

Let us escape for a little while from the anxieties of the present, the economic crisis and the cloud of uncertainty which hangs about the future. Let us return in our imagination to the glory days of the fifth century and to St Augustine. What do we find? Let me remind you that Augustine was a very hands-on saint who had the humanity to pray, *Lord, make me chaste and continent – but not yet*. He began the genre of confessional writing with the statement, *Then came I to Carthage, burning, burning; and a cauldron of unholy lusts sang all about my ears*. He was no stained-glass window saint. He was savvy. He knew the score. He understood the times he was living in.

Augustine describes a state in which people are, *unconcerned about the utter corruption of their country – ‘So long as it lasts’ they say – ‘so long as it enjoys material prosperity’*. The downfall of the Roman Empire was preceded with a whole series of financial crises. It was overwhelmed by mass immigration and threatened by terrorist violence. Augustine prophesied against *rulers who are interested not in the morality, but the docility of their subjects; they are regarded not as directors of conduct but as controllers of material things and providers of material satisfaction*.

Is this beginning to sound horribly familiar? Well, Charles Sisson said years ago: *What makes St Augustine remarkable is that he lived through times which were very much like our times – and he rejected them*.

Augustine describes a society where: *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*.

Augustine lived at the time of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire when the debauched people were entertained and consoled by the bread and circuses, the gladiatorial contests, public displays of great cruelty and lewdness. Today we inhabit the techno-digital version of something very similar. The nauseating voyeurism of *Big Brother* and the mindless culture of celebs. The narcissistic obsession with the mobile phone. Facebook and Twitter. A people shall speak drivel unto a people from generation to generation. The head-banging sub-culture of binge-drinking. It is as if aimless people with nothing in their lives are saying, *I’m a nobody: get me out of here*.

In the light of these troubles, the Roman governors allowed the licence and the debauch to continue, but they introduced a great many new laws in order to exert control. This is proving no escape at all is it? It’s all hauntingly familiar.

For example, our government is pledged, in a time of economic depression, to spend billions on identity cards. In other words we shall be obliged to prove who we are in our own country, where already our births are registered and we pay our taxes. I will not carry an identity card. Even if it means they come and lock me up. If freedom starts anywhere, it starts with the freedom to go about your private business in the public realm without being required to prove your identity.

Your identity *is* your British citizenship which is your birthright. But they have sold our birthright and for much less than a mess of potage.

There are new government proposals to read all our emails and listen to our phone conversations. All I can say is that, given the puerile jabber people talk into their mobile phones, the authorities listening in will hopefully die of boredom. *I'm on the train*. Incidentally, what do EU bureaucrats say on their mobile phones? Perhaps it's *I'm on the gravy train*.

We have one of the longest periods of detention without trial in the western world. This is said to be in order to protect us from terrorist attacks. How very considerate of the government to provide such protection for us. So why then do they free named Islamic militants and pay them compensation for the period we detained them for questioning?

And now all our foreign trips and holidays will have to be registered with the government *in the interests of national security*. This comprehensive intrusion into our private business will not deter a single terrorist who, of course, will not notify his intention to kill vast numbers of us. Neither will the extravagant, costly and highly inconvenient airport security checks we all have to endure at the airport.

If you want to know the time, ask a policeman – so long as you don't photograph him while he's looking at his watch. Make sure you put your rubbish in the correctly coloured recycling sack. Under a new Bill in Parliament, involving the coroners, it is proposed to allow our private medical records to be sold off to insurance agencies or almost any organisation prepared to pay for them.

All so similar to the way things were in St Augustine's Day. So, is there anything we can learn from those days to help us clear up the mess we're in? Let me try to cheer us up. The catastrophic end of the Roman Empire saw the beginning of monasticism. Christian groups withdrew from society and deliberately set themselves apart in order to preserve in their communities whatever was left of the good life and to wait for more auspicious times: what we might call *the recovery*.

It is of course impossible for us in the global village to withdraw to anywhere. There is no escaping universal technology and communications. Nor should we want to. But we can learn from monasticism. Monasticism was an institution. And we have institutions so we don't die of politics. Politics is a necessary evil. We cannot trust politicians of any party precisely because they are in it for the short term – the next election, even the next opinion poll. This skews and corrupts public life because it disposes of the long-term interest which is our real need.

Gradually, monasticism became a great power throughout Europe. And when the Dark Ages receded and the brilliant civilisation of the Middle Ages arose, other institutions were developed as well. These included the wonderful medieval trades guilds and societies and the Livery Companies. These were deeply rooted in the Christian faith. They had – and still have – their

Patron Saints. They formed the mysteries of their trades. And the origin of that word μυστηριον - mystery – is a Sacrament. And in the modern Livery Companies, the mysteries remain. How about the theory of flight?

When it comes to the theory of flight, we need the Bernoulli equation. You must, of course, first understand another principle of physical science, the continuity equation. It simply states that, *In any given flow, the density (rho) times the cross-sectional area (A) of the flow, times the velocity (V) is constant. Naturally, the continuity equation is written as: $\rho \times A \times V = \text{constant}$*

That has all the characteristics of a mystery as a trade secret understood and operated by the members of a dedicated Guild. Even as late as 1939 the prominent physicist O.T. Gnosspelius declared that the how and why of flight were questions not fully answered.

But the province of the Guild is not limited to technical matters. The Guild is dedicated to God, the origin of all intelligence. And under the commandment of God, the Guilds established the principle of charity and, out of charity, service. In a barbarous world, the Medieval Guilds developed chivalry and courtly love, and etiquette. The Guilds created and celebrated hospitality, friendship and conviviality.

Without these things, politics is dead and society is barbaric. So in our contemporary crisis, the Livery Companies are not irrelevant or out of date. You are needed now more than at any time in a thousand years. It is you – and your fellow Liveries – who are the custodians of the best in our society. Up then and assert yourselves. Become what you are.

We thank thee who hast moved us to building, to finding, to forming at the ends of our fingers and beams of our eyes.

And when we have built an altar to the Invisible Light, we may set thereon the little lights for which our bodily vision is made.

And we thank thee that darkness reminds us of light.

O Light Invisible, we give Thee thanks for Thy great glory