

Cry of the Heart (2) – Saturday morning - Nigel Bavidge. Notes by Paul B.

Augustine is very contemporary – the truth always is – his society was under threat just as ours is; the Pelagian heresy that man could save himself by his own efforts was widespread in Augustine's time and the same attitude prevails now, as shown by all the self-help psychology books on the shelves in bookstores. As I said last night, I have given up trying to be good! Instead I aim to receive God's love and be healed.

Friends of Augustine must aim to support and include both the OSA parishes and also the smaller, isolated groups such as the canons and canonesses [and the parishes that the Augustinians have had to withdraw from – Hythe, Gt. Yarmouth].

Augustinian spirituality, as I mentioned yesterday is hard to define, is less structured than other examples, perhaps it's best described as a 'Cry of the Heart' – a heart that is restless, longing for God, for friendship and community, and also a repentant heart.

The Repentant Heart

Augustine perceived a radical and fundamental disorientation in the human spirit. He is often seen as a pessimist because of this but this is not a true evaluation of his position. He was a rhetorician and we find his language difficult, but his listeners would have been used to 4hr long sermons! Our attention span is short: sermons are like drilling for oil, 'If you haven't struck oil within 5 minutes then stop boring!' Sometimes we haven't a clue what he is saying – sometimes reading the passage aloud can help as they were written to be spoken. I recall, as a novitiate, a text of Augustine being read out before mealtime as usual, which was so obscure that everyone burst out laughing at the end of it!

Augustine is very honest about his sin in the Confessions: he is prepared to open up his life to us and took a risk in doing so as, in his position as a bishop, he could have been pilloried for this. He is frank about his sexual sins but I believe is hard on himself: he was faithful to his partner and loved her deeply. Should we criticize him for not marrying her but ending the relationship? The customs of his society were very different and dictated that it would have been impossible for him to marry her. It seems very hard to us, we can't understand it as our society is so different. Lucy Beckett, an Augustinian scholar, commented at one of her talks (something only another woman could say) that 'she was fortunate to have had sixteen years with him'.

In the confessions Augustine reflects on his behaviour as a teenager with the gang he went around with. He recalls boasting of his exploits and 'growing in vice, so that I could be praised the more'. He describes one episode in detail – the childish prank of stealing some pears from a man's garden, which they then threw away. Why does he spend so much time on this? It is because it exemplifies the psychology of sin. There is an interesting allusion to the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in Eden; this comes up again at his conversion when he threw himself down by a tree in the garden. He writes, 'our only pleasure in it was that it was forbidden and for the companionship of others sinning with me'.

Augustine is intrigued by this childish prank: clearly there was no logic to it; they did just because it was forbidden. It is the principle Paul defines in Rom. 7:15 'I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.' This is an example of our 'disconnectedness': we groan because we know sin won't make us happy but we 'still go there'.

But God dwells within us and in him our heart finds peace. Our real heart longs for peace but we seek it in delusions: note how the devil is called the 'father of lies' – the fruit 'looked good to eat' but that was a fantasy, a lie. But God never stops calling us from within: God never leaves us, rather we leave him. How often do we reflect 'I did that wrong but it wasn't really me, not what I really want to be....?' But, 'You watch over my secret heart', God knows our true self, the heart even we don't know.

'Why does Augustine dwell on sin?' That is the wrong question: the Confessions are not about Augustine but about God and the wonder of his grace. We see sin as condemnation and failure but this is not Augustine's perspective. Augustine learnt to be content with himself as he was, he sees God's provision in his make-up, 'I thank you for the wonder of my being....' (Ps 139). How often we are dissatisfied with ourselves and change the Psalm to, 'I thank you...but please change this and that aspect of me!' We must be careful of overzealously rooting out our vices as there is a danger of rooting out our virtues as well. As an Augustinian said to me, 'When will you realise your sin is a gift which you haven't learnt to use yet.' We must be happier with ourselves: look at our anger and, rather than trying to suppress it, see that there is a

gift of energy there which needs to be channelled properly; look at our lust and ask 'What is behind that and how can should it be used?'

Augustine speaks of his character and the events of his life and the people who come into it as all part of God's providence. The Confessions are about God: about God taking hold of his life and enabling him to see its meaning. How often we live just by events rather than by experiencing their meaning: so much of the time we are deaf and blind: God speaks to us through events but we don't hear him or interpret them. We don't ask, 'What was that day really about?' rather we let the days wash over us. If we looked back as Augustine did then we would see the meaning of our lives, that it is a story about God's gifts to us; we would see meaning and pattern and, like Augustine be filled with praise.

This was the experience of the two on the road to Emmaus, 'Did not our hearts burn within us....' as Jesus opened up their minds to the gospel. I like to call it 'Sabbath spirituality', looking back over our lives and understanding their meaning. I recall on one retreat being asked to take the approach of thanking God for what had happened in the preceding year and then thinking of what hadn't gone so well and saying, 'I'd like to be able to thank you for this next year'.

The Revisions: towards the end of his life Augustine looked back over what he had written and corrected it. It shows his humility: he never claimed infallibility, rather his understanding of truth had developed and he was prepared to correct himself, 'I am a man in search of light...we teach divine realities even though we are simple human beings. Our life is and unending search for God...we live all or life in disquiet and searching.. Find God and keep on searching.'

Our life is a constant journey, a search for God and he is great at disappearing! Think of Mary, the angel announced the great news and then 'disappeared'! It was the same for the two on the road to Emmaus and the same for Abraham.

The Revisions: Augustine wrote in a letter about the Confessions, 'I know they please and continue to please...' He saw their importance in that they were not about him and his sin but about God and the goodness of God, just as the parable of the prodigal son really is about the goodness of his father. The son's father rushes out to embrace him, gives him a robe, which signifies salvation; sandals which signify sonship (as slaves went barefoot); a ring, signifying he is heir to the inheritance again.

Augustine praises God for all his deeds, both good and evil: isn't it surprising that he praises God for his sins! Augustine is steeped in the thought of St Paul, 'But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners Christ died for us' (Rom.5:8), 'And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him' (Rom 8:28). So even our sin God works for the good: it makes us more humble and more aware of our need, more experienced.

Think of the power of the Resurrection: all the 'death' things are turned into life by the power of the resurrection. Why does Jesus still carry his wounds after his resurrection – it is because the wounds are the only thing in his life that needs glorifying, [as it is the only thing that is not 'of him' and so by nature glorious, but inflicted by us]. An incident that may explain this is a comment a doctor made when I was admitted with appendicitis: he looked at an old cholecystectomy scar that tracked across most of my abdomen and said, 'That's a very good scar'. Initially I thought what a strange comment, I'd rather not have a scar at all, what can be good about it! But I like to think that in heaven we we'll be admiring each others 'scars' that have been caused by sin but healed by Christ because it will give glory to Jesus who died to heal us. We tend to think we bring glory to Jesus by 'suffering' for our sins but we more truly glorify him when we praise him for healing our sins. Another medical parallel from the same admission was when I was trying to do without painkillers after the operation but finally had to ask for some and the nurse said, 'Just ask for them, we don't give medals here we given injections!!'

Woundedness: we will enter heaven as ourselves with our whole life experience, evidence of our wounds as well. We must see that parts of us are 'good', do bear fruit and shouldn't be afraid to say that we are a gift to others. I like to say, 'I am a gift, but not to everyone... and that's not my problem!'

Augustine sees his sin as something to be learned from – not to be ashamed of because God has transformed it. So sin is not something morbid but a testimony to God's grace. Augustine can teach us to look at the darkness in ourselves and see as well the love God has for us and the wonderful things he's done. The

hymn 'Amazing Grace' is very Augustinian and his thought is very ecumenical, he is the Church Father who is most quoted across the denominations. 'The house of my soul is too small and needs cleansing.'

Hidden Sins: we are often lack self-awareness and often our wounds are not self-inflicted. Augustine prays for God to help him see himself but to see himself with love and have compassion for himself. We have hidden wounds that need healing and attention and it is the truth that can heal them, 'Whisper words of truth to my heart.' We need to be cleansed of sins incurred at the hand by others or by events. I struggle because of what's happened to my sense of dignity and self-worth, often from events going back to childhood. I observe that when I do something 'childish' I react by 'slapping it down' rather than asking what I need to be healed of – the inner hurts from being told we are worthless. In the journey into our hearts we need to see that as well as being sinners, we are victims of sin and need healing here as well.

The sacrament of confession is no longer popular because we see it superficially, as a spiritual 'car-wash' that we drive through; we don't see it as a sacrament of healing. Grace is available but we need to act on that grace. Recall what Jesus asked the leper who knelt before him, 'What do you want me to do for you?' Why did he ask –surely it was obvious! But the reason Jesus asks is that he will not force himself on anyone: we need to be aware of our need and ask him for healing and we have to 'live with the healing'! Think of the woman who was bent over double and whom Jesus healed so she could stand up and see the world – suddenly she has so much more responsibilities to contend with, perhaps she would prefer the limited perspective of the ground! Think of the beggar at the Beautiful Gate whom Jesus healed: he had a 'good patch' and must have been earning a lot of money. When he received his sight he suddenly had to find a new source of income, 'What do I do now?' he might have asked. So there is a certain cost to being healed.

Augustine teaches us to learn to look at our lives and see God's providence. To learn to understand and live not just by events but by experience, with the God who communicates. See sin not as a failure but as something that can be healed and given meaning. Sin takes away meaning; the Resurrection enables me to discover meaning. We will be wounded in heaven but the wound will speak to wound and all shall be well.....'

Further comments after discussion:

- 1) Augustine speaks to hung-up neurotic introverts like me – who long for community!
- 2) Do the quarrying to find out Augustine's spirituality and then make it available.
- 3) Do it together, balance your spiritual life so some is alone with God and some is together with others: the nuns at Lecceto have two study periods daily – one alone and one together.