

Tenth Sunday after Trinity

August 28, 2011

## **“OUR HEARTS ARE RESTLESS”**

**(“Thou hast made us for thyself and our hearts are restless  
until they rest in thee.” – St. Augustine of Hippo)**

Today is the feast day of St. Augustine of Hippo. Noting that already tells us something important, for August the 28<sup>th</sup> was not the day of his birth but of his death, in the year 430 AD. The date on which we remember the lives of the saints is not the day their physical life began, but the day it ended, the day on which they entered the life triumphant, the life eternal, of which their baptism was a prefiguring. That already tells us what was most important in their lives: not time but eternity.

Today is the feast day of St. Augustine, Bishop, the best known and best loved of all the Church Fathers, whose See was an ancient port of North Africa (now in Algeria), and whose influence upon Western Christendom is incalculable. Giovanni Papini wrote, “Just as ancient Italy appeased her hunger with the corn of Egypt and Libya, so throughout the ten centuries of the Middle Ages did the whole of Christianity feed upon the thoughts that had emanated from the fertile, lucid and generous brain of an African from Tagaste.” We sometimes forget that Augustine was from Africa, as were other great fathers like Tertullian and Cyprian. We who live so many centuries after Augustine know him primarily, not from the important work he did as the Bishop of Hippo, but from his writings, and most especially his famous book, *The Confessions*, written in the year 400.

St. Augustine’s *Confessions* is sometimes said to be the first autobiography, but that is a misnomer, first because he tells us of only certain limited aspects of his life, and second because its ultimate focus is not on himself, but God. The title throws us a bit because ‘confession’ here is only in part about what we think of as a ‘confession’ either of a criminal or the ‘true confessions’ of yellow journalism. The word ‘confession,’ as St. Augustine used it, had a three-fold meaning. Yes, it meant *confession* or acknowledgement of *sin*, and what is set forth here is as candid and earnest a soul-searching, heart-wrenching confession as that of King David in the 51<sup>st</sup> Psalm following his sin with Bathsheba. But it was also a *confession of faith*, for it pointed

to our merciful God more emphatically than to the penitent sinner. And flowing from these two it was also a *confession of praise*. And it is there, with praise, that St. Augustine began his book, and we shall begin with that beginning.

“Great art Thou, O Lord, and greatly to be praised.” This famous story of conversion bears witness from the outset to a heart that is in truth converted, for its center is no longer self or sin, and the two are virtually synonymous, but God. The first words out of his mouth, the first to flow from his pen, are of God; and they are not merely *about* God, not description, not doctrine, but are words of adoration. “Great art Thou, O Lord, and greatly to be praised.” And being words of adoration, they are already prayer. This so-called auto-biography, this story of the unfolding of this man’s life, is in form and reality a prayer, and a prayer that recognizes that all of life is undergirded by God’s power and surrounded by his wisdom. “Great art Thou, O Lord, and greatly to be praised; great is thy *power* and thy *wisdom* infinite.” It is to the power and wisdom of God that the saint’s unfolding story bears witness.

“And Thee would man praise,” he continues, only now pointing indirectly to himself, the creature that would sing God’s praise. “And Thee would man praise, man, but a particle of Thy creation.” We behold ourselves correctly when we see ourselves as the merest speck in the universe, and the universe itself infinitesimal over against the vastness (Gary Wills) of God. The majesty that overwhelmed John Muir amidst the mountains of the High Sierra is here magnified a thousand times, and that a thousand times again. “And thee would man praise; man, but a particle of thy creation; man, [moreover] that bears about him his mortality, the witness of his sin.” Man that lives out his three-score years and ten, more or less, returns to the ground from whence he came, for he was what he was as man only because God breathed into him the breath of life. It is in him that we live and move and have our being. And death, that sentence under which all men stand, is, Augustine notes, “the witness that [God] resisteth the proud.” Man who came from the hand of God, who lives by the breath of God, has the audacity to presume that life is his, and his to live as he will. The mere particle of creation deceives himself that he can live without and over against the creator. There is great humor in this comparison, an apt picture of the absurdity of man. And yet, . . . and yet, the saint observes that in spite of all, in spite of his seeming insignificance as but a particle of God’s creation, in spite of the absurdity of his pride and the arrogance of his sin, there is that inescapable something at the very center of his being

