

ST. AUGUSTINE ON RICH AND POOR

EXPOSITION OF PSALM 38 : 7.¹

He lays up treasure, and knows not for whom he gathers it. Folly and vanity! *Blessed is the man whose hope is the Lord, who has not cast his eyes on vanities and on lying follies* (Ps. xxxix, 5). 'Wild talk,' you think (I speak to one who has a hankering for treasure himself); 'such words are nothing but old wives' tales.' You are a careful, sensible man; every day you devise new means of money-making—from business, from farming, perhaps from pleading and legal practice, perhaps from soldiering; and there is usury besides. You are shrewd; you use every art you know to add coin to coin and to enclose your gainings in jealous secrecy. Robbing others, you are anxious not to be robbed yourself; you fear to suffer the wrong you do, though your suffering does not amend your doing. But of course, with you there is no suffering; you are a cautious man, and as good at keeping as at getting; you know where to place your wealth, with whom to trust it; how none of your gathering need be lost. Well, I ask you in your shrewdness and carefulness: Granted your gathering and storing are proof against any loss, tell me for whom you store your treasure. There are other evils that go with this vanity of your covetousness; these I leave; I neither stress them nor tax you with them. The one point I make, the one question I put, is that brought up by the reading of the psalm. Granted, you gather and lay up treasure. I do not say: 'Beware lest in gathering you should be gathered up yourself; beware lest in your zeal to despoil you become the spoil.' But your blind greed may have dulled your hearing or understanding; I will put it more plainly. I do not say, then: 'Beware lest in your zeal to despoil the lesser you become the spoil of the greater; unwittingly, unbeknown to yourself, you live in a sea where the bigger fish eat up the smaller.' I pass that by; I pass by the difficulties and dangers that beset the quest for money, the trials of those who gather it, the risks that they face at every turn, the mortal fears that haunt them continually; all this I pass by. Granted, you gather wealth unopposed, you store it unmolested. But examine that shrewdness, that wisdom which emboldens you to deride my words and account them folly; then tell me: You lay up treasure; for whom do you think to gather it? I see what

¹ Text in Migne, P.L. 36, 422-424.

you mean to answer (do you think it escaped the psalmist?); you will tell me, 'My sons; I am storing it for them.' To cloak your iniquity you make a plea of fatherly love. 'I am storing it for my sons.' Granted you are; was this plea then unknown to Idi-thun?² He knew it assuredly, but held such things to belong to the days of old, and spurned them because he was hastening towards the new.

I return to probe this matter of you and your sons. You who store and they whom you store for are doomed to pass away; or rather (for 'doomed to pass' implies some permanence now), you and they are already passing. Take this very day; from the sermon's opening words to this moment we have been growing older, though you are not conscious of it.³ So with the hair of your head; it grows unnoticed, but grow it does—now in church, while you are standing there, while you say or do anything; there is no sudden growth of it to send you to the barber's. Thus in all of us time goes fleeting by, whether our thought is on it or whether it is busied elsewhere—it may be with something wrong. You are passing away, and the son you store for is passing too. Hence I ask you first: This son you store for—are you sure he will inherit? And again, if he is not yet born, are you sure he will be? You store for sons who may never be born or never inherit; your treasure is stored, but not in its rightful place.

You are servant to one of great estate; you have also goods of your own; and your Lord's counsel could never mean the loss of his servant's goods. All that you have and love was given you by him, and he would not have you lose his own gift, since indeed he is ready to give you himself. More; he would not have you lose even his temporal gift. There is much of it, it is overflowing, it may surely be held to have reached excess; even so, says your Lord, I would not have you lose it. 'What then am I to do?' Remove it; the plate you have put it in is unsafe. If you consult your own covetousness even, you may find that it too is satisfied by my counsel. You wish to keep without loss what you have already; I am showing you where you may secure it. Do not lay up treasure on earth, unknowing for whom you gather it or how its owner and keeper may squander it. He who lays hold of it may be himself laid hold of; or while you store it for him you may lose it yourself before he comes.

² David's master of music; the psalm is inscribed to him, and St. Augustine regards it as written in his person.

