

John 1:1, St John Chrysostom

Were John about to converse with us, and to say to us words of his own, we needs must describe his family, his country, and his education. But since it is not he, but God by him, that speaks to mankind, it seems to me superfluous and distracting to enquire into these matters. And yet even thus it is not superfluous, but even very necessary. For when you have learned who he was, and from whence, who his parents, and what his character, and then hear his voice and all his heavenly wisdom, then you shall know right well that these (doctrines) belong not to him, but to the Divine power stirring his soul. From what country then was he? From no country; but from a poor village, and from a land little esteemed, and producing no good thing. For the Scribes speak evil of Galilee, saying, Search and look, for out of Galilee arises no prophet. John 7:52 And the Israelite indeed speaks ill of it, saying, Can any good thing come out of Nazareth? And being of this land, he was not even of any remarkable place in it, but of one not even distinguished by name. Of this he was, and his father a poor fisherman, so poor that he took his sons to the same employment. Now you all know that no workman will choose to bring up his son to succeed him in his trade, unless poverty press him very hard, especially where the trade is a mean one. But nothing can be poorer, meaner, no, nor more ignorant, than fishermen. Yet even among them there are some greater, some less; and even there our Apostle occupied the lower rank, for he did not take his prey from the sea, but passed his time on a certain little lake. And as he was engaged by it with his father and his brother James, and they mending their broken nets, a thing which of itself marked extreme poverty, so Christ called him. As for worldly instruction, we may learn from these facts that he had none at all of it. Besides, Luke testifies this when he writes not only that he was ignorant, but that he was absolutely unlettered. Acts 4:13 As was likely. For one who was so poor, never coming into the public assemblies, nor falling in with men of respectability, but as it were nailed to his fishing, or even if he ever did meet any one, conversing with fishmongers and cooks, how, I say, was he likely to be in a state better than that of the irrational animals? How could he help imitating the very dumbness of his fishes?

2. This fisherman then, whose business was about lakes, and nets, and fish; this native of Bethsaida of Galilee; this son of a poor fisherman, yes, and poor to the last degree; this man ignorant, and to the last degree of ignorance too, who

never learned letters either before or after he accompanied Christ; let us see what he utters, and on what matters he converses with us. Is it of things in the field? Is it of things in rivers? On the trade in fish? For these things, perhaps, one expects to hear from a fisherman. But fear not; we shall hear nought of these; but we shall hear of things in heaven, and what no one ever learned before this man. For, as might be expected of one who speaks from the very treasures of the Spirit, he has come bringing to us sublime doctrines, and the best way of life and wisdom, [as though just arrived from the very heavens; yea, rather such as it was not likely that all even there should know, as I said before.] Do these things belong to a fisherman? Tell me. Do they belong to a rhetorician at all? To a sophist or philosopher? To every one trained in the wisdom of the Gentiles? By no means. The human soul is simply unable thus to philosophize on that pure and blessed nature; on the powers that come next to it; on immortality and endless life; on the nature of mortal bodies which shall hereafter be immortal; on punishment and the judgment to come; on the enquiries that shall be as to deeds and words, as to thoughts and imaginations. It cannot tell what is man, what the world; what is man indeed, and what he who seems to be man, but is not; what is the nature of virtue, what of vice.

3. Some of these things indeed the disciples of Plato and Pythagoras enquired into. Of the other philosophers we need make no mention at all; they have all on this point been so excessively ridiculous; and those who have been among them in greater esteem than the rest, and who have been considered the leading men in this science, are so more than the others; and they have composed and written somewhat on the subject of polity and doctrines, and in all have been more shamefully ridiculous than children. For they have spent their whole life in making women common to all, in overthrowing the very order of life, in doing away the honor of marriage, and in making other the like ridiculous laws. As for doctrines on the soul, there is nothing excessively shameful that they have left unsaid; asserting that the souls of men become flies, and gnats, and bushes, and that God Himself is a soul; with some other the like indecencies. And not this alone in them is worthy of blame, but so is also their ever-shifting current of words; for since they assert everything on uncertain and fallacious arguments, they are like men carried here and there in Euripus, and never remain in the same place. Not so this fisherman; for all he says is infallible; and standing as it were upon a rock, he never shifts his ground. For since he has been thought worthy to be in the most secret places, and has the Lord of all speaking within him, he is subject to nothing that is

human. But they, like persons who are not held worthy even in a dream to set foot in the king's palace, but who pass their time in the forum with other men, guessing from their own imagination at what they cannot see, have erred a great error, and, like blind or drunken men in their wandering, have dashed against each other; and not only against each other, but against themselves, by continually changing their opinion, and that ever on the same matters.

