

ST AUGUSTINE'S USE OF THE PSALMS

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THE PSALTER WAS FOR THE HEBREWS a prayerful recapitulation of the Old Testament. For the Church Fathers the Psalter was a prolonged prophecy of the life, passion, resurrection of Christ and of the pilgrimage of the Church in dialogue with God. In their commentaries on Scripture the Fathers of the Church found Christ foreshadowed in types throughout the whole of the Old Testament. 'Our whole purpose is,' commented Augustine, 'when we hear a psalm, a prophet, or the law, all having been written before our Lord Jesus Christ came in the flesh, to see Christ there, to understand Christ there' (EnP 99:1).¹ David was seen as a type of Christ. St Hilary, St Ambrose, St Jerome and St Augustine commented on the psalms. From the latter's letter (85.20) we know that as early as AD 391, the year of his ordination to the priesthood, he wrote three essays on the psalms which were corrected by Jerome. Then, to become familiar with the tradition, he read the *Tractatus in Psalmos* of Jerome. Augustine's commentaries on the psalms, however, were guided not only by tradition but by personal interpretations and by the rules of Tyconius. Augustine used one of the Latin texts available in North Africa; with the Septuagint he corrected errors in the Latin translation, especially in Psalm 119. He thought that David was the unique author of all the psalms.

The Fathers of the Church interpreted the psalms as not merely recording historical events of the Old Testament with its promise of a coming Messiah, but as offering thanks for the presence of Christ with his saving work.

Then let the trees of the forest sing
before the coming of the Lord,
who comes to judge the nations,
to set the earth aright,
restoring the world to order.

(Ps 96:15)

And Augustine comments: 'He will judge the whole world, for it was the whole for which he paid the price' (EnP 96:15).

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Christians now celebrate in the psalms the fulfilment of the Covenant in the coming of Christ and the expectation that the one who triumphed over death by love will come again. Jesus Christ, who on earth prayed the psalms, now prays them with his members. He won these members by his life and death on the cross (EnP 138:12). With us, therefore, as we pray the psalms, he offers to the Father praise, gratitude, sorrow for our sins, petitions for grace. In some psalms Christ alone speaks as invisible Head of the Church (Ps 91: 14–16; 34: 12–23). At other times the 'total Christ' speaks – Head and members. 'For the voice is that sweet voice, so well known to the ears of the church, the voice of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the voice of the church toiling, sojourning upon earth . . .' Sometimes the voice of the Church alone can be heard (EnP 5:1).

Augustine taught his congregation how to discern which verses are being prayed by Christ as Head and which ones are the voice of the Church. The impossibility of certain verses coming from Christ alone alerts one to the fact that they come from the Church (EnP 61:1). But even here, by virtue of the close union between Christ and his members, it is Christ who always prays with us to the Father whenever we make a psalm our prayer.

Many seek union with God in prayer. A unique feature of the psalm-prayers is that of Christ uniting himself with the human condition of his members, sharing our emotions, our needs and desires, and transforming them into faith, hope and charity. By his compassion for his human sisters and brothers Christ continues to arouse love for himself and strengthens the bond between Head and members who adhere to their Head by love.

This doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ is alive in the psalms. Augustine believed firmly in Christ's prediction that he would be espoused to his Church as one flesh – so much so that he experienced Christ's own presence throughout all his members more vividly than their diversity. There is only one divine Head of the Church, namely Christ, and Augustine states that the term 'Bridegroom' applies only to a divine Person. All others are simply human and therefore belong to the body of Christ under his headship. The invisible Head, the Bridegroom, unites himself to his body as two in one flesh . . . so Christ is many members, one body (1 Cor 12:12; EnP 31, II: 4). Therefore the psalms express both the inner life of the Church – its longings, sorrows and joys – and the desires of God for his people.

As the psalms express a spiritual history of humanity, they were quite naturally used by Augustine to convey the emotions he felt during

his own spiritual journey. From his conversion in AD 386 until his death in AD 430 his soul reverberated with the sentiments in the psalms. Even before baptism he wept profusely as he prayed aloud the fourth psalm. He died reciting the penitential psalms which hung upon the wall of his room.

