

Saint Augustine of Hippo:

A restless heart

“Love God – and then do what you want.” How surprising that an African Christian from 17 centuries ago made this sentence famous. Augustine explains that loving God will reshape our desires in love itself.

Augustine lived from 354 – 430 in North Africa. His famous book ‘Confessions’, is credited with being one of the genre-defining autobiographies in world literature. It describes his early life, his education and family, his philosophical wandering and his wild living before he came to Christian faith at the age of 31. He sometimes lamented that he had not turned to follow Jesus sooner:

Here’s a simple version of his amazing reflection on coming to God.

“Belatedly I loved you, O Beauty so ancient and so new. You were inside, I was outside, and I was looking for you outside. I was unlovely - and I rushed heedlessly among the lovely things you have made. You were always with me, but I wasn’t with you. The created things kept me far from you even though they had no existence apart from you. You called and cried, you opened my ears from deafness. You gleamed and shone: you opened my blind eyes. Your breath was a perfume, and I drew in the scent. Now I yearn for you!”

Famously, Augustine’s vision of God the Creator makes this subtle point as he speaks to God: ***“You have made us for yourself, O Lord. Our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”*** The poetic line hints at God’s two great gifts to humans, first of freedom and then of grace, the freedom to choose, and the grace of God to bring us in faith to salvation. I love the way the restless human heart is seen as God’s gift here.

Living and writing as the Roman empire collapsed into chaos around him, he always taught that faith in God’s grace doesn’t make some kind of escape hatch from the trouble of this life: ***“What grace is meant to do is to help good people, not to escape their sufferings, but to bear them with a steady heart, with a fortitude that finds its strength in faith.”***

Augustine can sound amazingly contemporary.

He criticised men who exploited women (himself, in his earlier life, included) for their double standards in judging women for sexual cheating, while expecting to get away with it themselves without any criticism.

He believed that charity is no substitute for justice.

His psychological insight into the dangers of human pride – surely informed by self-awareness – can be strikingly contemporary.

He learned painfully that doing our worst may be an essential part of our lives: ***‘In my deepest wound, I saw your glory...and it astounded me’***

He was called a saint by the church, but he believed everyone is called to be holy, to be a saint, by God’s grace. It is said he was recognised as a saint first by the mass of Christians, not the authorities. And he taught that saints are those who let God’s light shine through them, each one different like light refracted through the colours of glass.

He wrote that ***“It is not that we keep God’s commandments first and that then God loves. Rather, God loves us and then we keep God’s commandments. This is that grace which is revealed to the humble but hidden from the proud.”***

The huge body of his writings are theological, philosophical, spiritual, educational and so much more. Many readers today will find much that is mysterious, some that is controversial and challenging: ‘the past is a foreign country – they do things differently there.’ But across 17 centuries, I find his voice speaks with great vision and love of the gifts of God, and of the City of God which beckons to us from the future. The Spirit calls us to look with high hopes always beyond the decay and destruction of our human lives and cultures for the coming of God. And then to follow Jesus along the way to a city of perfect peace.

“Trust the past to God’s mercy, the present to God’s love, and the future to God’s providence.”