³ I insert *non* before *sentis*.

Hence I counsel your anxiousness : *Lay up for yourselves treasure in heaven.* Here on earth if you wished to guard wealth you would look about you for a storehouse ; you might mistrust your own house because of the servants ; you might take your goods to the bankers' quarter, where mishaps are less likely, thieves can scarcely get in, and everything is securely guarded. Yet why should you take this measure except that you have no better storehouse ? What if I offer you a better ? This shall be my advice : ' Do not commit your goods to the banker, he is not to be trusted ; there is another whom you may trust, commit them to him. He has great storehouses where wealth can never be lost ; he is rich beyond all the rich.' At this you will say perhaps : ' I shall never find courage to ask such a one to guard my goods.' But what if he invites you ? Know him for what he is ; this person of great estate is your own Lord, and he speaks thus : ' My servant, I would not have you lose your goods ; learn from me where to store them. Why keep them where you may lose them, and—loss or no loss—where you yourself cannot always be ? There is another place ; I will take you thither. Let your wealth precede you ; fear no loss ; I who gave it will guard it for you.'

Such are your Lord's words. Question your faith ; will you trust him ? You will say, ' What I cannot see is as good as lost ; I must see my wealth here.' But at that rate you will neither see it here nor possess anything there. You have treasures—no matter what—buried underground ; when you leave the house you do not take them with you. You came here to hear a sermon, to reap some spiritual wealth, but your thoughts are with the temporal ; well, have you brought it with you ? At this very moment you cannot see it. You think you have it at home, where you know you put it, but are you sure that you have not lost it ? Many a man before now has gone home and not found what he had hoarded. --Did some covetous hearts beat faster then ? When I spoke of returning to emptied hoards, I think there was whispering in each of them : ' Heaven forbid, Bishop ; wish us better fortune ; say a prayer for us ; heaven forbid such mischance should happen ; I trust in God that I shall find my treasure safe.' You trust in God then, and do not trust God himself ? ' I trust in Christ that what I left will be safe and sound, that none will go near it, none will take it.' If you trust in Christ you think you need fear no loss at home ; still less need you fear if you trust him further and store your goods where he counsels you. Are you sure of your servant and doubtful of your Lord, sure of your house and doubtful of heaven ? ' But I,' you ask me, ' how can I put treasure in heaven ?'

You have heard my counsel; store your treasure where I have said; the way of its reaching heaven I do not mean you to know. Put it in the hands of the poor; give it to those in need; what matter to you how it reaches there? Shall I not deliver what I am given? Have you forgotten my words: *When you have done it to one of the least of mine, you have done it unto me?*

Suppose that some friend of yours had vats, cisterns or other vessels skilfully made for storing wine or oil; and suppose yourself in search of somewhere to hide or store your produce. He might say to you: 'I will store it for you.' He would have secret channels and passages to the vessels, and through them the liquid visibly poured would travel invisibly. Again, he might say to you: 'Pour out here what you have'; and you, finding that this was not the place where you thought to put it, might be afraid to pour. But your friend, knowing the hidden workings beneath his grounds, would surely bid you: 'Pour it and set your mind at rest; it passes from here to there; you cannot see how, but you may trust me; I am the builder.'

He by whom all things were made has built mansions for all of us, and lest we should lose our goods on earth he would have them go before us there. If you store them on earth, tell me for whom you gather them. You have sons, you answer. Number one more among them; let one portion be Christ's.

Translated by WALTER SHEWRING.

REFLECTIONS OF A REFUGEE

It is the last hour before Ash Wednesday. Only a little while ago I said the Office of Compline, and the calm of prayer is still upon me. The day has been heavy with many duties, but I was glad to bear them. There is so little we can suffer for him who suffered so willingly for us. The fire on my left is burning steadily. It will have to last the whole night, for we are fire-watching, my companion and I, and it is my turn to wake. She is sleeping peacefully, this dear young girl, and her gentle breathing is a solace to me.

I have been thinking of many things to-night, my friend, and my heart is very full. Here I am fire-watching, waiting for one of my people to come and bring destruction upon your people, to ruin their