

PAPER CHURCH

On the Shoulders of Giants – St Augustine

Sunday 21 June 2020

Some Tips

Our hope is that this is a resource that will help us all to engage meaningfully with God's word for us and invite an open and experimental sense of worship today. Use it in a way that feels comfortable and helpful to you. Here are a couple of suggestions that might help the process.

Get prepared for worship

Have your Bible close by, perhaps set up some favourite music to listen to, find some food and drink to have during communion. It doesn't have to be bread and grape juice; it could be whatever is available (tea and a biscuit) to use in this symbolic time.

Get into a 'sacred' space

When we are not physically in a dedicated worship space (like a church building), it is important to mentally and spiritually shift into a sense of worship.

Be intentional. Sit somewhere where you feel receptive and responsive to God (e.g. a cosy chair or outside in the garden). Have some visual representation of God (perhaps a small cross, your Bible, a symbol or image). Start with a few moments of silence and deep breathing.

Consider your environment

Consider your environment and what will work for you. If you have others in your house (house-mates/family), consider sharing this time with them, each reading or participating as appropriate. You might simply reflect individually, in your own time and space. Afterwards, you might connect with others through technology to share your reflections, or an encouragement, with them.

Call To Worship

Psalm 95:1-7

Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord;
let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation.

² Let us come before him with thanksgiving
and extol him with music and song.

³ For the Lord is the great God,
the great King above all gods.

⁴ In his hand are the depths of the earth,
and the mountain peaks belong to him.

⁵ The sea is his, for he made it,
and his hands formed the dry land.

⁶ Come, let us bow down in worship,
let us kneel before the Lord our Maker;

⁷ for he is our God
and we are the people of his pasture,
the flock under his care.

Song: What the Lord Has Done In Me

Let the weak say I am strong
Let the poor say I am rich
Let the blind say I can see
It's what the Lord has done in me

Hosanna Hosanna
To the Lamb that was slain
Hosanna Hosanna
Jesus died and rose again

Into the river I will wade
There my sins are washed away
From the heaven's mercy stream
Of the Saviour's love for me

I will rise from waters deep
Into the saving arms of God
I will sing salvation songs
Jesus Christ has set me free

CCLI Song # 2582803

Reuben Morgan

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Song: And Can It Be

And can it be that I should gain
An interest in the Savior's blood
Died He for me who caused His pain
For me who Him to death pursued
Amazing love how can it be
That Thou my God shouldst die for me
Amazing love how can it be
That Thou my God shouldst die for me

He left His Father's throne above
So free so infinite His grace
Emptied Himself of all but love
And bled for Adam's helpless race
'Tis mercy all immense and free
For O my God it found out me
'Tis mercy all immense and free
For O my God it found out me

No condemnation now I dread
Jesus and all in Him is mine
Alive in Him my living Head
And clothed in righteousness divine
Bold I approach th'eternal throne
And claim the crown through Christ my own
Bold I approach th'eternal throne
And claim the crown through Christ my own

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Song: Heaven to Earth (We Are Blessed)

Bring heaven to earth, Lord
Bring peace where there's fear
Bring life where there's death, Lord
Bring joy in these tears

Bring love where there's lust, Lord
Bring hope where there's pain
Bring rest where there's chaos
Bring faith where there's fame.

You invite us to partner with you
To see your kingdom come

We are blessed, to bless a world in pieces
We are loved, to love where love is not.
We are changed, to be the change you promised
We are freed, to be your hands, O God

Lord we cry out to you
Change the atmosphere
Breathe new life in all who gather here

Bring home to the homeless
Bring keys to the chained
Bring worth to the purchased
And touch to the shamed.

Bring flesh from your word, Lord
Bring truth where there's spin
Bring risk where there's safety
And grace where there's sin

In the broken, we shall see restored
the image of our King

Bring justice to profit
Bring patience to growth
Bring wisdom to progress
Like food for the soul

Bring freedom from debt, Lord
An end to excess
Bring closer your kingdom
By quiet success

May we grow in the knowledge of you
Through every heart and face

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Bible Reading: Ephesians 2:1-10 (MSG)

If you are with others perhaps take turns to read different sections

It wasn't so long ago that you were mired in that old stagnant life of sin. You let the world, which doesn't know the first thing about living, tell you how to live. You filled your lungs with polluted unbelief, and then exhaled disobedience. We all did it, all of us doing what we felt like doing, when we felt like doing it, all of us in the same boat. It's a wonder God didn't lose his temper and do away with the whole lot of us. Instead, immense in mercy and with an incredible love, he embraced us. He took our sin-dead lives and made us alive in Christ. He did all this on his own, with no help from us! Then he picked us up and set us down in highest heaven in company with Jesus, our Messiah.

