



The Poor Parson

After the Prioress, already presented in this selection of Chaucer's pilgrims (→ T7), you are going to read about another member of the clergy.

Geoffrey Chaucer
The Canterbury Tales
(ca 1387-1400)
General Prologue

A holy-minded man of good renown¹
There was, and poor, the Parson to a town,
Yet he was rich in holy thought and work.
He also was a learned² man, a clerk,
5 Who truly knew Christ's Gospel³ and would preach⁴ it
Devoutly to parishioners⁵, and teach it.
Benign and wonderfully diligent,
And patient when adversity was sent
(For so he proved in much adversity)
10 He hated cursing to extort a fee⁶,
Nay rather he preferred beyond a doubt⁷
Giving to poor parishioners round about
Both from church offerings and his property;
He could in little find sufficiency⁸.
15 Wide was his parish, with houses far asunder⁹,
Yet he neglected not in rain or thunder,
In sickness or in grief¹⁰, to pay a call¹¹
On the remotest, whether great or small,
Upon his feet, and in his hand a stave¹².
20 This noble example to his sheep he gave
That first he wrought¹³, and afterwards he taught;
And it was from the Gospel he had caught
Those words, and he would add this figure too,
That if gold rust¹⁴, what then will iron do?
25 For if a priest be foul¹⁵ in whom we trust
No wonder that common man should rust;
And shame it is to see – let priests take stock¹⁶ –
A shitten shepherd and a snowy flock¹⁷.
The true example that a priest should give
30 Is one of cleanness, how the sheep should live.
He did not set his benefice to hire¹⁸
And leave his sheep encumbered in the mire¹⁹
Or run to London to earn easy bread
By singing masses for the wealthy dead,
35 Or find some Brotherhood²⁰ and get enrolled.
He stayed at home and watched over his fold²¹
So that no wolf should make the sheep miscarry²².
He was a shepherd and no mercenary.
Holy and virtuous he was, but then
40 Never contemptuous²³ of sinful men,
Never disdainful, never too proud or fine,
But was discreet in teaching and benign.
His business was to show a fair behaviour
And draw²⁴ men thus to Heaven and their Saviour,
45 Unless indeed a man were obstinate;
And such, whether of high or low estate,
He put to sharp rebuke²⁵, to say the least.
I think there never was a better priest.

- 1 **renown.** Fama.
- 2 **learned.** Istruito.
- 3 **Gospel.** Vangelo.
- 4 **would preach.** Predicava.
- 5 **parishioners.** Parrocchiani.
- 6 **fee.** Tassa, denaro.
- 7 **beyond a doubt.** Al di là di ogni dubbio.
- 8 **He could in little find sufficiency.** A lui bastava poco.
- 9 **far asunder.** Lontane le une dalle altre.
- 10 **In sickness or in grief.** Nella malattia o nel dolore.
- 11 **to pay a call.** Di fare una visita.
- 12 **stave.** Bastone.
- 13 **wrought.** Lett.: operava, lavorava; qui: dava l'esempio.
- 14 **rust.** Rusts: arrugginisce.
- 15 **foul.** Cattivo, corrotto.
- 16 **let priests take stock.** Che i preti ci pensino.
- 17 **A shitten ... flock.** Un pastore sporco ed un gregge pulito.
- 18 **He ... hire.** Lui non dava in affitto la sua prebenda.
- 19 **encumbered in the mire.** Costretto a muoversi faticosamente nel fango (*metafora per: peccato*).
- 20 **Brotherhood.** Confraternita.
- 21 **fold.** Gregge.
- 22 **miscarry.** Smarrirsi.
- 23 **contemptuous.** Sprezzante.
- 24 **draw.** Condurre.
- 25 **He ... rebuke.** Lo rimproverava aspramente.



50 He sought²⁶ no pomp or glory in his dealings,
No scrupulosity had spiced his feelings.
Christ and His Twelve Apostles and their lore²⁷
He taught, but followed it himself before.

26 sought. Cercava.

27 lore. Il sapere.

LITERARY COMPETENCE

> VOCABULARY

1 READ the text and match the highlighted words with their Italian translation.

- | | |
|-------------------------|---------------------|
| 1 arrugginire | 7 imprecare |
| 2 trascurava | 8 peccatori |
| 3 sdegnoso | 9 pastore |
| 4 vergogna | 10 parrocchia |
| 5 iscritto | 11 rapporti |
| 6 abbiamo fiducia | 12 a dir poco |

> COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT

2 READ the text again and answer the following questions.

- 1 What kind of life did the Parson lead? Was it a life of contemplation?
- 2 How did he travel about?
- 3 How did he teach Christianity?
- 4 Why did many priests go to London? Did he go as well?
- 5 How did he treat his parishioners?

> COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT

3 READ again from lines 1 to 14. Point out the adjectives used by Chaucer to introduce the Parson. What aspects of the character do they stress most?

4 EXPLAIN what kind of convergence is referred to in line 3.

5 READ again from lines 15 to 20.

- 1 Chaucer, who usually devotes many lines to the description of his characters' outfit, just gives one detail about the Parson. What is it?
- 2 How do you think the Parson used it? Tick as appropriate.
☐ As a symbol of his mission.
☐ As a real object to lean upon.

6 DEFINE the tone of the description in these lines.

- A Idealised.
- B Humorous.
- C Ironical.
- D Realistic.



7 READ again from lines 22 to 37. Line 24 contains a metaphor, that is an implicit comparison in which the qualities of a thing are applied to the other (usually from concrete to abstract). This metaphor involves much of medieval symbolism.

- 1 What were the meanings of 'gold' according to it?
- 2 State what 'gold' and 'iron' stand for.

8 SAY who is speaking in the lines following the metaphor. What is the function of this intervention? What habits of the time are being criticised?

9 READ again from lines 38 to 52. Chaucer turns again to the Parson's character. How does he define him now? Does this add mystic overtones to the figure of the Parson?

10 WRITE down and comment the two words that can be regarded as keys to the Parson since they also recur at the beginning of the extract.

➤ **COMPETENCE: FINDING AND UNDERSTANDING LINKS AND RELATIONSHIPS**

11 DISCUSS. What does the Parson share with John Wycliffe's idea of the priest (→ Towards B2, p. 36)? How is the Parson different from the other religious character you have studied (→ T7)?