4. But this unlettered man, the ignorant, the native of Bethsaida, the son of Zebedee, (though the Greeks mock ten thousand times at the rusticity of the names, I shall not the less speak them with the greater boldness.) For the more barbarous his nation seems to them, and the more he seems removed from Grecian discipline, so much the brighter does what we have with us appear. For when a barbarian and an untaught person utters things which no man on earth ever knew, and does not only utter, (though if this were the only thing it were a great marvel,) but besides this, affords another and a stronger proof that what he says is divinely inspired, namely, the convincing all his hearers through all time; who will not wonder at the power that dwells in him? Since this is, as I said, the strongest proof that he lays down no laws of his own. This barbarian then, with his writing of the Gospel, has occupied all the habitable world. With his body he has taken possession of the center of Asia, where of old philosophized all of the Grecian party, shining forth in the midst of his foes, dispersing their darkness, and breaking down the stronghold of devils: but in soul he has retired to that place which is fit for one who has done such things.

5. And as for the writings of the Greeks, they are all put out and vanished, but this man's shine brighter day by day. For from the time that he (was) and the other fishermen, since then the (doctrines) of Pythagoras and of Plato, which seemed before to prevail, have ceased to be spoken of, and most men do not know them even by name. Yet Plato was, they say, the invited companion of kings, had many friends, and sailed to Sicily. And Pythagoras occupied Magna Graecia, and practiced there ten thousand kinds of sorcery. For to converse with oxen, (which they say he did,) was nothing else but a piece of sorcery. As is most clear from this. He that so conversed with brutes did not in anything benefit the race of men, but even did them the greatest wrong. Yet surely, the nature of men was better adapted for the reasoning of philosophy; still he did, as they say, converse with eagles and oxen, using sorceries. For he did not make their irrational nature rational, (this was impossible to man,) but by his magic tricks he deceived the foolish. And neglecting to teach men anything useful, he taught that they might as well eat the heads of

those who begot them, as beans. And he persuaded those who associated with him, that the soul of their teacher had actually been at one time a bush, at another a girl, at another a fish. Are not these things with good cause extinct, and vanished utterly? With good cause, and reasonably. But not so the words of him who was ignorant and unlettered; for Syrians, and Egyptians, and Indians, and Persians, and Ethiopians, and ten thousand other nations, translating into their own tongues the doctrines introduced by him, barbarians though they be, have learned to philosophize. I did not therefore idly say that all the world has become his theater. For he did not leave those of his own kind, and waste his labor on the irrational creatures, (an act of excessive vainglory and extreme folly,) but being clear of this as well as of other passions, he was earnest on one point only, that all the world might learn somewhat of the things which might profit it, and be able to translate it from earth to heaven. For this reason too, he did not hide his teaching in mist and darkness, as they did who threw obscurity of speech, like a kind of veil, around the mischiefs laid up within. But this man's doctrines are clearer than the sunbeams, wherefore they have been unfolded to all men throughout the world. For he did not teach as Pythagoras did, commanding those who came to him to be silent for five years, or to sit like senseless stones; neither did he invent fables defining the universe to consist of numbers; but casting away all this devilish trash and mischief, he diffused such simplicity through his words, that all he said was plain, not only to wise men, but also to women and youths. For he was persuaded that the words were true and profitable to all that should hearken to them. And all time after him is his witness; since he has drawn to him all the world, and has freed our life when we have listened to these words from all monstrous display of wisdom; wherefore we who hear them would prefer rather to give up our lives, than the doctrines by him delivered to us.

