



In late antiquity, the notion of friendship with God was virtually unheard-of outside of Christian contexts, and even in Christian circles, the entrenched concept of God's transcendence inhibited a robust theology of friendship with God. Friendship with God is, however, a prominent image in John Chrysostom's (c. 349-407) homiletical discourses. For Chrysostom, 'friendship with God' is intensely personal and relational, rooted in God's condescension to seek us through the incarnation, interweaves us into God's own intra-trinitarian friendship and results in our love for the least of these, the strangers, etc., as our expression of friendship with God.

John Chrysostom on Friendship with God

Scholars recognise that John Chrysostom's soteriology has a clear personal emphasis. Young, for example, says that Chrysostom expresses salvation "in parables of personal relationships" (151). One of the gifts of grace is defined by Chrysostom as "friendship with God", often mentioned together with the gift of adoptive sonship.

For He has granted you great confidence [παρρησίας], He has enrolled you in the front ranks of His friends [καὶ εἰς τοὺς πρώτους τῶν φίλων ἐγγράψας], and has received into the adoption of sons [καὶ εἰς τὴν υἰοθεσίαν ἀναγαγών] you who were formerly captives and slaves with no right to speak out.¹

Friendship and sonship are for Chrysostom not just titles of honor, referring in a mere juridical way to a changed status before God, but are indications of an intimate divine-human fellowship. While discussing what it means to 'put on Christ', he uses a lively image of a close friendship relation:

For this is what putting on Christ means. It means never to be taken away from him; (...) So it is, too, in the case of friends that we say: "So-and-so is all wrapped up in So-and-so." And what we mean by this is their great love for each other and their constant companionship.

[Οὕτω καὶ ἐπὶ φίλων λέγομεν, Ὁ δεῖνα τὸν δεῖνα ἐνεδύσατο, τὴν πολλὴν ἀγάπην λέγοντες καὶ τὴν ἀδιάλειπτον συνουσίαν]

For he who is wrapped up seems to be the one in whom he is wrapped up

[ὁ γὰρ ἐνδυσάμενος, ἐκεῖνο φαίνεται, ὅπερ ἐνδέδυται].

Therefore, let Christ be seen in every part of us

[Φαινέσθω τοίνυν πάντοθεν ἐν ἡμῖν ὁ Χριστός].²

Friendship is thus another way for Chrysostom to give expression to the Scriptural notions of divine-human fellowship like union with God in Christ, abiding in Christ, putting on Christ, of which the basis lies in Christ's condescension (*συγκατάβασις*) through the Incarnation:

² *Hom. in Rom. 24.40*, transl. by Fr. Panayiotis Papageorgiou, *Commentary of Our Father among the Saints John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans. A Modern Translation*. Holy Cross Orthodox Press (pending publication).

"For Christ wishes our soul to be a dwelling for himself; he wishes to surround us as a garment, so that he may be all things to us, inside and out. (...) He is our home and dwells in it with us. "He abides in me and I in him." [John 15:5] He is our friend. "For you are my friends." [John 15:4] (...) What is there which Christ does not wish to be to us? He joins and fastens us to himself in every way [παντὶ τρόπῳ συγκολλῶν καὶ συνάπτων ἡμᾶς]. For this is a mark of love [φιλοῦντός] which is exceedingly deep."³

Chrysostom's theological understanding of *συγκατάβασις* is a hermeneutical key permeating all his works (cf. Rylaarsdam, 2000). This key allows him to explore ideas that are (to the ancient world) remarkable. He clearly calls God, through Christ, the Initiator/leading actor of this friendship relation,

"He desires and earnestly endeavors to obtain our friendship

[καὶ ἀπειρώς ἐπιθυμεῖ καὶ σπουδάζει τῆς ἡμετέρας φιλίας τυχεῖν]."⁴

This is remarkable since Chrysostom, – given friendship between non-equals within the classical system of patronage –, was used to the idea of the client pursuing the friendship of his patron, rather than the other way around.⁵

³ *Hom. in Rom 24.15-17*; Transl. *ibid.*; cf. *Cat. 1*.

⁴ *Hom. in Hebr. 23*, transl. *NPNF-series*, vol. 14. Cf. *Hom in Jo. 77*.

⁵ M. Sherwin, "Friends at the Table of the Lord. Friendship with God and the Transformation of

¹ *Catecheses ad illuminandos 2.29*; Transl. *Ancient Christian Writers 31*.

