

Corinth and Philippi. Both knew that they carried the word of the Spirit. It was their function to tell their communities what things the Spirit wished and what things the Spirit operated. Conversely, it was the duty of the communities to follow the Spirit which came to them through their ministers. Spontaneously, as new Churches were founded, a deep understanding developed among them and they reacted in a similar way both to the authority of the Apostles and to the Spirit. This is very characteristic of the Church. There were no traditions whatsoever, to begin with, in the Churches that sprang up in the steps of St Paul: they did not even have their own Scriptures, for the books of the New Testament had not yet been written. Nevertheless the Church had a unity, both through the visits and supervision of those in authority and through their spiritual influence. It seems to me that this profound spiritual unity of the Church has been preserved throughout the centuries, down to our own day. The Spirit of Christ expressed itself in the first martyrs, and does so today in the Christians suffering persecution in China. There is a spiritual kinship which is the mark of the Holy Spirit.

*(To be concluded)*



### A SERMON OF ST AUGUSTINE ON THE TITLE OF PSALM 33: I

*A psalm for David, when he changed his features before Abimelech, and he sent him away, and off he went.*

Translated by EDMUND HILL, O.P.

**T**HERE does not seem to be anything very obscure in the text of this psalm; but its title puts us on our mettle, it cries out for us to knock on its door. However, 'blessed is the man who hopes in him' (Psalm 33. 9), as it says here; so let us all be hoping he will open up to us when we knock. After all, he wouldn't urge us to knock if he didn't want to open up to us when we do. If it sometimes happens that a man who was intending to keep the door shut for the night will get up and open it against his own inclinations, because he cannot stand the din of the door-knocker any longer (Luke 11. 8); surely we have

every reason to hope that he who said 'Knock and the door will be opened to you' (Matt. 7. 7), will open it promptly. Well, I am knocking at God's door now, by giving my mind to the matter; and I would ask you please to join me in knocking, by listening to me carefully and praying for me humbly. Because there is no denying it is a very great mystery indeed.

This is how the title goes: 'A psalm for David, when he changed his features before Abimelech, and he sent him away, and off he went.' So we look in the Scriptures among the actual exploits of David that have been recorded for us, to find out when this happened. Just as in the case of another psalm title (Psalm 3), 'When David fled from the face of Absalom his son', we read the Book of Kings and find out about when he actually did flee from his son Absalom (II Kings 15. 14). So I assume that what we have here, 'when he changed his features' and so on, is written somewhere in the Book of Kings, where everything to do with David's adventures is recorded. But in fact you won't find his episode exactly, though you will find something which clearly suggested it. It's recorded that when David was fleeing from the persecution of Saul, he took himself to Achis, king of Geth, king of a tribe who were neighbours of the Jews, where he could lie low and escape Saul's persecution. He had only recently become very famous by killing Goliath, and all he got in return for this good deed was envy (I Kings 17). Saul had been fuming at the taunts of Goliath, and yet when he was rid of his enemy, he turned his enmity on David instead, and envied him his success. And when in the middle of the popular rejoicings the women came dancing and singing of David's triumph, saying, 'Saul has slain them in thousands, and David in ten thousands' (ib. 18. 7), it was too much for Saul altogether; to be put in the shade by a mere boy, and take second place to him in everyone's esteem! So, as the way is with this pestilential jealousy, he began to envy and persecute him, and David took himself, as I was saying, to the king of Geth, who was called Achis. But it was brought to that king's notice that the man he was harbouring was the one who had recently made such a name for himself among the Jews. 'Isn't this David, they said, in whose honour the women of Israel came singing "Saul has slain them in thousands and David in ten thousands"?' (ib. 21. 10). So David had every reason to fear that Achis might want to do away with such a

dangerous neighbour. Therefore, the account goes on, 'he changed his features before them, and started affecting and drumming on the doors of the city, and he was being carried in his own hands and falling down at the doors of the gate, and spittle was dribbling down over his beard. When the king saw him like this he said to his servants, "Why have you brought me this raving lunatic? Do you imagine he is going to come into my house?"' And so he turned him out, and David got away safely, thanks to this ruse of playing the madman. This pretence of madness seems to be the story the psalm title is referring to, 'when he changed his features before Abimelech, and he sent him away, and off he went'. It is Achis, though, in the story, not Abimelech. Still, the name is the only thing that doesn't fit, otherwise the title seems to come from the story in the Book of Kings almost word for word. The change of name then should prompt us to look all the more closely for the hidden meaning of the title. The event, though it really happened, did not happen without reason, but because it meant something; and it was not without reason either that this title was written, and with the name changed.