Now God has us where he wants us, with all the time in this world and the next to shower grace and kindness upon us in Christ Jesus. Saving is all his idea, and all his work. All we do is trust him enough to let him do it. It's God's gift from start to finish! We don't play the major role. If we did, we'd probably go around bragging that we'd done the whole thing! No, we neither make nor save ourselves. God does both the making and saving. He creates each of us by Christ Jesus to join him in the work he does, the good work he has gotten ready for us to do, work we had better be doing.

Message

Harley Kitchen

Continuing with our series on Christian giants of the past – we are “standing on their shoulders”.

Augustine lived during the 4th Century in north Africa (Algeria area on the coast of the Mediterranean). In his early days he rejected Christ, and then he began the torturous pathway to faith, like so many adults have trod, overcoming barriers and opening up to God.

He became leader of the Church in Hippo, which is now the modern port city of Annaba, Algeria, with a large Church on top of the hill - St Augustine Basilica (image below).



Called a “Doctor” of the Church, he was not only a bright scholar, leader of people but also a healer of the Church. In those early centuries the Church was one institution and any heretical teaching had to be challenged. Different to today, where people with particular theological interpretations can gather together, set up their own Church, and it’s OK (except when they dominate people’s lives, demand a lot of money, break up families, etc.). In those days, heresies had to be challenged! Seen as dangerous to the future of the whole Christian movement! And it was in the addressing of those issues that Augustine became a hero.

As he grew up he had wanted to be a better person than he was – he had some friends with whom he broke the law, stealing things. As a young adult he had begun a live-in relationship with a young lady – and they had a son born to them. He had thrown himself into study and become a silver-tongued orator of philosophy in a prestigious place of learning.

If you asked him at that time about faith in God, he possibly would have said “I think I am confident in my ability to manage my own destiny” (probably with a cigar in one hand and a brandy in the other).

I wonder if you have ever been in a conversation, maybe at school, Uni, work, over coffee and heard someone say about faith in God “I’m doing it my own way”? They may be saying “I live a good life, I think I can pass any test”. They may be saying “I’m OK, the traditions I was brought up with, family religious ceremonies, they will carry me through”. Maybe a bad experience of the Church in the past, or an ongoing battle in life with pain or disappointment comes up in conversation “I’ve been hurt by life – don’t like God if he lets bad things happen to people”.

The pathway, especially for an adult, to come to faith in Christ is often ... torturous. The issue is, to decide to turn from your own self-centred life and open yourself to God who loves you, Christ who died for you and can come to live within you by His Spirit. Therefore, beginning a personal relationship with God for life.

But an adult is already carrying a lot of baggage, which gets in the way. Family expectations of who you are – parents who might say “Oh, you really shouldn’t get religious – it could be quite unsettling for all!” There may be attitudes from early days, negative perspectives that are quite hard to break away from. Life’s habits that have grown – that may have grown into addictions ...

But the biggest is independence. To surrender yourself to a higher power is an affront to independence! To see yourself as needing anything else than your own strength and wisdom. To take time to listen to someone speaking about their experience through faith in Christ, to actually listen, is simply not on! Or if it is, as you feign listening, it is simply time for coming up with your own objections, and dismissing it all.

Augustine himself said at that time of his life “I want chastity and obedience ... but not yet”.

A torturous pathway for an adult! How good it is when a young person responds to Christ and starts into adult life with an orientation of walking with their Lord into the future!

Augustine knew he wanted more. In his search for meaning in life, in his twenties, he tried self-denial. He tried to attain perfection through being tough on yourself. He joined a group who said you could do this; you could become an enlightened person like Jesus or Buddha or Zoroaster ... Augustine was in that group for nine years, trying to follow their special wisdom that promised a revelation of the secrets of the universe. But he found it didn't ... and the leaders of the group were not living by the ascetic standards they set for their followers, so he left them. Feeling quite unfulfilled – and actually quite desperate.

He travelled across the Mediterranean to the big cities of Rome and Milan. On a trip to Milan, he was invited by a friend to go and hear a great preacher of the day – Ambrose, the Bishop of that city. He was impressed but felt that the God whom Ambrose preached about was unattainable to him. He could simply not reach that far.

