

Sunday 22 – Year A (2)

A Heart Made for God

*You have seduced me, Lord, and I have let myself be seduced; you have overpowered me:
you were the stronger.*

There is a beautiful theme running through our readings today about how we experience God and how God reaches out to us, about how God makes himself known to us in the very depths of our being and becomes an irresistible force in our lives. Jeremiah, in the first reading, speaks of the feeling of God coming into his depths in a rather shocking way, like being seduced by an ardent lover and willingly submitting to being overpowered by him. This is not an unusual image to describe how God ravishes the human soul of those overpowered by his love. St Teresa of Avila, one of the greatest mystics, describes how God, as an angel, appeared to her in a vision holding a burning spear which he thrust into her heart creating a deep, deep longing for him in the depths of her being:

*I saw in his hands a long dart of gold and at the end of the iron there seemed to me to be a little fire. This I thought he thrust through my heart several times, and that it reached my very entrails. As he withdrew it, I thought it brought them with it, and left me burning with a great love of God. So great was the pain, that it made me give those moans; and so utter the sweetness that this sharpest of pains gave me, that there was no wanting it to stop, nor is there any contenting of the soul with less than God. [St Teresa, *Life*, ch.19]*

The experience of God for those who encounter him in the very depths of their soul is a very visceral thing that stirs the human being like an act of love. Sometimes spiritual writers speak of their desire for God in terms of some other physical appetite such as a gnawing hunger; sometimes He is the most delightful fragrance that they gasp to breathe in. The psalmist in today's responsorial psalm describes the longing for God as like a powerful thirst that cannot be quenched except by God himself:

*O God, you are my God, for you I long;
for you my soul is thirsting.
My body pines for you
Like a dry, weary land without water*

And another Psalm uses the same analogy:

*Like the deer that yearns for running streams, so my soul is yearning for you,
my God.*

Another common way of describing the indescribable experience of God is as a fire or flame burning in the heart. Thus Jeremiah writes in the first reading:

Then there seemed to be a fire burning in my heart, imprisoned in my bones. The effort to restrain it wearied me, I could not bear it.

Jeremiah speaks of this overture by God as something irresistible. As someone who fought a vocation to the priesthood for many years, I can testify that God pursues those he calls until they have nowhere else to run. As one of my fellow students in seminary put it, “when God is on your case it’s worse than having the devil on your back; there is no escape!”

When I was a teenager and first plucked up the courage to mention to our parish curate in confession that I thought I might have a vocation to the priesthood, he suggested I read St Augustine’s *Confessions*. I was intrigued by the title and wondered if his confessions could be anything like mine. Could a person do the things that I do and still be a saint? Surely not. I couldn’t wait to find out. The answer was ‘yes’ and ‘no’. I never scrumped pears as St Augustine confessed he did as a boy, we had our own pear trees, but I did sometimes pinch peanuts from the display outside Mr Crail’s greengrocer’s shop on the way to the library. So we had one thing sort of in common, as to the rest, all I can say is, that as a teenager, Augustine’s debauched life and loves were way beyond my experience! But I will never forget opening the *Confessions* and reading, in the very first paragraph, a sentence that went straight to my heart and through which I felt an instant affinity with Augustine. He says of God: ‘you have made us for yourself and our heart cannot rest until it rests in you’.

God has made us for himself. This means that only God can ever ultimately fulfil our deepest longings and desires. St Augustine spent his lifetime seeking pleasure, trying every kind of sensual experience in the

effort to find true happiness and contentment but after a night of pleasure he inevitably woke up feeling empty and defiled. This week we celebrated his feast and in the readings the Church gives us for it is a passage from his *Confessions* in which he describes how, for the greater part of his life, he eagerly threw himself on the pleasures of the world, the flesh and the devil and greedily devoured them, but found none could give him lasting satisfaction, until he finally realised that all seeking for pleasure, fulfilment and happiness in life was really an unfulfilled desire and search for God; all these other pleasures were a mere glimpse or inkling of the true and absolute happiness that can be found in God alone. Then he searched into the depths of his heart and found God within. He writes:

Late have I loved you, Beauty so ancient and so new, late have I loved you! Lo, you were within, but I outside, seeking there for you, and upon the shapely things you have made I rushed headlong...They held me back from you, those things which would have no being were they not in you. You called, shouted, broke through my deafness; you flared, blazed, banished my blindness; you lavished your fragrance, I gasped; and now I pant for you; I tasted you, and now I hunger and thirst; you touched me, and I burned for your peace.

I went to the Salesian College in Farnborough whose motto is *Virtus sola nobilitas* – ‘virtue alone is nobility’, which is a posh way of saying that only the pursuit of what is good and right will bring fulfilment and happiness, which is another way of saying that happiness can only be found in God; or as St Teresa put it, there is no ‘contenting of the soul with less than God’; and this is what Augustine discovered and what he means when he says that God has made us for himself and our hearts cannot rest until they rest in God. Until we truly acknowledge this essential truth we will always seek fulfilment in things that are less than God and always be dissatisfied. However, once we embrace this reality and begin to live it, it changes our whole outlook and the way we live our lives. St Paul has yet another way of expressing the same truth in today’s second reading:

Do not model yourselves on the behaviour of the world around you, but let your behaviour change, modelled by your new mind. This is the only way to discover the will of God and know what is good, what it is that God wants, what is the perfect thing to do.