

Why be a Christian?

Back to Church Sunday 2012

A sermon preached by Nick Moir

'You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you'

Words of Augustine, the early 5th century bishop of Hippo whose writings dominated the landscape of Western intellectual history for a thousand years.

But he wasn't always a faithful Christian. His mother was a Christian and ensured he had a Christian education but his father was pagan. When he went away to University in Carthage he kicked over the traces of what Christianity he had left and did what students still do. He did a lot of things he was in his later years to regret, including a certain freedom of sexual expression that led to his later honest prayer 'Give me chastity, but not yet'. He tried different philosophies and the new age spiritualities of his day until he came to embrace the philosophy of Neo-Platonism through which he came to see that the experiences of this life are echoes and parables of deeper mysteries, eternal ones. His story of leaving home and leaving behind the faith he had been taught was not just one person's personal history of separating from his earthly parents and their nurture; neither was it just an example of a universal tale of growing up, of exercising independence, of making one's own decisions in life and being able to exist apart from one's parents. It was also a tale of humanity in relation to the divine. Augustine was a clever man. He would have understood the possibility much beloved in our intellectual climate since Freud, that all the eternal stuff is just a projection from human experience – that the idea of a heavenly Father is a projection onto the eternal from the real world, that the idea of a heavenly home is a psychological extrapolation from our human experience of both loving the human home where we were nurtured and also needing to separate ourselves from it in order to be ourselves. Augustine would have got all that. But he came to believe something else – and this he got from his Platonic philosophy – that the real thing is not what we see and touch and feel now, the world of our day to day experiences in this world. The real world is the one beyond our seeing, beyond our touching, beyond our immediate experience, but what we do experience here in Shadowlands, as both C S Lewis put it and Plato might have put it, gives us intimations of what truly is and is to be, foretastes. We who are made in the image of God are made of earthly stuff but have the capacity to experience and participate in the divine. It is not just heart-strings to mother that pull at us throughout our lives, says Augustine. It is heartstrings to God. You have made us for yourself....

Augustine universalised in a way even more comprehensive than St Paul the story of Adam and Eve at the beginning of the Bible. Adam – which means humankind – is us. We have been placed in this garden to tend and keep it but we have chosen to break away from the will of our Father, and we have found ourselves away from home, far from home, autonomous but alienated, lost like the sheep in our gospel reading.

Why be a Christian? Well, here's my first answer: because it makes sense of our human predicament. As Oscar Wilde's Lord Darlington put it, 'We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.'

We are all in the gutter. We all mess things up. As I was growing up in my parental home I learnt to make my own choices. Sometimes I chose to do things that my parents did not like or want – some

of those were good choices and some of them were not. Sometimes I needed to do some things my parents didn't want even though they were right not to want me to do them. I had to find that out for myself. I had to fall if not into the gutter then at least flat on my face sometimes because that was me becoming me. Human autonomy is always double-edged – it leads us to new discoveries both personally and for society, it is what fuels the explorer of new lands, it is the spirit of scientific enquiry. Its yield is wisdom, technological advancement, the miracles of modern medicine, the genius of Albert Einstein; but its yield is also the atomic bomb, Hiroshima, the slaughter of aboriginal peoples, the genius of Adolf Hitler. You and I may not be in the same league as Adolf Hitler or Pol Pot but we're probably there with Oscar Wilde, though without the genius part. We are flawed, we mess things up. 'We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.'

Which brings me to my second reason for being a Christian – and that is the compelling attraction of the person of Christ. I am a Christian because I believe in Christ and one of the reasons I believe in him is because of what he did for those in the gutter. 'For the Son of Man' - as he once said of himself - 'came to seek and to save the lost' (Luke 19.10). The frontline of Jesus's mission and ministry was not the respectable people, the 99 sheep in the terms of the parable, but the ones who were most obviously and self-consciously in the gutter: the quisling tax-collectors, prostitutes and those labelled by the respectable as 'sinners'. The Son of Man came to save them – but in the process what that taught us was that there is no us and them, but 'we are all in the gutter'.

Few people fail to see the attraction of this Jesus, the friend of sinners. But some people – quite a lot of people perhaps – wonder why Christianity had to confuse it all by turning a good man into a god and then make it even worse by finding a third god – yet at the same time insisting there is only one god. Why have we made it so complicated and do darn difficult to believe? Some go on to blame St Paul for confusing everything – for inventing a Christianity radically different from the faith of Jesus. My brief answer to that is that the only difference I can see between the Christ of the gospels – and the Jesus that I think must lie behind them – and the Christ of Paul is that in Paul the divine nature of Christ is explicit whilst in the gospels it is more often implicit. The identity of Jesus – who himself deliberately used this enigmatic title of 'the Son of Man' – was mysterious and required a good deal of reflection. Take our readings today. As so often with the parables, it is only when we think about it that we realise that the central person of the parable is Christ himself. He tells it in the form of 'which one of you if you were a shepherd would not...?' But what he is saying is that he is the shepherd who has gone out to find the lost sheep – hence their grumble of v2 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them'. But then later on when you're reading your Old Testament, as we have done this morning, you come across these words: 'Thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. ¹²As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep.'

The Christian claim about Jesus is that he is the good Shepherd: in him God himself was searching for the sheep, seeking and saving the lost. Or, as St Paul was to put it, 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself'.

My final reason for being a Christian – well, the final one I have time for this morning – is that Jesus did not just come to save lost but in order to do so he laid down his life for them.

'He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were going astray like sheep, but now

you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.’ [1 Peter 2.24f]

We are going to be exploring this far more deeply in our ‘Questioning Christianity’ course, but at the heart of the Christian faith stands the cross of Christ and that in order to reconcile the world to himself Jesus did not just have to live a life of selfless service to others but he had to lay down his life for them. He had to die – because through his death our sins are forgiven and a new life is opened to us.

And that was the difference for Augustine. It wasn’t enough for him to have his eyes opened to the God made known in Jesus Christ; it wasn’t enough for him to realise that he was a sinner, one who was lost; it wasn’t even enough for him to know that he was forgiven and accepted as a child of God. He knew that he needed more than knowledge – he needed something that would transform him from within and help to change him into the person at his better moments he wanted to be. That gift is what the New Testament calls Grace. And it is from the hill of Calvary where Christ died that grace flows.

Almighty God,
you have made us for yourself,
and our hearts are restless till they find
their rest in you:
pour your love into our hearts and draw us
to yourself,
and so bring us at last to your heavenly city
where we shall see you face to face;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.