That's when God moved in his life. Augustine was walking in a garden and heard some children playing over the hedge – obviously part of the game they were playing was to read a clue written for them – so one of them cried out "Pick it up and read it! Pick it up and read it!" The effect on Augustine was electric! He ran to pick up a Bible and let it open where it wanted to. And he read these words of Paul to the Romans:

"Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature."

Let me quote Augustine's own words "I had no wish to read more and no need to do so. For in an instant, as I came to the end of the sentence, it was as though the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled ... You had converted me to Yourself ... (O God)."

He hadn't been able to convert himself. To feel forgiven and clean. To dispel the darkness of doubt and gain confidence, peace with God. But suddenly the light had come on. And he knew it was completely by God's move, God's grace, that it had happened. He rose from that moment wanting to soak in the truth of Christ – took himself away on a three month retreat – and in that time, the living truth of the grace of God to meet a seeking person and transform their life became the most important thing in life to him.

He would have read words like Colossians 2 and thought "Why hadn't I seen that before? All those years of searching!" Words like:

"When you were dead in your sins and incapable of responding to God, God brought you alive—alive with Christ! All sins forgiven, the slate wiped clean, that old arrest warrant canceled and nailed to Christ's cross."

Augustine wrote these words: "You made us for Yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in You".

Augustine was baptised, with his son, then sailed home a convinced Christian. Sadly, lost his mother and his son to illness soon after that, then sold his family property in Algeria and gave the

money to the poor and lived for a time in a monastic community, devoting himself to study and writing.

In the year 391 at the age of 37 he visited Hippo, and there, was implored by the aged bishop to offer himself for ordination as a priest. One historian says there was a small crowd there, also urging him to do so! He was reluctant, but obviously felt God's call – did so, and within a year, when the old Bishop died, he found himself in charge of the Church in that area. Obviously, it involved a lot of work with people – praying for them, helping, preaching, teaching, standing up for them against injustices, a lot of writing ...

Augustine was known as a leader who loved people: "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 the eyes to see misery and want. It has the ears to hear the sighs and sorrows of men. That is what love looks like."

But as I said before, the main reason he became a hero of the Christian Church was because he had to defend the Church from at least four different heresies, any one of which could have sent it off in the wrong direction. The one that affects us today, that Augustine particularly had to counter, was Pelagianism. Following the teaching of a man from Britain named Pelagius (one writer described him as corpulent) who said we humans can do everything needed to believe and receive eternal life, it just needed a decision of the will within us – to follow the teaching and example of Jesus who inspires us to live the Christian life – and we are entirely capable of doing so!

In fact, it can be said that in the three centuries between the writing of the New Testament and this point, that Christian thinking had been along these lines. Most people were illiterate, didn't read the Bible for themselves, so they were taught that if you willingly gave assent to the teachings in the Church, followed its practices, received its sacraments and did your best, you were right – that is all that needed to happen.

Until Augustine. It hit a brick wall in Augustine. He had not been able to willingly give assent to God or the Church. He had not been able, even with his bright intellect, to reach God in any satisfying way. Augustine said no! We humans are spiritually dead. We have been since Adam sinned. We cannot save ourselves. It is God's grace, the love of God poured into the human heart by the Holy Spirit that brings us to believe, that forgives and saves us because of the death of Christ and His risen life given to us through the Holy Spirit. Only by God's grace.

Augustine was appealing for a return to what Jesus and Paul had said! He was saying the Church had forgotten the main thing! And it wasn't just because of his own personal experience of not being able to reach God on his own (and if God had not intervened, he would still have been unhappily searching) - it was that THAT was the truth! He appealed to Paul's statement to the Ephesians:

"It is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by human strength, so that no-one can boast".

That was bedrock truth for Augustine – it led on to practical outcomes of loving ministry, social concern, fighting injustices – just as Paul stated in the very next verse in Ephesians:

"For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works..."

Or in The Message

“...to join him in the work he does, the good work he has for us to do, work we had better be doing.”

(Unfortunately, in the centuries following Augustine, the Church took his message of God’s grace and saw it as a commodity which belonged to the Church alone and it could dispense to people, and by 1200 years later, it had become a money-making racket - which deeply concerned Martin Luther, an Augustinian monk.) Luther’s call to the Church was “Live by faith! You can only be justified before God by faith”. Faith in God’s provision of forgiveness and life in Christ, not in human traditions and systems, especially ones driven by money-making!

