

# BLACKFRIARS

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## ST. AUGUSTINE ON DEATH

THROUGHOUT the country there are people mourning their loved ones, parents, sons and daughters killed fighting or helping behind the scenes; even babes in arms, children on the high seas, sent away for safety, have met a cruel death. In the streets, once so familiar, are unsightly ruins, houses crumbling, churches, convents, public buildings, the houses of the very poorest, all overwhelmed by the common wanton destruction wrought by an unseen hand. How trite and unconvincing seem our condolences with the afflicted! We hardly know what to say, our tongues stammer and falter, as indeed must always be the case when speaking of the mysteries of faith. For death is a mystery, though an inevitable fact: 'Who is the man that shall not see death, that shall deliver his soul from the underworld?' (Ps. lxxxviii, 49). The Saints of God made themselves familiar with the thought of death and the next world, and we may well turn for guidance to one who had lived with such thoughts always before him, to one who had seen Death with his scythe mowing down men, women and children, now by the sword, now by pestilence, now by the creeping onslaught of old age, to one who himself died amid the destruction of all he had loved, the overthrow of all he had so laboriously built up, to St. Augustine of Hippo.

'Who does not feel sad when looking at a body which had formerly drawn its life from the soul, but is now lifeless since that soul has departed? He who once walked now lies still; he who once talked is now dumb; his closed eyes no longer see the light; his ears are deaf to the sound of our voices; his bodily members have ceased to function;

for there is no one there to set those feet in motion, no one there to move those hands, to stir the organs of sense to their due perceptions. Yet surely this body is a house which some invisible dweller used to adorn? True, but he is gone whom none ever saw; that alone remains which no one can look on without grief.<sup>1</sup>

But is death final? Is it merely the brutal, cruel cutting of the thread of life? Is there nothing that could redeem it of its horrors?

One remarkable feature of Christian life in Africa was the frequency of apparitions of those who—to use Augustine's own expression—had 'gone before.' To give but one instance out of many: Evodius, the bosom friend of Augustine, though the Saint often found him somewhat trying with his seemingly endless questions, says in a letter to Augustine:

'Our friends whom we have sent on ahead of us sometimes come back to us, they appear to us in dreams and speak to us. I myself well remember how Profuturus, Privatus, and Servilius, whom I recall as holy members of our monastery, have spoken to me, and how things came to pass as they foretold.'<sup>2</sup>

Elsewhere in the same letter he dwells with feeling on the death of a young student who throughout his brief illness found comfort in passages of Scripture which he had committed to memory: 'My soul,' he quoted, 'longeth and fainteth for the courts of the Lord' (Ps. lxxxiii, 2), and again: 'Thou hast anointed my head with oil, and my chalice which inebriateth me, how goodly is it!' (Ps. xxii, 5). Then, continues the Bishop, 'when he had quitted this house of clay . . . we provided fitting obsequies, worthy of such a soul; for three days we sang the Lord's praises at his tomb, and on the third day we offered up for him the Mysteries of our Redemption.' Evodius then goes on

<sup>1</sup> *Sermon*, cclxxiii, 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Ep.* clviii, 9.

to tell how two days later a devout servant of God seemed to see in her sleep a Deacon, who had himself died but four days previously, and who, with a number of God's servants, holy maidens and widows, was getting ready a palace so marvellously adorned that the whole place shone with its glory and seemed like silver. Then Angels came, took the body of the young student from the grave and brought it up to heaven.<sup>3</sup> Evodius was naturally puzzled to explain these and many similar visions which he records: nor did St. Augustine attempt to explain them in his reply, but was content to say that if he were to narrate all the similar instances that he had himself heard, he would never end.<sup>4</sup>

All of us, then, fear death; that is a dictate of nature. Is there anything to be feared more? Yes, our strange unwillingness to prepare for it, even to think about it. Augustine constantly put this elementary truth before his people, sometimes in forcible, even blunt terms:

'When we keep the anniversary of our departed brethren we ought to bear in mind two things: something we hope for, and something we dread. We hope, because "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His Saints" (Ps. cxv, 15); we dread, because "the death of the wicked is very evil" (Ps. xxxiii, 22).'

