

Reflection: St Augustine of Hippo - Memorial - 28th August 2020

1 Corinthians 1:17-25, Matthew 25:1-13

The Epistle today is remarkable when it is compared to the winding path followed by one of the greatest Doctors of the Church: Saint Augustine of Hippo (354-430). Augustine was one of those very clever people, those savvy debaters, wise in the knowledge of his age, a rhetorician, possessed of one of the finest minds ever to be produced. He sought fame and fortune precisely in the fields that Saint Paul tells us are the antithesis of where to find the meaning of the Gospel - which is of course in the Cross of Christ - a stumbling block to Jews and folly to the Greeks.

Augustine is most famous for his Confessions, and the great line, "restless is the heart, until it rests in thee." This desire for God, Augustine found, is unable to be fulfilled by anything other than God himself. No pleasure, no thing, no experience, no amount of fame and fortune, not anything other than God will satisfy the hungry soul. This longing Jesus satisfies in pouring out his love in the sacrifice of Calvary. The Cross, as St Paul tells us is the answer, and Saint Augustine finally found his way to it, once he realised that everything else, in comparison to the love of God, as we see it in the Cross, was a futile search. The famous passage reads in this case translated by Francis J. Sheed (1948):

Hate have I loved thee, O Beauty so ancient and so new; late have I loved thee! For behold thou were within me, and I outside; and I sought thee outside and in my unloveliness fell upon those lovely things that thou hast made. Thou were with me and I was not with thee. I was kept from thee by those things, yet had they not been in thee, they would not have been at all. Thou didst call and cry to me and break open my deafness: and thou didst send forth thy beams and shine upon me and chase away my blindness: thou didst breathe fragrance upon me, and I drew in my breath and do pant for thee: I tasted thee, and now hunger and thirst for thee: thou didst touch me, and I have burned for thy peace.

Having become a Christian, then reluctantly a bishop, God put Augustine's natural talents to great use - in Sermons, Letters, Treatises, Disputations, Books and all sorts of writing. One could spend a lifetime reading his mighty works and never encompass the whole of the corpus. He is a giant, the greatest theological giant, and we owe God a huge debt of thanks for the grace that he gave in drawing Augustine to himself. The great medieval English mystics, such as Walter Hilton, draw on Augustine's works which emphasise how the soul is drawn to God by his grace.

Our knowledge of the early heresies, so essential to clarify our understanding of what it is that we don't believe, is due in large part to the debates and disputations that Augustine himself had with the heretics. We also come to know more of Saint Ambrose, from descriptions by Augustine. His great work, "The City of God against the Pagans" was written at time when civilisation was collapsing in the wake of the sack of Rome, and people were asking questions like, "How could God allow this calamity to happen?", "Has Christianity weakened the Empire?" Saint Augustine gave us his just war theory, and spelled out the doctrine of original sin. He helped us work out that the Sacraments worked by the work itself and were not dependent for their validity on the worthiness of the minister. He also gave us great slogans such as "We are an Easter people, and Alleluia is our song." or "He who sings prays twice."

Saint Augustine's conversion should inspire us. No matter what kind of sinner we are, God can draw us to himself and take our talents and use them for his purposes and his greater glory. His ministry of the word, in his teaching, and preaching is still influential down to this day. His insistence on doing catechesis well in order to form good Christians stands as a testament to our own duty to form others in the faith to the best of our abilities. He worked tirelessly for the Gospel of Christ, wrestling with all the questions that came at him, trying to put the answers he had into the most memorable rhetoric so that the faith would be advanced in the hearers. May God help us in our efforts to put across the faith once delivered to the Apostles to those in our own day, an era much like Augustine's, so that they may cleave unto God that their hearts too might rest in him.