I think he would add today “Live by faith - not just in religious-sounding words or self-help ideas that pander to our consumer society.” Live by faith – a radical counter-culture faith in Christ. And that added to Augustine’s emphasis is a call for human responsibility in receiving God’s gracious saving power in our lives – which is where we are at today.

In the year 411 troops from northern nations, the “Goths, Huns, Vandals”, destroyed (sacked) the city of Rome. Unbelievable! The Roman Empire being decimated! And now Augustine was left with a lot of refugees from Italy crowding into Hippo, and the challenge was to defend Christianity against claims that the Christian faith had caused the empire’s downfall by turning eyes away from Roman gods.

Augustine’s response to the widespread criticism came in his writing a book called “The City of God”. In it he argued that Rome was punished for past sins, not a new faith. "Mankind is divided into two sorts," he wrote. "Such as live according to man, and such as live according to God. These we call the two cities ... The Heavenly City outshines Rome. There, instead of victory, is truth." And in the writing of this, Augustine was ministering to his people facing an epidemic – as this fearful horde threatened them. Giving hope and certainty of God’s ongoing, loving grace in time of trial.

In the summer of 429, the Goths and Vandals came across the Mediterranean and invaded North Africa. Hippo, one of the few fortified cities, was besieged. In the third month of the siege, the 76-year-old Augustine died, not from an arrow but from a fever. Miraculously, his writings survived.

Augustine was certainly a man for his time. A giant, upon whose shoulders we stand. May it be that, personally and corporately, we are open to receive the grace of God. Enabling us to move from self-centred living to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ” and live in our world today by faith; faith in the amazing grace and saving power of God. Faith renewed daily by His life within us.

Quote for Reflection

Behold what you are, become what you receive.

St Augustine

Communion

Have some food and drink prepared for this time

If you're able, join us at 11am Sunday through Zoom to share in communion together at rngwd.com/communion or after you have shared in communion below, consider who you can call to have a chat as you would on a Sunday morning after a church service.

One of the things that we can be actively doing to embrace the idea of spiritual formation is to press into spiritual practices. Communion is a dedicated practice that we do week to week – to set aside time to pause and remember Jesus' death on a cross and the loving sacrifice that he made for each of us. As we pause for a few minutes and take simple food and drink – we remember Jesus meeting with his followers:

*Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it saying,
"Take, eat, this is my body".*

*Then he took the cup gave thanks and offered it to them,
and they all drank from it.*

Please share in your version of communion.

Communion is usually a time of being *in* community, breaking bread together as a symbolic remembering of Jesus' last supper with his disciples and followers. If we are not in our normal community it might feel strange to do this alone, as a couple or with only a small group of people.

Intentionally consider who you are communing with:

- Think of the people in close proximity to you e.g. neighbours. Give thanks for them.
- Consider and visually bring to mind friends in our church community who would normally be sitting close by at this time. Give thanks for them.
- Consider the community of the Trinity – God the Father, Jesus and the Holy Spirit – a divine community into which you are embraced today as a beloved child of God.

Prayer

Harley Kitchen

*Our God and heavenly father, we thank you for these memories of Augustine. We thank you for the effect of his life. But most of all we want to thank you for the magnificent grace of God that is available for us today. To turn from our self-centredness and self-preoccupation, and to begin a new relationship with you, because Jesus died for us upon the cross and is alive today – the risen saviour – to live within our lives and to live his beautiful life within us and out into the world that needs that grace of God so much. Thank you for Augustine, for all that he meant and all that he did. And we pray that we shall walk in his footsteps in the way that he walked in your footsteps. We pray in the name of Jesus our saviour.
Amen.*

Song: Hosanna

I see the King of glory
Coming on the clouds with fire
The whole earth shakes
The whole earth shakes yeah

I see His love and mercy
Washing over all our sin
The people sing
The people sing

Hosanna Hosanna
Hosanna in the highest
Hosanna Hosanna
Hosanna in the highest

I see a generation
Rising up to take their place
With selfless faith
With selfless faith

I see a near revival
Stirring as we pray and seek
We're on our knees
We're on our knees

Heal my heart and make it clean
Open up my eyes to the things unseen
Show me how to love like You have loved me
Break my heart for what breaks Yours
Everything I am for Your Kingdom's cause
As I walk from earth into eternity

CCLI Song # 4785835

Brooke Ligertwood

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Click this link or enter it into your web browser rngwd.com/connect.

We love to know that you have been able to connect through worship today. Please click on the link (or enter it into your web browser) to our online connect cards letting us know which ways you have been able to worship, and if you want to let us know how we can praying with you. Thank you!