that yearns to praise God, that acknowledges him from whom he came, the infinite one before whom he stands. Some have called it a God-shaped hole in the soul of man. Whether that is apt or not, I do not know, but there remains within us an awareness of God that can never be fully eradicated, even by sin. God has made us for himself and the stamp of the manufacturer can never be completely effaced.

There is, therefore, a deep split within man, a tension between what he is and what he was made to be. He lives much of his life in a kind of forgetfulness, an unconscious denial of his truest nature and vocation. Like the prodigal of last week's Gospel, he wants to take his own things and go his own way. He wants to squander his inheritance, to spend his substance on the insubstantial, to live as though he were not his father's son, . . . until at last, perchance, he opens his eyes and recognizes where he is, how far from home he was wandered, and remembers the peace and security of his father's house.

Of the wandering son it is said, "He came to himself." It was only after St. Augustine "came to himself," when he found that the pleasures of the flesh satisfied him no more than the husks for the swine the worldly son, when he recognized that for all of the valid questions of the philosophers and their occasional insights into truth, they had no full and final answers, when he discovered the *power* of God manifested in the weakness of his Son made flesh and the *wisdom* of God revealed in the foolishness of the Gospel, when the eloquent and proud rhetorician and scholar humbled himself before God, then he found true wisdom and lasting peace.

"Thou hast made us for thyself, and our hearts are restless." The story of that restlessness fills the many chapters (or Books) of the *Confessions*. It's a story some of you know well. In the end that deep split within the heart of man, that tension between who he is and who he is to be came to the surface, and Augustine struggled with it mightily, trying however to sort it out on his own. "Myself when I was deliberating upon serving the Lord my God now, as I had long purposed, it was I who willed, I who nilled, I myself. I neither willed entirely, not nilled entirely. Therefore was I at strife with myself, and rent asunder by myself." Like St. Paul in Romans chapter 7, he could not do what he willed, and what he willed not to do, that he did. His was a restless heart, and that restlessness reached a boiling pitch.

Thus soul-sick was I, and tormented, accusing myself much more severely than my wont, rolling and turning me in my chain, till that were wholly broken,

whereby I now was but just, but still was, held. And Thou, O Lord, pressedst upon me in my inward parts by a severe mercy, redoubling the lashes of fear and shame, lest I should again give way, and not bursting that same slight remaining tie, it should recover strength, and bind me the faster.

The cords with which he was bound were almost broken, but not quite, and God in his mercy would not let him go.

This restlessness of heart continued. Then one day, as he was unburdening his soul to his friend, Alypius, “Speaking and weeping in the most bitter contrition of [his] heart,” he heard a voice coming as though from a neighbor’s house, whether that of a boy or girl, he knew not. “*Tolle, lege,*” the voice said. “Take up and read.” Remembering a similar incident in the life of St. Anthony which he had read quite recently, St. Augustine took up the volume of the Epistles of St. Paul he had just laid on the table beside him, and read from the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of Romans, “*Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wontonness, not in strife and envying; but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh.*” “Put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ.” That was the answer, the salve for the restless heart. “No further would I read; nor needed I: for instantly at the end of this sentence, by a light as it were of serenity infused into my heart, all the darkness of doubt vanished away.” “Put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ,” wrote the Apostle, and St. Augustine did.

Oh, there is much more to the story, of course, much more, but in reality St. Augustine put it all in a nutshell at the very beginning, “Thou hast made us for thyself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in thee.”

---

Sermon preached by the Rev’d Fr. Voris G. Brookshire at the Anglican Catholic Church of Saint John the Theologian, Pompano Beach, FL, on the Tenth Sunday after Trinity, August 28, 2011. Copyright © 2011.