<sup>5</sup>

But human nature loves procrastination. It would—nay it does persistently—put off the thought that one day the end of earthly life must come. The Bishop of Hippo has no patience with such people:

'What harm can it be to men to die when they have to die some time or other? Those who are afraid to die are only putting off death for a little space. The only source of anxiety for the dying arises from the lives they have led, not from their

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* No. 3, cf. *De Civitate Dei*, XXII, viii, for similar instances.

<sup>4</sup> *Ep.* clviii, 5, see Augustine's answer, *Ep.* clxix, 5.

<sup>5</sup> *Sermon*, clxxxiii, 1.

death. If when they come to die their souls are in such a state that the grace of Christ comes as a help to them, then most assuredly their death does not mean the setting of the sun of their good lives, but the starting-point of a better life.<sup>6</sup>

One sermon he preached to his flock must have made a deep impression on them if only by reason of the frequently repeated refrain:

' Let us take the case of people who have perchance led bad lives and have died in their beds. Their funerals were celebrated with great pomp, their bodies lie in magnificent sarcophagi, in tombs fashioned in beauteous style, at great cost and with great labour. And some of you may perhaps say as you look at them: "I wish I could die like that." Yet am I wrong when I say to you: "Live well, lest you die ill"? Take now the different case of one who has lived a good life, but has—as men would say—met a miserable end, dying perhaps when his house collapsed, or by shipwreck, or slain by a wild beast. Perhaps some worldly-minded man thinks within himself: "Not much to be gained by leading a good life!" But look into your own hearts; there you will find Christ saying to you in silent tones what I have been shouting to you: "Live well, lest you die ill." ' Augustine then takes the familiar Gospel story of Dives and Lazarus: ' The rich man, proud here in time, now a beggar in hell. The poor man secured his "crumbs," the rich man failed to secure even a "drop of water." Which of them, I ask you, died well, which of them ill? Rightly do I keep saying to you: "Live well, lest you die ill." ' "

But how, it might be urged, can we be expected to think persistently of death when, as has been already said, the very thought of death is abhorrent, even contrary to nature, when, moreover, we have to be busy with the affairs of this life so long as it lasts?

St. Augustine frankly concedes the difficulty:

' It is true that to some few people, men whom God has chosen to govern the churches, He has granted the privilege of not only looking forward with eagerness to the day of their death, but of looking forward to it with joy while at the same

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<sup>6</sup> *Ep.* clvii, 7.

<sup>7</sup> *Sermon*, cii.

time shouldering bravely the burden of governing their sees. But the same privilege is not extended to men who seek such positions out of love of the temporal dignity attaching to them, nor is it extended to people who, though not destined for an official life, yet crave for the bustle of business. I fancy that so inestimable a privilege as that familiarity with the thought of death is hardly compatible with noisy and busy meetings or with endless runnings to and fro.<sup>8</sup>

But we fancy St. Augustine would tell us that it is not so much death itself of which we are to think so persistently, but of heaven as the goal which we can attain only through the portals which are death. St. Ambrose beautifully expresses this in the Hymn:

‘ Sed praeium mortis sacrae  
Perennis instet gloria.’

When commenting on the words of the Psalmist, ‘ I believe that I shall see the good things of the Lord in the land of the living,’ Augustine suffers himself to be carried away:

‘ Oh! Those good things of the Lord! How sweet they are, how undying, incomparable, everlasting, unchangeable! When shall I see you, you “good things of the Lord”? “I believe that I shall see them,” yet not in the land of the dying, but “in the land of the living.” The Lord will snatch me out of this land of them that die, He who for my sake deigned to take on himself this clay of them that die, and Himself to die at the hands of them that die. The Psalmist said, “I believe that I shall see the good things of the Lord in the land of the living”; he said it with yearning, in the midst of toils and dangers, in the midst of a flood of temptations. But he said it with hope, knowing that all depends on God’s mercy.’<sup>9</sup>

This thought governs the Bishop’s many references to suffering and tribulation.

