of providing a lavish feast in the sermon that is dished up, and the language of navigation. The simile of the relationship between mother and infant is also typical. The New Church of the title is most probably the Great Church, called more familiarly ‘new’ because of its location in the new quarter of the city, the area which contained the palace and hippodrome and which occupied the island in the Orontes. The date of the homily cannot be determined.


TEXT

371-2 At the previous service he celebrated with the bishop in the New Church. He delivered this homily in the Old Church on the pericope of the apostle: ‘When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face’ (Gal. 2:11), and showed that the event was not an opposition, but happened according to the divine plan.