

Evensong: Exploring the Church Fathers

28/8/16

“St Augustine of Hippo”

Almighty and merciful God, who didst raise up blessed Augustine in thy Church, to be witness and champion of the Gospel of thy grace; shew forth in us, we beseech thee, the working of the same grace, that by light from thee we may know thy will, and by thy power may perform it with all thy heart.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

Amen.

(Collect from the early Altar Missal.)

“What does love look like? It has the hands to help others. It has the feet to hasten to the poor and needy. It has eyes to see misery and want. It has the ears to hear the sighs and sorrows of men. That is what love looks like. “

(St Augustine of Hippo)

The quote you have just heard me read out is beautiful and profound.

It was written by St Augustine of Hippo whose year's mind is today.

As I reflected on what message to share with you this evening, I was reminded that today is the day that we give thanks for the life and ministry of St Augustine. I then felt led to suggest that we spend the next few Evensongs looking at the various Church Fathers and their contributions over the ages to the life and work of the Church. I sometimes feel that while the Christian Church has an absolute wealth in terms of historic people of the faith, they are often lost to obscurity. So join me for the next few minutes as we explore the life and times of St Augustine of Hippo.

Augustine of Hippo was born on the 13th of November in 354. He died on the 28th of August 430. He is also known as Saint Augustine, Saint Austin, Blessed Augustine and the Doctor of Grace. (He is also the Patron Saint of Brewers, by the way!)

St Augustine is categorised by scholars as an Early Christian theologian and philosopher. His writings influenced the development of Western Christianity, as well as Western Philosophy. He was also the Bishop of Hippo Regius, which is to be found in modern-day Algeria. He is also viewed as one of the most important Church Fathers in Western Christianity. Well known writings include "The City of God" and "Confessions".

His mother, Monica, was a Christian, and interestingly, his father remained a pagan for most of his life, only converting to Christianity just before his death.

Although raised as a Christian, Augustine was more attracted to the high life of sex, parties and alcohol. He took on a mistress who bore him a son when he was only eighteen years of age. He never married the woman, but did stay in a relationship with her for fifteen years. Historians have suggested that she may have been a freed slave and customs or laws of the day may have prevented betrothal.

There was a light bulb moment for Augustine at the tender age of nineteen, whilst a student at Carthage, he stumbled across a treatise written by Cicero and his eyes were opened.

Whilst a brilliant academic, he never mastered Greek (I know the feeling) but he did become very proficient in Latin. After various studies at Carthage, Augustine decided to leave for Rome.

Augustine studied various Gnostic theories in Rome. He also prospered after being appointed as Chief Professor of Rhetoric. While in Milan, Augustine met the Bishop of Ambrose. For the first time, Augustine felt he had met a man worthy of Christianity in terms of personal integrity and academic rigor.

After a few ups and downs in his personal life, Augustine was converted to Christianity in 386 AD and baptised in the Easter of 387 AD. After about twelve years he wrote his life stories in a book titled, "Confessions". Whilst the book can be seen as an autobiography, it can also be seen as an outpouring of penitence and thanksgiving.

Augustine then went back to Hippo in Africa and was ordained as a Priest in 391 AD and consecrated as Bishop of Hippo in 396 AD.

It was during this time as a Priest and Bishop in Africa that his writing became prolific. Libraries now contain well over 113 books, 200 letters and 500 sermons. His work greatly influenced both Luther and Calvin. His second great book, "City of God" was an engagement about the fallen City of Rome. Augustine wrote about the works of God in history and the relationship of the Christian between heaven and Earth.

There is no doubt that St Augustine, a man who emerged from humble beginnings, landed up being one of the greatest Church Fathers who ever lived. He was instrumental in laying the foundation for many of the later Christian theologians. He helped to boost Christianity in Africa and left us all with a wealth of writings that will remain priceless to this day.

This evening we thank God for the life of St Augustine and all that he contributed to the life of the church.

I would like to close with a prayer:

"O Lord God who art the light of the minds that know thee, the life of the souls that love thee, and the strength of the hearts that serve thee: Help us, following the example of thy great servant Augustine of Hippo, so to know thee that we may love thee that we may truly love thee that we may fully serve thee, whom to serve is perfect freedom: through Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen.