

A Change in Life - From Pelagius to St Augustine.

There was a famous controversy at the beginning of the fifth century between Pelagius and St Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo. It has a perennial relevance. Pelagius, a young Briton became involved with a group of young enthusiastic ascetics in Rome. It was a lay movement and he was its spokesman. Putting it bluntly Pelagius held that we achieved heaven solely by our own hard work. He made such comments as – ‘Since perfection is possible for man, it is obligatory’, and ‘God made man to execute his demands and would condemn to hell anyone who failed to perform a single one of them’. This was terrifying stuff, and so Augustine attacked (‘Contra Pelagius’) saying that was wrong; we get to heaven by God’s grace and we do our best to cooperate with it. It is a healing process. Pelagianism was condemned by various Councils in the fifth century, but in a half-hearted way it has lived on and has reappeared in various guises in the last two thousand years. It can even linger in some form in ourselves, particularly early in our lives.

Let us look at the early part of our life. We think we have to be in control. We strive for success both material and spiritual. There is a strong element of the Pelagian in us and we want to have all the answers. The whole educational system is geared for success and to be self-reliant. In many ways, of course, that is good, and it can spill into our life afterwards. For example when we pray we want to feel satisfied, we want to feel it is worthwhile. It might be going too far to say that we want to master prayer, but there is a strong element of that in us. We want to have successful structures, correct rituals, things that make us feel safe. In faith, we seek understanding, we want to *know* God and have intellectual certainty. Then we want to feel good about ourselves and try to prove our moral infallibility. In all this there is a large degree of egocentricity.

As our life progresses all that begins to change and the Pelagian in us receives some knocks and we begin to see the wisdom of St Augustine. Our moral infallibility founders and we realise that this side of the grave we are sinners. Then we remember that Jesus came to call sinners – ‘It is not the healthy that need the doctor, but the sick. Go and learn the meaning of the words ‘What I want is mercy not sacrifice’. And indeed I did not come to call the virtuous, but sinners’. (Mt 9:12-13). Forgiveness is of the essence of love, and therefore of the essence of God. The Gospels teem with examples of God’s forgiveness. Just look at the parables – the parable of the Prodigal Son, of the Lost Sheep, etc. or those moving incidents in the Gospels e.g. when Jesus meets the adulterous woman at the well and says to her : ‘Has no one condemned you?’ ‘No one sir’ she replied. ‘Neither do I condemn you’ said Jesus, ‘go away and don’t sin any more’. (John 8:10-11); or that moving incident of forgiveness of the thief on the Cross: -‘This day you will be with me in paradise’- or when

Peter asks Jesus, ‘Lord, how often should I forgive my brother if he wrongs me? As often as seven times?’ Jesus answered, ‘Not seven times, I tell you, but seventy-seven times’ (Mt 18:21-22). Jesus came to forgive sinners. That message rings out clearly in the Gospels. That remarkable 15th century laywoman St Catherine of Siena once wrote to some friends who were haunted by their sins - ‘Isn’t God more willing to forgive than we are to commit sin? Isn’t he the bearer of our iniquities? So open your mind’s eye and see how much God loves you.’ It is our awareness of God’s healing love and forgiveness that draws us to God. Mary Magdalen was a wonderful witness of this - ‘Her sins, her many sins must have been forgiven, or she would not have shown such great love’ (Luke 7:49). Leonard Cohen, the Canadian Jewish song-writer, has a famous line: ‘Everything is cracked, and it is through the crack that the light gets in’. As we learn our fallibility perhaps we learn a little humility. The Greek word ‘hubris’(pride) means precisely the refusal to be humbled by what should be humbling. It is rare for Prime Ministers to admit their policies were wrong. Blair did not do it for the Iraq War, nor Cameron for an ill-prepared referendum, etc. and yet it is through acceptance of failure that wholeness is achieved. St Augustine famously said - ‘the real sin is not in the falling but in the failure to get up.’

So there we are – sinners, forgiven sinners, loved by God, utterly dependent on God.