Christ on the Cross drank the bitter gall:

‘ Do you, you sick man, drink of the cup of bitterness; fear not to do so, for our Physician drank it before you. Drink it

<sup>8</sup> *Ep.* x, 2.

<sup>9</sup> *Enarr.*, ii, 22, on Ps. xxvi.

until the bitterness of this world passes away and there comes that world where there are no scandals, no anger, no decay, no bitterness, no fever, no guile, no enemies, neither old age nor death. Toil on here, then, for you are approaching the goal; toil on, lest when you no longer wish to toil you find you have come to the end of your life, but not to the end of your toil.<sup>10</sup>

Over and over again, in sermon after sermon, as well as in his letters, does this shepherd of souls recur to the thought of the heaven which to him was so near and to which his thoughts were ever turned. And as before, it is always as the goal to which tribulation alone will lead us safely:

'There is a species of tribulation which we ought to seek for, even to find. The pleasantness of this world and temporal prosperity are only meant to assuage that tribulation of which I speak. For that tribulation is nothing but our earthly pilgrimage itself. The mere fact that we are not with God, the fact that we live surrounded by temptations and amid all sorts of vexations, the fact again that we can never wholly get rid of fear—all those facts are surely tribulation.' . . . But when the goal of life is reached 'there everything will be supremely perfect, there will be nothing but truth, nothing but holiness, nothing but eternity. No illness will be lurking there, no fatigue clamouring for sleep, no death, no strife. But perfect peace, rest, joy and righteousness.'<sup>11</sup>

To us such constant reference to heaven seems strange, though it is hard to see why this should be so. But Augustine felt that the lives of his people were on the whole prosperous ones, that earthly, even carnal delights, had too great a hold upon them. He would, then, keep on repeating 'Sursum corda' and make them, if only for a brief space, reflect on that other world. How his heart must have thrilled when on at least two occasions they shouted with enthusiasm when he dwelt on the joys of

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<sup>10</sup> *Enarr.* i, 11, on Ps. xlviii.

<sup>11</sup> *Enarr.* i, 22, on Ps. xlix.

heaven. He had been preaching on the words, 'In the morning I shall stand and contemplate (Thee)' (Ps. v, 5): 'How you shouted when I said that; you shouted through yearning for a beauty you had not yet seen'<sup>12</sup>; and again when he quoted the words: 'What have I in heaven but Thee; apart from Thee, what can I desire upon earth?' (Ps. lxxii, 25): 'I gather from your voices that you understand what that means.'<sup>13</sup>

Still when all was said and done, death with its horrors remained, and all those who stood and listened to him would have sooner or later to meet that grim figure.

Of how many of his hearers during the long years of his episcopate had he had to say in his quaint punning fashion, *non amisimus sed praemisimus*, 'we have not lost them, but sent them on before us'? How many bereaved ones he had had to console, as he so well knew how? Italica had lost her husband, and writes in grief to the Bishop. Here is but a fragment of the reply he sent her:

'Your faith and hope and that charity which is poured out into the hearts of devout folk by the Holy Spirit must be your consolation now. Of that same charity we have a pledge here now that so we may learn to yearn for its fulness. Nor should you regard yourself as desolate now seeing that in your inner self you have Christ present in your heart by faith. Nor should you be saddened as the heathen who have no hope, for we have God's most firm promise on which we base our hope that after this life, whence we are to pass and from which we have sent on before us, and have not lost, those who have already passed hence, we too shall arrive at that life where those who have gone before us will be all the more known to us in that they will be still more dear to us, that life where we shall love them without any fear of further separation.