How Augustine wove the psalms into his own life-story shows the role they can play in private prayer. In each psalm, slowly prayed, we are praying by the power of the Holy Spirit with Christ and his Church. In praying with us Christ offers us the grace to surrender to God's will. In his *Confessions*, begun in AD 397, Augustine chose psalms most expressive of his youthful plight of enslavement to passions and of liberation from sin, and expressive of contrition and gratitude. As time progressed he lived out the meaning of the messianic psalms in his own life by sharing deeply the sufferings and joys of Christ.

The psalms seem to structure the account he gives of his spiritual development, an account so marked by the contrasting emotions of grief and joy. In Psalm 31 he discovered the sentiments suitable for that mire of misery described in the first seven books of the *Confessions*, and appropriate to relief on acknowledging his sins.

Pity me, Lord,
I hurt all over;
my eyes are swollen,
my heart and body ache . . .
. . . whoever seeks your help
finds how lavish you are.
(Ps 31:10, 20b)

For Augustine 'confession' means not only an admission of sinfulness but also, and even more, a praise of God's goodness. Perhaps this idea was inspired by the opening of Psalm 92:

How good to thank you, Lord,
to praise your name, Most High,
to sing your love at dawn,
your faithfulness at dusk . . .

The *Confessions* is a prose-poem spoken to God, a long prayer that we overhear. Book one opens with two sentences praising God based on expressions in the psalms: 'you are great, Lord, and highly to be praised' (cf 47:3); 'great is your power and your wisdom is immeasurable' (cf 145:3). Augustine views the praise of God as a deep natural

longing of the human soul, even by those far removed from God who unconsciously seek him. Restless is the heart of one whose natural desire for God is frustrated. Augustine's experience of such restlessness originated, he later learned, from his searching for God everywhere except within himself, the place where God was intimately present. Longing to forget all his past evils in the embrace of God who cared so much for his love that he commanded him to love him, Augustine wished to hear with the ears of the heart what he meant to God, and so he prayed: 'Tell me you will save me' (Ps 35:3).

His childhood faults he sees as having made him mere flesh and wind, going on its way and not 'returning' (Ps 78:39). This was an alienation from God whom he abandoned to pursue the lowest things of creation. Yet even as a boy he loved truth and this was to be the thread of Ariadne making possible a 'return' to his Creator. The bitterness, disgust and pain he endured in the pleasures sought by his 'sham liberty' he saw now as punishment directed to his healing.

How right your judgments,
Lord, how wisely you humble me.
Comfort me with your love,
just as you promised.

(Ps 119:75-76)

On Psalm 25:1 Augustine commented: 'Christ is here speaking in the name of his church; indeed the content of the psalm applies to the Christian people already converted to God'. How ardently Augustine could pray such verses as this:

Remember me, not my faults,
the sins of my youth.
To show your own goodness,
God, remember me.

(Ps 25:7)

And in his own words he continued: 'Not only have you pardoned the faults I committed before I reached the faith, but the sacrifices of a contrite heart will make you deal mercifully when considering my present sin which is grievous indeed, for even the true path is by no means free from stumbling blocks' (EnP 25:11).

At one point in the *Confessions*, Augustine's mother, Monica, has a dream. She takes it as a promise that one day Augustine will forsake Manichaeism and stand with her as a Christian. Augustine begins his

account with a sentence alluding to two psalm verses: "You put forth your hand from on high", and from this deep darkness "you delivered my soul" (C III,xi,19: cf Ps 144:7, 86:13). He declares that he is willing to make known the sins of his early life because the fact he can say that God has forgiven them makes his praise of God all the greater. These sins, of course, manifest how destructive human activity becomes when no reference is made to God.

Later, as a bishop, recalling the unhappiness following the death of his Thagastan friend, Augustine realized that the misery of this loss occurred because he was disconnected from God, the source of permanence in one's love: 'Let all who revere the Lord say, God's love is for ever' (Ps 118:4). The enjoyment of the beautiful things of earth should have lifted his heart to Beauty itself, their source. Instead, he wandered away from God (Ps 119:25-26). Without contrition and without humility he was left to himself.

I slip toward death;
revive me as you promised.
I tell my story; you answer
and teach me your ways.

(Ps 119:25-26)

Augustine now knew, years later, that no thought of his at that time, no desire, no deed was hidden from God. Those who try to escape from God fail to realize that he is everywhere. Their pride is the obstacle to relating to him. This applies also to the learned, high in their own estimation, proud of knowing the existence of God but not accepting the way to him: the Incarnate Word. Such, according to Augustine, were the late Greek philosophers. They needed to descend from themselves in order to ascend to God through the Only-Begotten (C V, iii, 5).