6. From this then, and from every other circumstance, it is plain, that nothing of this man's is human, but divine and heavenly are the lessons which come to us by this divine soul. For we shall observe not sounding sentences, nor magnificent diction, nor excessive and useless order and arrangement of words and sentences, (these things are far from all true wisdom,) but strength invincible and divine, and irresistible force of right doctrines, and a rich supply of unnumbered good things. For their over-care about expression was so excessive, so worthy of mere sophists, or rather not even of sophists, but of silly striplings, that even their own chief philosopher introduces his own master as greatly ashamed of this art, and as saying to the judges, that what they hear from him shall be spoken plainly and without

premeditation, not tricked out rhetorically nor ornamented with (fine) sentences and words; since, says he, it cannot surely be becoming, O men, that one at my age should come before you like a lad inventing speeches. And observe the extreme absurdity of the thing; what he has described his master avoiding as disgraceful, unworthy of philosophy and work for lads, this above all he himself has cultivated. So entirely were they given up to mere love of distinction. And as, if you uncover those sepulchers which are whitened without you will find them full of corruption, and stench, and rotten bones; so too the doctrines of the philosopher, if you strip them of their flowery diction, you will see to be full of much abomination, especially when he philosophizes on the soul, which he both honors and speaks ill of without measure. And this is the snare of the devil, never to keep due proportion, but by excess on either hand to lead aside those who are entangled by it into evil speaking. At one time he says, that the soul is of the substance of God; at another, after having exalted it thus immoderately and impiously, he exceeds again in a different way, and treats it with insult, making it pass into swine and asses, and other animals of yet less esteem than these. But enough of this; or rather even this is out of measure. For if it were possible to learn anything profitable from these things, we must have been longer occupied with them; but if it be only to observe their indecency and absurdity, more than requisite has been said by us already. We will therefore leave their fables, and attach ourselves to our own doctrines, which have been brought to us from above by the tongue of this fisherman, and which have nothing human in them.

7. Let us then bring forward the words, having reminded you now, as I exhorted you at the first, earnestly to attend to what is said. What then does this Evangelist say immediately on his outset? In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God. John 1:1 Do you see the great boldness and power of the words, how he speaks nothing doubting nor conjecturing, but declaring all things plainly? For this is the teacher's part, not to waver in anything he says, since if he who is to be a guide to the rest require another person who shall be able to establish him with certainty, he would be rightly ranked not among teachers, but among disciples. But if any one say, What can be the reason that he has neglected the first cause, and spoken to us at once concerning the second? we shall decline to speak of first and second, for the Divinity is above number, and the succession of times. Wherefore we decline these expressions; but we confess that the Father is from none, and that the Son is begotten of the Father. Yes, it may be said, but why then does he leave the Father, and speak concerning the Son? Why? Because the

former was manifest to all, if not as Father, at least as God; but the Only-Begotten was not known; and therefore with reason did he immediately from the very beginning hasten to implant the knowledge of Him in those who knew Him not. Besides, he has not been silent as to the Father in his writings on these points. And observe, I beg of you, his spiritual wisdom. He knows that men most honor the eldest of beings which was before all, and account this to be God. Wherefore from this point first he makes his beginning, and as he advances, declares that God is, and does not like Plato assert, sometimes that He is intellect, sometimes that He is soul; for these things are far removed from that divine and unmixed Nature which has nothing common with us, but is separated from any fellowship with created things, I mean as to substance, though not as to relation. And for this reason he calls Him The Word. For since he is about to teach that this Word is the only-begotten Son of God, in order that no one may imagine that His generation is passible, by giving Him the appellation of The Word, he anticipates and removes beforehand the evil suspicion, showing that the Son is from the Father, and that without His suffering (change).

