

Cry of the Heart – A talk by Nigel Bavidge - Friday evening. Notes by Paul B.
Part 1

We were taught Jesuit spirituality when I was a novitiate here at Clare which is just right for many people but how much I preferred Augustine's message!

There are two aspects of Augustine – that portrayed in the powerful statue in St. Peter's, the imposing 'Father of the Church' a man of huge intellect; and that by the fresco in San Gimignano where it is his warmth of heart that comes across. The same contrast is seen in his two close friends: Nebridius, the companion to Augustine the intellectual; and Alypius, the companion of his heart.

Sometimes Augustine frustrates us: he is so loquacious we get lost in his prose but then, when we find the nuggets of insight and truth we know the search was worthwhile. Our task is to discover and then share his spirituality for it has so much to say to us. It is much harder to define than Ignatian spirituality, which is set out methodically in the Exercises, or the Franciscan or Carmelite way. Augustine has to be discovered and then shared - for he is very contemporary.

Perhaps the place to start is his famous sentence, 'You have made us towards yourself and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.' This reminds me of T.S. Elliot's Four Quartets, '...we return to the place from which we set out and know it for the first time.' As we come back to ourselves, we find ourselves, but the truth Augustine teaches us is that we start off 'disconnected' from ourselves and restless because of original sin.

For this reason Augustine is often portrayed as a pessimist: he does talk about sin and its influence and this is often emphasized by the Reformed Church; but he still believes in the goodness of man. He emphasizes original grace as much as original sin: God is within us and we have to seek out and find him there. The problem is that we are disconnected from our true selves and so have lost contact with God within. 'By continence the scattered elements of the self are reconnected.'

This concept of disconnectedness is very contemporary: so much of psychoanalysis aims at reconnecting the scattered elements of our personality.

How did we become so 'disconnected' from our true selves? This tragic reality is described in Genesis 1-3.

In Genesis 1 the Holy Spirit is described as 'brooding' over the waters of chaos and drawing out the order of creation: in the same way God broods over us – he leaves a space, a gap between us and him, which indicates he doesn't want to control us but wants us to learn to use the freedom he has given us. This was the test Adam and Eve faced

The devil starts off the process of disconnection. Adam and Eve listen to his temptation that they could be like God and a desire awakens in them to be 'other' than what they were – to be God; they became dissatisfied with themselves and discontent to just be who God had made them. Augustine too learnt that he had to learn to be content with just being himself. We too want to be 'other' than our true self, we judge ourselves wanting rather than being content.

The process of disconnection once started, continues as they become divided from each other. Genesis portrays this as Adam and Eve making clothes for themselves; it is an image of their covering themselves, hiding from each other. We must understand the elements of myth in Gen. 3: myth is a literary form which seeks to grapple with the ultimate questions of existence. It is fascinating that so many of the OT myths have parallels or antitheses in the NT: for instance Tower of Babel (language confused) – Pentecost (language understood). A parallel for Adam and Eve covering themselves is the story of Blind Bartimaeus throwing off his cloak and coming to Jesus to be healed.

They become disconnected from God: Adam and Eve hide from God when he comes walking in the cool of the day (what a wonderful image!). The close relationship they enjoyed is broken.

They then become disconnected from their own hearts: when God asks 'Why have you done this?' They hide from the truth about themselves by blaming the other, denying their own responsibility for their actions. The process of 'disconnection' is complete.

A New Testament antithesis of this 'passing on the blame' is found in Jn. 8: the story of the woman guilty of adultery. In contrast to Adam and Eve she does not deny her sin and it is significant that, when all her accusers have departed, she 'stands' before Jesus – an image of dignity and openness, 'This is me!' Jesus treats her with dignity; 'Woman' is best translated as 'My lady': he points out her sin but importantly he re-connects her with herself, restores her dignity.

'Late have I loved you beauty so ancient, ever new, behold you were within me...'
(Nigel played a tape at this point of a musical setting of this quote).

We so often look for happiness away from ourselves – we become disconnected from ourselves in pursuing these exterior attractions, but the truth is that happiness is within. Augustine spoke of his becoming 'an enigma to myself' as he tried to fathom why he sought after externals when he knew that happiness was found within.

Another scriptural insight into this reality of our being alienated and disconnected from our true selves is contained in the story of the Gerasene Demoniac.

He lives amongst the tombs, the 'dead stuff' – so we often live immersed in 'dead stuff'. He gashes himself, punishes himself – we do this all the time and hear more and more of 'self-harm' in the papers. We do this because we don't like ourselves, we feel guilty about who we are. How contemporary the Gerasene demoniac is!

Jesus asks him his name and the demons have to answer 'My name is legion'. Augustine spends the first half of the Confessions 'naming' the stuff in himself, being absolutely candid and open about his nature. We too have to be honest with God about what is within us if we are to become 'connected' again with ourselves, others and God.

The citizens had chained up the demoniac but he repeatedly broke the chains: so we often try and control, suppress the drives within us; we 'try to be good' and chain ourselves with various 'laws'; but just like the demoniac we succeed for a while in controlling these drives but then 'break the chains' and revert to our old ways. So now I have given up trying to be good! It is hopeless, I will always fail, and I will always break the self-imposed constraints. So instead I ask God to heal me! This is the only way I'll really change.

The last image of the demoniac is of him sitting at the feet of Jesus 'in his right mind': again a powerful example of someone 'reconnected' with himself. We too return to ourselves by resting with Jesus and facing the desert of our own hearts, facing the truth about ourselves. In that desert, as Jesus did in his forty days of fasting, we meet both the demons and the angels – it is a painful but fruitful and necessary journey and God will support us on it. Augustine comments on Jn. 4 when Jesus sat down by the well, 'When Jesus rested, great mysteries took place....' In the same way when we rest and seek to return to ourselves, to become reconnected with our deepest desires God will work great mysteries in us.