Through God's secret providence the learned Augustine was brought to face his shameful errors (Manichaeism) so that he would see and hate them: 'I know my evil well; it stares me in the face' (Ps 51:5; C V, vi, 11). The proud assertions of Mani were recognized as false when compared with the early philosophers' explanations of the heavenly bodies. And eventually Ambrose's preaching opened the ears of Augustine to truth, described in the words of the psalms as 'the abundance of your sustenance', 'the gladness of oil' (Ps 45:8). From Ambrose he learned to interpret Scripture spiritually in the way we find in his very longest work, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, from which many of our quotations in this essay are taken.

After the experience with Manichaean falsehoods he lost hope in finding truth (C VI, i, 1). Yet he never ceased to believe that God exists and has a providential care over human beings. Under Ambrose's influence he came to believe that Scripture could reveal what God is like and the means to reach him. For would Scripture have such authority throughout the whole world unless God wanted these writings to be the means of coming to faith in him? But Augustine's pre-judgement that nothing is real unless it is material (was this Stoic influence?) prevented his acceptance of what Scripture taught of God. This philosophical roadblock was removed through his reading of Plotinus, who gave convincing evidence for the immateriality of God and of the human soul.

When his reading of the Platonic books led him to return into himself, he described what happened:

I saw above the same eye of my soul the immutable light higher than my mind . . . And you gave a shock to the weakness of my sight by the strong radiance of your rays, and I trembled with love and awe. And I found myself far from you in the region of dissimilarity. (C VII, x, 16)

Augustine directed this experience to God in the words of the psalmist:

But my joy is to be near you, Lord. (Ps 73:28a)

You rebuke us for our sins . . . (Ps 39:12a)

As a deer craves running water,
I thirst for you, my God. (Ps 42:2)

Psalm 31:23 expresses what happened here:

I said too quickly,
'God has cut me off'.
But you heard my cry
when I prayed for help.

In a transport of soul he had beheld something indescribably sublime, but was not yet wholly lost in what he saw. A kind of lightning flash, so to speak, of light eternal lit up the scene and made him feel that he had not yet attained it. He realized to what degree he was enfeebled and fettered with human ills, whereupon he cried:

I said in my excess of mind: I am cast away from before your eyes.
Such is the ineffable vision seen in ecstasy, that it makes me realize

how far off I am, who have not yet attained to it. That man had already attained, who declared that he had been taken up to the third heaven and there heard words beyond the power of speech, not granted to man to utter. (EnP 38:12)

The psalm on which Augustine is commenting here continues: 'Lord, you see what I long for, you hear all my sighs' (Ps 38:10).

Soon after this episode of what some, though not all, call a true mystical experience, an African friend, Ponticianus, visited Augustine and told him of two government officials who had surrendered their earthly careers and their fiancées to follow the example of St Antony. Augustine compared his own indecision to their decisiveness. God confronted Augustine with himself, and sadly he saw his own iniquity and ugliness: 'Your mouth serves evil, and your tongue savors deceit' (Ps 50:19). He united his voice to that of the psalmist:

Have pity, for I am spent;
heal me, hurt to the bone,
wracked to the limit.
Lord, how long? How long?
(Ps 6:3-4)

Time was needed to impress his soul with the wound that was self-inflicted. One of his first commentaries years later was an explanation of this cry of the psalmist:

Who does not see at once the picture of a soul struggling against its disorders, while the physician makes no haste whatever to help in order to make the patient realize the evils into which sin has plunged him? Far from thinking God cruel when he is asked: 'Lord, how long? How long?', we should understand that in his kindness he is showing the soul the wound it has inflicted upon itself. The truth is that we lost him not because he was absent who is everywhere present, but because we turned our backs upon him. (EnP 7:4)

At last he picked up St Paul's letter to the Romans (13:13-14) and at the words: 'put on the Lord Jesus Christ' he surrendered his will wholeheartedly to God. In telling the effect of this conversion on his mother, Monica, Augustine echoed Psalm 30:12: 'You changed her grief into joy'.