Then comes suffering. Suffering will happen to all of us, it is part of the human journey. It is significant that the Cross is the symbol of Christianity; but of course it is the acceptance of the Cross that leads to the Resurrection. It was so for Jesus and it is so for those who want to follow him. There is the example of recovering addicts who end up thanking God for their suffering as it brakes down their false self and opens them up to the love of God and others. There is a dignity, peace and holiness about those who have suffered much and have accepted it.

So failure and suffering can make us humble and aware of our incompleteness and hence the need for God’s grace. That is why we can say that in the second part of our life we move away from an immature Pelagianism in which we think we can do everything ourselves, and move towards a greater awareness of the wisdom of St Augustine. Augustine himself experienced that change in his own life. During his early years he had tried to ‘go it alone’ and had made a mess of things. Then after his conversion he became increasingly aware of his dependence on God’s grace. In all aspects of his life he began to see the futility of a self-centred striving for success. Even those in worldly terms who rise to the top of the mountain realise when they arrive there is only the slope downwards. St Therese of Lisieux once wrote – ‘You want to scale the

mountain, but the Good Lord wants you to descend, for he is waiting for you at the bottom in the fertile valley of humility'. We have to descend to where we need help. The Orthodox Church has the 'Jesus Prayer' which is repeated as a mantra – 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner'. So our striving for moral infallibility founders and we find an extraordinary joy in God's loving forgiveness.

The same pattern shows itself with the question of 'Faith'. Our striving to comprehend God and to understand his immensity, founders. That youthful demand for certainty is of course naïve. In the first half of our life there is much of the Apostle Thomas in us – 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands...and put my hand into his side...I refuse to believe' (John 20:25). Eventually we come to accept intellectual doubt, because we accept the limitations of the human mind to comprehend things infinitely beyond us. Wisdom lies in mystery and unknowing. That is why great theologians like St Augustine and St Bonaventure talk about 'docta ignorantia' (learned ignorance). Faith involves the acceptance of doubt, so that we are agnostic for the very reason that we live by faith. Then we come to realise that faith is 'trust' in a *person*. It is summed up by St Paul in I Corinthians 1:26 – 'The Jews demand signs, the Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified' - a person. It takes some time to make the change and absorb the fact that faith is essentially personal, and it demands *trust*. To trust is to have courage.. Meister Eckhart once wrote – 'Why is it that people do not bear fruit? Because they cannot trust either God or themselves. Love cannot distrust.' Trust is a casualty of modern society. God trusts us, he gives us free-will. There is that lovely incident in the Gospel when Mary Magdalen the public sinner washes the feet of Jesus with her tears and anoints them. She trusts Jesus, and Jesus trusts her. So we are called from the cerebral to the personal. The great General of the Jesuits, Pedro Arupe, when addressing the World Youth Congress said to them – 'May I give you one piece of advice – make Jesus your friend'.

Trust is articulated in prayer, so we can say that prayer is the articulation of our faith. Here again we can see a shift in the two halves of our life. At the beginning of our life perhaps we think we have to be successful in prayer. We want to be satisfied, feel that we are making progress, expecting to have our prayers answered, maybe even thinking we must master prayer. Then later on we come to experience our inadequacy, we learn to 'waste time', to be receptive and to stand empty-handed before God. So we don't seek results rather we learn 'to be' in the presence of the one who loves us. We move in the latter part of our life towards simplicity.

There is much in our life that can be characterized by the words 'letting-go', 'accepting'. We learn to accept we are sinners, but forgiven sinners. We learn

to accept suffering as part of our human condition, a reminder that we are only in this world for a short time and that the fullness of life in God's love awaits us. We learn to accept the unknowableness of God, the limitations of our minds and understanding. So we are called to trust, and our trust is in a person who loves us unconditionally. We learn to accept our inadequacy in prayer and to be content to be in the presence of the one who loves us.

So in the latter part of our life there is a greater freedom and a greater simplicity. There is no 'I' to protect or 'I' to project. We should be happy in our skins because we are loved by God as we are. We die to that false self of our early life and rise to our true self in the latter part of our life. 'Dying' and 'Rising' is a central strand in the Gospels and it repeats itself in so many circumstances in our own life. You could call them dress-rehearsals for our final death and resurrection. So our life should be full of HOPE.