'Even in this life your husband was, though indeed well known to you, yet better known to himself than to you. For though you indeed saw his countenance which he himself had never seen, yet our knowledge of ourselves that is from within

<sup>12</sup> *Enarr.* ii, 8, on Ps. xxvi.

<sup>13</sup> *Enarr.* i, 31, on Ps. lxxii.

is more sure than any knowledge depending on corporeal images: "For what man knoweth the things of a man, but the spirit of a man that is in him?" (I Cor. ii, 11). But when the Lord shall have come and "brought to light the hidden things of darkness and made manifest the counsels of the heart" then there will be nothing to hide from one another, nor will there be aught that one can disclose to another while keeping it hidden from some stranger, for there there will be no stranger."<sup>14</sup>

His flock changes year by year. But those who have 'gone before' are still his. For he and those yet working out their salvation must remember them at the altar, even as years before he had listened to the dying Monica, adjuring him: 'Lay my body where you will, have no anxiety about that; one thing only do I beg: that you remember me at the altar of the Lord, wheresoever you may be.'<sup>15</sup> Hence prayers for the dead and Masses for them were a regular feature of Church life at Hippo, indeed everywhere in North Africa, though here as elsewhere people were inclined to attach more importance to the pomp and ceremony with which the body was laid to rest than to prayers for the poor man's soul.

'Funeral pomp,' the Bishop told them, 'the crowds that come to the exequies, the money spent on the burial and the costly monuments men erect, all these may be some consolation to the survivors, but they afford no help to the departed. Yet there can be no doubt that the dead are helped by the prayers of holy Church and by the life-giving Sacrifice, and that God then deals more mercifully with them than their sins deserved. For our fathers before us have taught us, and it is the universal practice of the Church, to pray for the dead who have departed this life in communion with the Body and Blood of Christ when they are commemorated in due course in the Holy Sacrifice; we are also taught that the same Sacrifice may be offered for them.'<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> *Ep.* xcii, 1-2.

<sup>15</sup> *Confessions*, ix, 11 and 13.

<sup>16</sup> *Sermon*, clxxii, 2.



How often Augustine reminds them of the reality of that Mystical Body of Christ to which they who are still living and trying to work out their salvation, as well as the faithful departed who have gone before them, belong: 'The souls of the faithful departed,' he says, 'are not separated from the Church; for even here on earth that Church is the Kingdom of Christ. If they were so separated why should we commemorate them at the altar in the Communion of the Body of Christ?'<sup>17</sup>

But the question always arises: Whom are we to reckon among the members of Christ's body here on earth and in the next world? St. Augustine answers:

'Since we have no certain knowledge on this point the Church only prays for those of her enemies who are still living in the flesh; nor are her prayers answered for all such. For those alone are they heard who, although enemies of the Church, are predestinated so that the Church's prayers for them may be heard and they may be made children of that Church.

'But as for people who remain impenitent until death and who never become the Church's children instead of her enemies—can we imagine the Church praying for the souls of such when they have departed this life? No, for they are now to be reckoned as belonging to the devil, since they had not, while yet in the flesh, passed over to the side of Christ.'<sup>18</sup>

Finally, St. Augustine insists that care must be taken

'not to omit those prayers which the Church undertakes to make for the souls of the departed, prayers which the Church has arranged to have made for all the departed members of the Catholic Christian family in one general commemoration even when their names are unknown; this the Church does in favour of such as have neither parents nor children, nor friends nor relatives, so that supplications may be made for them all by their one common mother, the Church.'<sup>19</sup>

HUGH POPE, O.P.

<sup>17</sup> *De Civitate Dei*, XX, ix, 2.

<sup>18</sup> *De Civitate Dei*, XXI, xxiv, 1.

<sup>19</sup> *De Cura pro mortuis gerenda*, 6.