During the interval between conversion and baptism he went to Cassiciacum with relatives and friends. In Book IX he reveals what praying the psalms there did for him:

My God, how I cried to you when I read the Psalms of David, songs of faith, utterances of devotion which allow no pride of spirit to enter in. I was but a beginner in authentic love of you, a catechumen resting at a country villa with another catechumen, Alypius . . . How I cried out to you in those Psalms, and how they kindled my love for you! I was fired by an enthusiasm to recite them, were it possible, to the entire world, in protest against the pride of the human race. Yet they are being sung in all the world and 'there is none who can hide himself from your heat' (Ps 18,7) . . . As I read the fourth Psalm during that period of contemplation, I would have liked them [the Manichees] to be somewhere nearby without me knowing they were there, watching my face and hearing my cries as I prayed to see what the Psalm had done to me. 'When I called upon you, you heard me, God of my righteousness, in tribulation you gave me enlargement. Have mercy on me, Lord, and hear my prayer.' (C IX, iv, 8, quoting Ps 4:2)

Augustine declared that he 'trembled with fear and at the same time burned with hope and exultation' at the mercy of God: 'Whoever seeks your help finds how lavish you are' (Ps 31:20). All these emotions exuded from his eyes and his voice as he heard the Spirit say: 'How long, proud fools, will you insult my honour, loving lies and chasing shadows?' (Ps 4:3). And Augustine concluded: 'As I heard the psalm, I trembled at words spoken to people such as I recalled myself to have been. For in the fantasies which I had taken for the truth, there was vanity and deceit' (C IX, iv, 9).

In these months of renewal prior to his baptism he discovered in the psalms the expression of his penitence, and of his joy as he grew in delight in the God who gives gladness to the heart (Ps 4:8). For this convert, who was by nature emotionally sensitive, the psalms were an assurance that the command to love God with one's whole heart signifies God's pleasure in the emotional dimension of human love.

After the baptism, they set out for Africa, but were delayed at Ostia where Monica died. At the requiem, 'Evodius took up the Psalter and began to chant a psalm. The entire household responded to him: "I will sing to you, O Lord, sing of your justice and love" ' (Ps 101:1b; C IX, xii, 31). In the books and letters Augustine wrote during his next few years in his Thagastan community, we can see him having recourse to the psalms to express Christian truth and sentiments.

At Hippo, when he wrote the *Confessions*, he acknowledged in Book X that, like everyone, he was still subject in daily life to temptations of every kind, and needed to seek God's help in order to overcome them. In his third sermon on Psalm 36, written after he had publicly denounced Donatism at the Council of Carthage (411), he made a

similar admission in response to a Donatist bishop's attack on his personal life. The Donatist declared that Augustine had never been baptized and was a secret Manichee. In this sermon he does not deny his past sins, but almost exults in them:

the less we deny our past, the more do we praise God who has forgiven us . . . But whatever I was, in Christ's name that is finished. They cannot pretend to know what they are blaming in my present life. There are still things to blame in me, but they can scarcely be expected to know them. I struggle a great deal with my thoughts, fighting against my evil suggestions and waging a daily and almost incessant warfare against the temptations of the enemy trying to overthrow me . . . (EnP 36, III:19)

He saw these Donatists as making personal accusations to distract attention from the question of the true Church. He warned them to accept the truth ' . . . otherwise, if you are captious and crafty, and everlastingly bent on picking holes in the basket (i.e. the Church) that contains it, you may never attain to tasting the bread' (EnP 36, III:20).

In the last three books of the *Confessions*, Augustine uses many psalms to praise God for his creation of a magnificent world. 'God, how fertile your wisdom! You shape each thing, you fill the world with what you do' (Ps 104:24; C XI, ix, 11). In this wisdom, the Word of God, the Light of minds, Augustine taught that human persons participate when they judge truly about reality. Referring in Book XII to the same psalm verse, he said: 'It is true, Lord, that you made heaven and earth. It is true that the "beginning" means your wisdom, in which you made all things' (C XII, xix, 28). In this wisdom, so long sought by him, he now takes delight: 'Let my song give joy to God who is a joy to me' (Ps 104:34).

