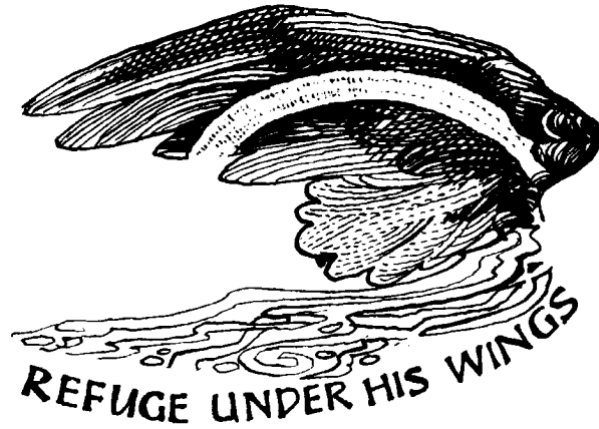


FRIENDS OF AUGUSTINE

AUGUSTINE FOR TODAY



THE GENTLENESS OF GOD



THE WORD

And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still, small voice. (I Kings 19.11-12)

He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. (Isaiah 42.3)

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. (Galatians 5.22)

But when they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the eldest, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus looked up and said to her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' She said, 'No one, Lord.' And Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you; go and do not sin again.'

(John 8.9-11)

FROM AUGUSTINE

The devil and his angels are the enemies against whom the Church fights. And how does she fight? With gentleness. For our king himself conquered the devil with gentleness. The devil was the one in a rage; Christ was the one who was suffering. The one in a rage was conquered; the conqueror was the one who suffering. That is the gentleness with which the body of Christ, that is the Church, conquers her enemies.

(*Exposition of Psalm 131* 3)

Then, when the woman was left there alone and they'd all gone, he lifted up his eyes to her. We have heard the voice of Justice; let's also hear the voice of Gentleness. It seems to me that the woman would have been more terrified still when she heard the Lord's words: 'If any of you is without sin, let him be the first to cast a stone at her.' The men, then, turned their attention to themselves, and confessed their guilt simply by departing; and they left the woman with her own grave sin to him, who was without sin. Because she had heard his words, 'If any of you is without sin, let him be the first to cast a stone at her,' she expected to be punished by him, in whom no sin could be found. However, having rebuffed her opponents with the voice of justice, he lifted to her a look of gentleness and asked her, 'Has no one condemned you?' She replied, 'No one, Lord.' He then said, 'Neither will I condemn you. Perhaps you were afraid of being condemned by me because you have found no sin in me. Neither will I condemn you.'

(*Tractate on the Gospel of John* 33 6)

REFLECTION

A gentle word or touch is one that soothes or calms whatever it affects, where it might so easily have hurt or damaged it. Those who are gentle have the power to do harm but take care not to do so. The Latin for gentleness, *mansuetus*, means literally 'accustomed to the hand' or 'tame': the dog that could maul a child, but nuzzles it instead. The test of gentleness, then, is how one treats the vulnerable.

It may seem surprising to talk of the gentleness of God in the context of St Augustine. His God is one of fierce and energetic love, ever ready to be harsh in order to be kind. Augustine usually sees suffer-

ing as 'discipline', sent by God in order to restrain and retrain us, to recall us to him. In keeping with this, Augustine makes little use of those scriptural passages where God or the Messiah are represented as mild or gentle.

An exception is the story of the woman caught in adultery, to which Augustine repeatedly returns, meditating on Our Lord as a model of gentleness. Jesus has the woman in his power; he is without sin, and could therefore condemn her. Instead, he speaks a word of forgiveness, and urges her not to sin again. And just because he does not exploit his power, because he does not force her to obey him through fear, she is free to listen or not to listen to his counsel. Gentleness invites others to choose for themselves: it gives them the privilege and the responsibility of freedom.

A similar pattern marks the many stories of conversion in the *Confessions*. Again and again it is a quiet word that strikes home, a word that could easily have gone unnoticed. The seeker needs to be attentive; the sinner needs to be humble: otherwise, they will miss the still small voice. At the same time, God in the *Confessions*, just as in George Herbert's poem overleaf, is insistent in his invitation. The sinner's excuses, whether made from fear or from shame or from apathy, eventually yield to the gentleness that perseveres.

POINTS TO PONDER

- In a world that promotes noise, do we attend to gentle voices?
- In a world that promotes aggression, do we notice gentle people?
- How do we make use of our power to help or to hurt those who are vulnerable?
- Does it make sense to talk of the gentleness of God in the face of suffering?

FROM ANOTHER TRADITION

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
 Guilty of dust and sinne.
But quick-ey'd Love, observing me grow slack
 From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
 If I lack'd any thing.

A guest, I answer'd, worthy to be here:
 Love said, You shall be he.
I, the unkinde, ungratefull? Ah my deare,
 I cannot look on thee.
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
 Who made the eyes but I?

Truth Lord, but I have marr'd them: let my shame
 Go where it does deserve.
And know you not, sayes Love, who bore the blame?
 My deare, then I will serve.
You must sit down, sayes Love, then I will serve.
 So I did sit and eat.

(George Herbert, 'Love')

A FINAL THOUGHT FROM AUGUSTINE

I call upon you God, mercy of mine, you who made me and who did not forget me when I forgot you. I call you into my soul, which you prepare to receive you through the desire which you have aroused there. Do not abandon me now that I am calling upon you; for you came to me before I ever called upon you.

Compiled by Margaret Atkins, Boarbank Hall