One of the general principles in the classical notion of friendship between human beings was the absence of 'mine' and 'thine'; friends considered everything as common goods. While Chrysostom recalls this principle, he even goes beyond it by saying that a genuine friend

"wishes rather to bestow a favor than to receive one, for he loves, and is so affected, as not having satisfied his desire. He is not so much gratified when good is done to him, as when he is doing good. For he wishes both to bestow favors, and not to seem to bestow them, but himself to be the debtor."⁶

Genuine friendship, according to Chrysostom, is thus more than just a relationship characterized by the formal obligation of mutual exchange of services. A real friend even desires to be a debtor to his friend. This is how God approaches human beings.⁷

In this sense, friendship with God, where the believer sees God as his Friend and acts according to the principles just mentioned, seems to be a strange and impossible idea.⁸ However, Chrysostom says "if you wish to have God as your constant friend [Ὡ εἰ βούλει φίλον αὐτὸν ἔχειν διηνεκῶς], make him

Patronage in the Thought of John Chrysostom," in *New Blackfriars* 85 (2004): 393-394.

⁶ *Hom. in 1 Thess. 2*, transl. *NPNF-series*, vol. 13.

⁷ For the idea of God wishing to become a Debtor (ὀφειλέτης) to the believer in Chrysostom see Brändle, *Matth. 25,31-46 im Werk des Johannes Chrysostomus*. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1979) p. 260-264.

⁸ According to Konstan the possibility of friendship between man and God was a novelty in late antique notions on friendship (and primarily occurring in Christian texts), contrary "to earlier ideals and practices from Homer down to the Hellenistic period and the early Roman empire". With regard to the Christian thought he remarks that "If friendship is available as a metaphor for a human being's relationship with God, it nevertheless involves a profound sense of one's distance from the divine." David Konstan, "Problems in the History of Christian Friendship," in *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 4 (1996) p.89 and 996.

your debtor for many loans."⁹ Entering into friendship with God is possible according to Chrysostom by imitating His approach of pursuing the friendship of those below (in other words, participating in divine condescension [συγκατάβασις]). These are the poor or in broader terms, the stranger¹⁰, because thereby Christ is invited at the believer's table, invited to bestow him/her with even more gracious benefits¹¹.

According to Brändle this is no cheap thought of repayment of man towards God but shows how Chrysostom is occupied with the great mystery of God's love and friendship towards man.¹² Being friends with God means being caught up "into the network of divine friendship"¹³ or as Chrysostom puts it himself in his homily on John 15:

"'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.' [John 15:12] Do you perceive that the love of God is interwoven with ours, like a kind of cord binding it together? That is why Christ at one time spoke of two commandments; at another, one. For it is not possible for him who is receptive to the love of God not to possess the other kind of love. (...)

If abiding with Him is the result of our love of Him, and our love of Him is manifested by keeping His commandments, and the commandment is that we love

⁹ *Hom. in Rom. 7,86*, transl. Papageorgiou, *ibid.*

¹⁰ Sherwin says that Chrysostom focuses on the Christian virtue of φιλοξενία as genuine, i.e. spiritual, friendship, and he proposes to translate this not with hospitality but "friendship toward the stranger". p. 397.

¹¹ *Hom in Col. 1; Hom in Thess. 11,5; Serm. In Gen. 8. Prov. 19.17* "Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and will be repaid in full."

¹² Brändle, *Matth. 25*, p. 262.

¹³ Sherwin, p. 397.

one another – therefore, our love for one another results in abiding in God."¹⁴

Chrysostom thus presents friendship with God as an indication of divine-human communion, as the sharing of the believer in the divine life. As such, we could say that Chrysostom even exhibits a surprisingly rich soteriology of deification.

Maria Verhoeff

Book notice:

Gie Vleugels, *De Oden van Salomo: uit het Syrisch vertaald en toegelicht*. Bronnen van spiritualiteit. Averbode: Altiora Averbode, 2010, 143 pp.

In issue 7 of RCECR (Jan. 9, 2007) the RCEC research project on the Odes of Solomon was announced. In October of 2010 Prof. Gie Vleugels published a fresh translation of this unique early Christian document in Dutch, with an introduction and explanatory notes, to provide Dutch readership with a firsthand witness of Christian devotion in the early post Apostolic era. See also his articles in previous reports: "The Odes of Solomon, a riddle and a key" (RCECR-7, 2008); "4 Editions of the Odes of Solomon: A Christian Hymnbook (~100 CE)" (RCECR-11, 2008); "Christ's descent into Sheol in the Odes of Solomon" (RCECR-13, 2008); "Preparing a concordance for the Odes of Solomon" (RCECR-19, 2009); "Benefits of preparing a concordance for an ancient document" (RCECR-21, 2010).

Gie Vleugels

¹⁴ *Hom in Jo. 77*, transl. *Fathers of the Church-series*, 41. John Chrysostom uses φιλία and ἀγάπη more or less interchangeably. It seems that he interprets Scriptural texts on ἀγάπη as the fulfillment of what the classical notion of φιλία was striving for.