

3rd Sunday of Year

Looking back on his life the great Saint Augustine of Hippo in North Africa wrote how he came to be convinced of the truth of the Christian Faith and to change his way of life. He was in a garden and hear a voice that seemed to be of a child telling him to "take up and read" which he took as a divine command to open the Bible and read the first thing he saw. The book opened at Romans chapter 13, verses 13 and 14, which speaks of setting aside riotous behaviour, excess drinking and sexual immorality. It spoke to him in the heart of his existing way of life. It was this that led him to take the final step of approaching St Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan where he was living, to seek baptism.

However, this momentous step in his life did not come out of the blue. His mother St Monica had brought him up in the Christian faith and he had read extensively although he had dismissed Christian teachings and gone off in a different direction. He had heard of Ambrose's skills at public speaking and it was this that drew him to Milan. Augustine quickly discovered that Ambrose was a spectacular orator. Like Augustine, Ambrose was a master of rhetoric, but older and more experienced. Soon, their relationship grew, as Augustine wrote, "And I began to love him, of course, not at the first as a teacher of the truth, for I had entirely despaired of finding that in your Church—but as a friendly man." Eventually, Augustine says that he was spiritually led into the faith of Christianity. It was no longer the oratorical skills but the subjects of which Ambrose spoke that fascinated him but still he hesitated until his experience in the garden.

In St Augustine we see at the level of an individual what the people of Israel experienced in our 1st reading. Their faith, already weak, had been shaken by the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem and the exile of their leaders. They had been allowed to return but still lived in a ruined city. God inspired their leaders Ezra and Nehemiah to read to them the Law he had given to Moses so as to reconnect them with their roots and breathe new life into them. It was a challenge! First they no longer spoke Hebrew but Aramaic and so Ezra had to translate and explain as he went along. When they understood how far they had departed from the way of life God expected of them they were moved to tears but Nehemiah told them not to weep but to rejoice. It was a new start for them.

All of us are in a similar position. We are not just individuals but part of a community. The community and especially our parents and family have helped to shape our values and outlook on life. For most of us, like Augustine, that shaping has been in the Christian faith and as members of the Catholic Church and yet without an individual experience of the touch of God on our hearts it can be lifeless - powerless to transform our way of life and fill us with hope. We have been baptised and probably confirmed. We have received the gift of the Holy Spirit and yet there is some kind of obstacle within us that blocks the work of God's gift of grace.

In the Gospel Jesus comes with the key to unlock this gift for the people of his home town. He turns to the passage in Isaiah. "The spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives and to the blind new sight, to set the downtrodden free, to proclaim the Lord's year of favour." He then adds, "This text is being fulfilled today even as you listen." He speaks those words to each of us just as he spoke through Ezra and Nehemiah or through the child overheard by Augustine.

In the weeks ahead we hear St Luke's account of this wonderful message of hope and transformation – and in the case of St Luke with his special emphasis on the gift of healing and mercy. It is a message for us as individuals but also as a community. St Paul reminds us that we are parts of one body. We share each other's sorrows and joys. Our gifts are given to us for the benefit of all – not least our gift of faith. We support each other by our prayer and example. The one who breathes life and hope into us as individuals also breathes life and hope into our community. This is not just a pious hope. The Lord tells us it is being fulfilled today even as we listen.