

I'd like to say something about St Augustine, because he is, you might say, a saint for our times. He lived during the decline and fall of the Roman Empire when there were three intractable problems.

There were the barbarians attacking and besieging Rome itself and gangs of marauders – you might say, terrorists – mounting raids on outposts of the Empire; there was within Rome an alien and disaffected minority who refused to accept the Roman civilisation. Not long after Augustine's day the Emperor said to the writer and philosopher Sidonius:

*I know what to do Sidonius. I will close the gates of Rome!*

And Sidonius replied, *Too late, Sir. Our enemies are within our gates!*

We naturally sympathise because we too have our home-grown terrorists

And then among Romans themselves there was widespread decadence.

Augustine stared into this decadence and said: *A city is not fortunate when its walls are standing while its morals are in ruins*

He asked: *Why do you seek an infinite variety of pleasure with a crazy extravagance, while your prosperity produces a moral corruption far worse than all the fury of an enemy?*

There were theatres putting on gross pornography and the sadism and blood lust of the gladiatorial arena. Augustine described and condemned these scenes of depravity:

*Full publicity is given where shame would be appropriate; close secrecy is imposed where praise would be in order. Decency is veiled from sight; indecency is exposed to view. Scenes of evil attract packed audiences; good words scarcely find any listeners. It is as if purity should provoke a blush and corruption give grounds for pride*

Pretty much like Britain AD 2007. That's why I say Augustine is a saint for our times. He blamed the pagan gods for the decline and fall. This is not so stupid and *primitive* as it sounds. The multiplicity of pagan gods represented a confused human universe in which everything was at odds with everything else. Paganism, because it is so various and haphazard, always produces confusion. In his day Juno and Minerva. In our day Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. The Christian God is the antidote because he is one and he represents unity of purpose

Even the educated and well-to-do people of Augustine's day fell into futility and nihilism. In the chaos of decline and fall of the thousand year classical civilisation, they came to believe life itself was meaningless. And so they turned to sensual excess and casual cruelty.

We recognise the same things in our own culture of drugs and celebrities, of mindless diversions and the banality of popular entertainments. Everything lewd or dumbed down – or both. And anything striving to rise above the morass scorned as *elitism*. Augustine condemned the decadence and the nihilism. But he also exposed the humanist fallacy of the day – the Stoic fallacy that it was possible to have morality without the transcendent world in which morality must be rooted. Augustine yelled at them:

*Listen to sense – if you can still hear sense, your minds so long clouded and drunk on intellectual nonsense!*

The same intellectual nonsense is prevalent today: the idea that you can be good without God. Augustine's repudiation of this idea was by means of the doctrine of Original Sin. We *can't* do even what we say we'd *like to do*. We are weak and constantly fall and backslide. There is no virtue, no morality, no civilisation, no life at all without the grace of God

All these things were St Augustine's public persona. But we most deeply learn from him only when we try to enter his soul. And how do we enter a man's soul? We do it by contemplating his prayers. Take one of Augustine's great prayers:

*Lord, thou hast made us for thyself; and our hearts are restless till they rest in thee.*

It's a well-known prayer. And it sounds horribly churchy and pietistic. Ah, but what did this great man mean us to understand by it? When Augustine spoke about the love of God, he always said it is like sexual love; it is like being in love. What he meant by that prayer then was that you only find your heart when you give your heart away. This sort of love and passion is the driving force in Augustine's teaching. You must give your heart to God. Then when you have given your heart to God, he begins to illuminate your understanding. Go on then – do it! That is what being saved by faith is.

Wonderfully, Augustine the Master Psychologist says,

*Faith is to believe what you do not see. The reward of faith is to see what you believe*

*Seek not to understand that you may believe, but believe that you may understand.*

You have to make that movement towards the darkness within your own soul – for in that darkness is God who is all light. Once you have done this, the Christian faith, the doctrines of the Creed, are no longer just words in a book: they are within you *the love that moves the sun and the other stars*. This is the meaning of Dante's underworld and St John of the Cross' dark night of the soul

This is not at all theoretical. We are in the workshop of our own soul. We are engaged in a practical. He warns us against the merely theoretical approach:

*The words printed here are concepts. You must go through the experiences.*

You have to learn to be passionate with your own soul. You, each one of you, is a world of wonders He says:

*People travel to wonder at the height of the mountains, at the huge waves of the seas, at the long course of the rivers, at the vast compass of the ocean, at the circular motion of the stars, and yet they pass by themselves without wondering*

And:

*There is in a man a deep place so deep as to be hidden even from him in whom that deep is.*

And this deep is the spirit of God within each one of us. However depraved we are, this spirit still lurks in our depths – because God made us in his own image. Turn to your soul then to find God.

It is all love and passion. Augustine simply radiates love and passion and tenderness. And this love, passion and tenderness is God. For example, he says:

*I have read in Plato and Cicero many wise and beautiful words but neither of them ever said, 'Come unto me all that travail and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest'*

But the love and passion and tenderness we experience when we turn in our darkness to God is not just an individual thing. It's not psychotherapy. Augustine is no guru. It is the love and passion with which we in the church should love one another. That is what Our Lord commanded in St John's Gospel. Augustine says:

*First find out how much God has given you. Then take from it what you need. The rest is needed by others.*