8. Do you see then that as I said, he has not been silent as to the Father in his words concerning the Son? And if these instances are not sufficient fully to explain the whole matter, marvel not, for our argument is God, whom it is impossible to describe, or to imagine worthily; hence this man nowhere assigns the name of His essence, (for it is not possible to say what God is, as to essence,) but everywhere he declares Him to us by His workings. For this Word one may see shortly after called Light, and the Light in turn named Life. Although not for this reason only did he so name Him; this was the first reason, and the second was because He was about to declare to us the things of the Father. For all things, He says, that I have heard from my Father, I have made known unto you. John 15:15 He calls Him both Light and Life, for He has freely given to us the light which proceeds from knowledge, and the life which follows it. In short, one name is not sufficient, nor two, nor three, nor more, to teach us what belongs to God. But we must be content to be able even by means of many to apprehend, though but obscurely, His attributes. And he has not called Him simply Word, but with the addition of the article, distinguishing Him from the rest in this way also. Do you see then that I said not without cause that this Evangelist speaks to us from heaven? Only see from the very beginning whither he has drawn up the soul, having given it wings, and has carried up with him the mind of his hearers. For having set it higher than all the things of sense, than earth, than sea, than heaven, he leads it by the hand above the very angels,

above cherubim and seraphim, above thrones and principalities and powers; in a word, persuades it to journey beyond all created things.

9. What then? When he has brought us to such a height as this, is he in truth able to stop us there? By no means; but just as one by transporting into the midst of the sea a person who was standing on the beach, and looking on cities, and beaches, and havens, removes him indeed from the former objects, yet does not stay his sight anywhere, but brings him to a view without bound; so this Evangelist, having brought us above all creation, and escorted us towards the eternal periods which lie beyond it, leaves the sight suspended, not allowing it to arrive at any limit upwards, as indeed there is none. For the intellect, having ascended to the beginning, enquires what beginning; and then finding the was always outstripping its imagination, has no point at which to stay its thought; but looking intently onwards, and being unable to cease at any point, it becomes wearied out, and turns back to things below. For this was in the beginning, is nothing else than expressive of ever being and being infinitely. Do you see true philosophy and divine doctrines? Not like those of the Greeks, who assign times, and say that some indeed of the gods are younger, some elder. There is nothing of this with us. For if God Is, as certainly He Is, then nothing was before Him. If He is Creator of all things, He must be first; if Master and Lord of all, then all, both creatures and ages, are after Him.

10. I had desired to enter the lists yet on other difficulties, but perhaps our minds are wearied out; when therefore I have advised you on those points which are useful to us for the hearing, both of what has been said, and of what is yet to be said, I again will hold my peace. What then are these points? I know that many have become confused by reason of the length of what has been spoken. Now this takes place when the soul is heavy laden with many burdens of this life. For as the eye when it is clear and transparent is keen-sighted also, and will not easily be tired in making out even the minutest bodies; but when from some bad humor from the head having poured into it, or some smoke-like fumes having ascended to it from beneath, a kind of thick cloud is formed before the ball, this does not allow it clearly to perceive even any larger object; so is naturally the case with the soul. For when it is purified, and has no passion to disturb it, it looks steadfastly to the fit objects of its regard; but when, darkened by many passions, it loses its proper excellence, then it is not easily able to be sufficient for any high thing, but soon is wearied, and falls back; and turning aside to sleep and sloth, lets pass things that concern it with a view to excellence and the life thence arising, instead of receiving

them with much readiness. And that you may not suffer this, (I shall not cease continually thus to warn you,) strengthen your minds, that you may not hear what the faithful among the Hebrews heard from Paul. For to them he said that he had many things to say, and hard to be uttered Hebrews 5:11; not as though they were by nature such, but because, says he, you are dull of hearing. For it is the nature of the weak and infirm man to be confused even by few words as by many, and what is clear and easy he thinks hard to be comprehended. Let not any here be such an one, but having chased from him all worldly care, so let him hear these doctrines. For when the desire of money possesses the hearer, the desire of hearing cannot possess him as well; since the soul, being one, cannot suffice for many desires; but one of the two is injured by the other, and, from division, becomes weaker as its rival prevails, and expends all upon itself. And this is wont to happen in the case of children. When a man has only one, he loves that one exceedingly. But when he has become father of many, then also his dispositions of affection being divided become weaker. If this happens where there is the absolute rule and power of nature, and the objects beloved are akin one with another, what can we say as to that desire and disposition which is according to deliberate choice; especially where these desires lie directly opposed to each other; for the love of wealth is a thing opposed to the love of this kind of hearing. We enter heaven when we enter here; not in place, I mean, but in disposition; for it is possible for one who is on earth to stand in heaven, and to have vision of the things that are there, and to hear the words from thence.