After celebrating wisdom as the source of creation, Augustine went on to celebrate it as the source of divine revelation. In Book XIII he wrote:

Who but you, O God, has made for us a solid firmament of authority in your divine scripture? . . . 'Like a skin it is stretched out above us'. (C XIII, xv, 16, quoting Ps 104:2)

We have not come across any other books so destructive of pride . . . I have not met with other utterances so pure, which so persuasively move me to confession, make my neck bow to your yoke, and bring me to offer a free worship. (C XIII, xv, 17)

These passages refer to Scripture in general, but who can doubt, given all the quotations from the psalms in the *Confessions*, given that

Augustine's commentaries on the psalms constitute his longest work, and given his directives to his monks to recite the psalms six times daily, that he has the psalms particularly in mind?

Toward the end of his life he delivered at Carthage four long sermons on Psalm 104. Augustine transposes this psalm's praise to God for creation to praise for God's institution of the Church. As God created the world through Wisdom, his Son, so he instituted the Church upon Christ, its foundation. According to Augustine, there is a hidden meaning in all that the psalms say about bodily and visible creation. 'It has pleased Our Lord God himself to exhort you by us to this realization: that in all that is said of the bodily and visible creation, we may seek something spiritually hidden, in which when found, we may rejoice' (EnP 104:11). And so Augustine does just that:

The earth is full of your creation . . . but it seems to me to speak here of some new creature; old things have passed away; behold old things have become new. And all things are of God. All who believe in Christ, who 'put off the old man and put on the new' are a new creature. 'The earth is full of your works.' On one spot of the earth he was crucified, in one small spot that seed fell into the earth, and died; but brought forth great fruit. (EnP 104:31)

Augustine ended this long sermon by returning to the opening verse of the psalm: "'Bless the Lord, O my soul" for what the Lord gave to both of us: to me understanding and power of language; to you attention and earnest listening'. He entreated his hearers to recall what was said of becoming a new creature, and to discuss it with others (EnP 104:46).

For Augustine, the psalms were instructions and exhortations instilling the authentic sentiments and convictions of the citizens of the City of God. They are the prayer life of those on pilgrimage to the heavenly Jerusalem. Augustine wrote that what is being sung and praised in Psalm 87 is a 'city whose citizens we are in so far as we are Christians' (EnP 87:1). It is a city to which Christ made himself the Way. 'Walking thus in Christ, and pilgrims while walking, and sighing in longing for a certain ineffable dwelling within that city, a rest such that "eye has not seen nor ear heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man to conceive . . ."' (EnP 87:1). This city is built upon the foundation of the apostles and the prophets, and its cornerstone is Jesus Christ himself. Of this city the psalmist sings: 'Great is your renown, City of God' (Ps 87:3). Equally, however, Augustine taught that in praising God by praying the psalms we are not merely preparing for eternal happiness but already

participating in it. 'To live with you is joy, to praise you and never stop' (Ps 84:5).

Lamentations, of course, now mingle with our praise because we do not possess God permanently. When we finally possess him 'all our sorrows will be taken from us, and nothing will remain but praise, pure and everlasting' (EnP 87:8). There shall be joy such as we know not here on earth, and there is nothing here to compare with that delight.

Conclusion

Just as in his *Confessions* Augustine found in the psalms the most realistic way to relate the events of his life to the goodness and mercy of God, so also the themes present in the psalms are woven throughout the twenty-two books of the *City of God*, recording the spiritual drama of all humanity. In this work, as in so many of his commentaries on the psalms, Augustine focuses on the twofold love which enables pilgrims to travel to the glorious City of God: the love of God and the love of neighbour (EnP 18:11; 10:15). This love is aroused by God's unconditional love for each and every one, a love shining forth in the life and death of Jesus Christ. This love is a magnet drawing the soul to God just as it drew Augustine out of his darkness into the marvellous light of God's truth and goodness. By the grace of Christ, Augustine taught, all restless hearts even on earth can find in this light a blissful repose; hoping for eternal happiness as members of the communion of saints who will enjoy together the vision of God the Trinity and of one another in God.

NOTE

¹ The psalm translations and numbering in this essay are taken from the ICEL version, apart from the occasional instance when Augustine's own reading, based on the Vulgate, has been followed. Quotations from the *Enarrationes in psalmos* (EnP) are taken from the Schaff translation published in *The Nicene and post-Nicene fathers* (New York, 1894), except for the material from the third sermon on Psalm 36, which is taken from the translation by Hebgin and Corrigan in the Ancient Christian Writers series (Westminster, Md., 1961). Quotations from the *Confessions* (C) follow the Chadwick translation (Oxford, 1992).