

So many horror stories that our minds have become jaded. Another young person shot or stabbed to death in London and it is nothing out of the ordinary. But sometimes there is an event so manifestly evil that even our drowsy consciences are startled awake by it. I'm talking about the awful incident in Derby when a mob encouraged 17 year old Shaun Dykes to jump to his death from the roof of a shopping centre. This is one of the nastiest news stories I've read in my life. A group of onlookers gathered to watch while trained negotiators spent three hours trying to coax him down. Some of the mob taunted Shaun, who lived in the Derbyshire village of Kilburn, and shouted: "Go on then, jump!"

Students from Shaun's college were nearby and heard the goading, according to his head teacher Rob Howard: "One student told me he could not believe people place such little value on life. It's almost as if they are in a television show. It's unreal." The hateful mob was not made up only of young louts. Neatly dressed middle-aged and middle-class people, ordinary shoppers, rushed to where Shaun had fallen to photograph his body on their mobile phones.

I recalled the head teacher's words: "It's almost as if they are in a television show." I was struck by the sense that our society has lost the knack of distinguishing between appearance and reality. We are so much enthralled by the voyeuristic culture of Big Brother and You Tube that we tend to mistake real life events for play-acting. Often reality and fiction are deliberately confused and to reflect this new words have come into the vocabulary: "docudrama" and "infotainment." The result is the massive desensitising we saw in the Derby mob.

Then I remembered those words of Charles Sisson years ago: "What makes St Augustine remarkable is that he lived through times which were very much like our times – and he rejected them." Modern society uncannily resembles the sorts of things that were going on near the fall of the Roman Empire – things which St Augustine condemned in his great book *City of God*. The cruelty of the arena, the gladiatorial contests and the deadly games in the Colosseum where spectators would vote by a show of hands on whether a man should have his left foot or his right hand cut off first.

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 barbarian violence. The comparisons with our own time are very striking. 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."

Doesn't that make you think of extravagant loans to people who could never afford them; of laws to encourage 24/7 shopping and 24/7 drinking; of the whole world turned into advertisements? Art and culture debased, as Sir Peter Maxwell Davies said this week of the Damien Hirst exhibition, "...into manufactured artefacts without content, with just a brand tag supposed to guarantee market value." A civilisation

cannot survive on such debased conduct, on pretend values which are really valueless.

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.”

Of course the rottenness is not a thing which involves only the senses and the body. Augustine speaks of “...the intelligentsia who are infected by a gross mental disorder which makes them defend the irrational workings of their minds as if they were logic and truth itself.” And so in our day, so-called leading intellectuals such as Richard Dawkins declare that if God exists we should be able to detect him with our scientific instruments. That’s what Augustine means by “a gross mental disorder.” Philosophers and psychologists make human consciousness the centre and basis of all understanding.

When you read *City of God* it’s as if you’re reading the chronicles of today. For instance, I thought the solecism of referring to a sectional self-interest group as a “community” was a particularly modern mistake. (The funniest example of this was in *The Independent* newspaper some years ago when they referred to “London’s sado-masochistic community.” I wonder if they have community singing?) But no, this is not a modern social heresy. Augustine said, “They define ‘the community’ as meaning not every association of the population but an association united by a common sense of rights and a community of interest.” Such things are pressure groups or even ghettos; and as such they are divisive of the commonwealth, the whole community of the nation.

Augustine lived at a time when the church was persecuted and when it was blamed for all that was going wrong. He faced these accusers and said:

“Why is it that you put the blame on Christians when things go wrong? Is it not because you are anxious to enjoy your vices without interference and to wallow in your corruption untroubled and un-rebuked? For if you are concerned for peace and general prosperity, it is not because you want to make decent use of these blessings with moderation, with restraint, with self-control, with reverence. No! It is because you seek an infinite variety of pleasures with a crazy extravagance; and your prosperity produces a moral corruption far worse than all the fury of an enemy.”

And so today Christianity is derided by atheist intellectuals and prominent journalists as something which is primitive, unbelievable and restrictive. Restrictive of what? Why, of their debauch of course. Of their desire to scorn and abolish Christian morality – because it puts them in the wrong. Augustine mentions the enemy. We have many among us today who claim that the chief threat comes from a foreign enemy – such as Islamic terrorism.

But a people of integrity can always defend themselves against external foes. What we cannot defeat so easily is an enemy so deeply embedded in our own psyche and culture that we do not even recognise it as the enemy. I refer to aggressive

secularisation, to the fact that there is an influential and growing faction in our country who want to see Christianity altogether abolished.

What can be done? The antidote to the destruction of our society by rampant secularism is for the church to recover its wits and its confidence. The philosopher and President of the Italian Senate, Marcello Pera spells it out: “Christianity is so consubstantial to the West that any surrender on its part would have devastating consequences. Will the Church and the clergy and the faithful be able to be purified of the relativism that has almost erased their identity and weakened their message and witness?”