11. Let none then introduce the things of earth into heaven; let no one standing here be careful about what is at his house. For he ought to bear with him, and to preserve both at home and in his business, what he gains from this place, not to allow it to be loaded with the burdens of house and market. Our reason for entering in to the chair of instruction is, that thence we may cleanse ourselves from the filth of the outer world; but if we are likely even in this little space to be injured by things said or done without, it is better for us not to enter at all. Let no one then in the assembly be thinking about domestic matters, but let him at home be stirring with what he heard in the assembly. Let these things be more precious to us than any. These concern the soul, but those the body; or rather what is said here concerns both body and soul. Wherefore let these things be our leading business, and all others but occasional employments; for these belong both to the future and the present life, but the rest neither to the one nor the other, unless they be managed according to the law laid down for these. Since from these it is

impossible to learn not only what we shall hereafter be, and how we shall then live, but how we shall rightly direct this present life also. For this house is a spiritual surgery, that whatever wounds we may have received without, here we may heal, not that we may gather fresh ones to take with us hence. Yet if we do not give heed to the Spirit speaking to us, we shall not only fail to clear ourselves of our former hurts, but shall get others in addition. Let us then with much earnestness attend to the book as it is being unfolded to us; since if we learn exactly its first principles and fundamental doctrines, we shall not afterwards require much close study, but after laboring a little at the beginning, shall be able, as Paul says, to instruct others also. Romans 15:14 For this Apostle is very sublime, abounding in many doctrines, and on these he dwells more than on other matters. Let us not then be careless hearers. And this is the reason why we set them forth to you little by little, so that all may be easily intelligible to you, and may not escape your memory. Let us fear then lest we come under the condemnation of that word which says, If I had not come and spoken unto them, they had not had sin. John 15:22 For what shall we be profited more than those who have not heard, if even after hearing we go our way home bearing nothing with us, but only wondering at what has been said. Allow us then to sow in good ground; allow us, that you may draw us the more to you. If any man has thorns, let him cast the fire of the Spirit among them. If any has a hard and stubborn heart, let him by employing the same fire make it soft and yielding. If any by the wayside is trodden down by all kind of thoughts, let him enter into more sheltered places, and not lie exposed for those that will to invade for plunder: that so we may see your cornfields waving with grain. Besides, if we exercise such care as this over ourselves, and apply ourselves industriously to this spiritual hearing, if not at once yet by degrees, we shall surely be freed from all the cares of life. Let us therefore take heed that it be not said of us, that our ears are those of a deaf adder. Psalm 58:4 For tell me, in what does a hearer of this kind differ from a beast? And how could he be otherwise than more irrational than any irrational animal, who does not attend when God is speaking? And if to be well-pleasing to God is really to be a man, what else but a beast can he be who will not even hear how he may succeed in this? Consider then what a misfortune it would be for us to fall down of our own accord from (the nature of) men to (that of) beasts, when Christ is willing of men to make us equal to angels. For to serve the belly, to be possessed by the desire of riches, to be given to anger, to bite, to kick, become not men, but beasts. Nay, even the beasts have each, as one may say, one single passion, and that by nature. But man, when he has cast away the dominion of reason, and torn himself

from the commonwealth of God's devising, gives himself up to all the passions, is no longer merely a beast, but a kind of many-formed motley monster; nor has he even the excuse from nature, for all his wickedness proceeds from deliberate choice and determination. May we never have cause to suspect this of the Church of Christ. Indeed, we are concerning you persuaded of better things, and such as belong to salvation; but the more we are so persuaded, the more careful we will be not to desist from words of caution. In order that having mounted to the summit of excellencies, we may obtain the promised goods. Which may it come to pass that we all attain to, through the grace and lovingkindness of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom and with whom, to the Father and the Holy Ghost, be glory world without end. Amen.