You can see I am sure, brothers, that there is a deep meaning here. If there is no mystery about a boy killing Goliath, no mystery about him changing his features and affecting and drumming and falling down at the doors of the city and the doors of the gate—well, how can all this possibly *not* mean anything, when St Paul says that 'these things were happening to *them* in figure (that is as a pattern or model); but they have been written down for *us*, on whom the end of the ages has come'? (I Cor. 10. 11). If manna doesn't mean anything, about which he says 'they ate spiritual food'; if it doesn't mean anything that the sea was divided and the people brought through the middle of it to escape from Pharaoh's clutches, though he says 'our fathers were all under the cloud, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea'; if it doesn't mean anything that water poured out of the rock when it was struck, though he says 'and the rock was Christ'; if none of these things means anything, but just happened; finally, if Abraham's two sons do not mean anything, though the Apostle calls them the two testaments, the old and the new, put in an allegory or parable (Gal. 4. 24); if none of these things means anything, though as you see we have the Apostle's

word for it that they do; then in that case I grant you we can presume that this doesn't mean anything either, which I have just told you about David from the Book of Kings. So there, it is not entirely meaningless either, surely, that the name has been changed, and it says 'before Abimelech'.

Now let me have your attention, please. All I have said so far is just the hand knocking; the door isn't open yet. I have been knocking by talking, you have been knocking by listening; let us all go on knocking by praying, so that the Lord may open the door to us. Well now, I have got a translation of the Hebrew names that occur here; we are lucky enough to have had learned men who have translated the names from Hebrew into Greek and from Greek into Latin. So I looked them up, and found that Abimelech means 'kingdom of my father', and Achis means 'how can it be?' Let us examine these names, and the door will begin to open as we knock. You ask what Achis means, and the answer is 'how can it be?' 'How can it be?' is what a man says who is still wondering about something, without understanding it. Abimelech, 'kingdom of my father'; David, 'strong-handed'; David stands for Christ as Goliath does for the devil. David killing Goliath means Christ bringing down the devil. And what is Christ bringing down the devil, if not humility killing pride? So when I mention Christ, brothers, it is above all humility that is being put before us; because by humility he has made us a road. Having deserted God by pride, we could not go back to him except by humility, and we didn't have anyone we could take as a pattern, since the whole of mortal mankind had gone bad with pride. And if anyone *did* arise who was humble in spirit, like the prophets and the patriarchs, the human race disdained to copy humble men. In order then that men should not disdain to copy a humble man, God himself became a humble man, so that in this way at least human pride need not disdain to follow the footsteps of God.

Now as you know, the Jewish sacrifice after the fashion of Aaron used to consist of animals, and it was a sacrifice with a mysterious meaning pointing beyond itself; but the sacrifice of the Lord's body and blood which the faithful know about, and those who have read the gospel, the sacrifice which has spread over the whole world, was not yet instituted. Picture to yourselves then these two sacrifices, the old one after the fashion of Aaron

the new one after the fashion of Melchisedech. Melchisedech, because it is written: 'The Lord has sworn and he will not repent, You are a priest for ever after the fashion of Melchisedech' (Psalm 109. 4). Who is? Our Lord Jesus Christ. And who was Melchisedech? King of Salem. Salem, so the learned have disclosed, was the same city which was later to be called Jerusalem. So before the Jews were in power there, Melchisedech was priest there, priest of God most high, as he is described in Genesis (Genesis 14. 18). He it was who went to meet Abraham when he had rescued Lot from his captors. So great a man was Melchisedech that he actually gave a blessing to Abraham. He brought forth bread and wine, and blessed Abraham, and Abraham gave him tithes. Notice what it was he brought forth, and who it was he blessed. And then many centuries later someone said: 'You are a priest for ever after the fashion of Melchisedech.' And who else can this be said about, except him whose sacrifice you are all familiar with?

So the sacrifice of Aaron was set aside, and the sacrifice after the fashion of Melchisedech came to be instead. And so a certain I don't know who 'changed his features'. Who is this I don't know who? No I-don't-know-who about it, surely, because everyone knows our Lord Jesus Christ. He wanted us to find our salvation in his body and blood. And what made him entrust us with his body and blood? Why, his humility. If he had not been humble, he would not have let himself be eaten and drunk. Just consider the greatness of his real station; 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God' (John 1. 1). There is the food of eternity for you, but it is food which the angels eat, which the powers on high eat, and the heavenly spirits eat, which they thrive on eating, which remains undiminished while nourishing and contenting them. But what man could ever eat that food? How could his mind ever be capable of that food? So it was necessary for that solid meal to become milk, and in this way reach the babies. But how is food turned into milk? By being passed through flesh. After all, that is what mothers do. What the mother eats the baby eats as well; but because the baby is incapable of eating bread, the mother incarnates the bread, turns it into her flesh, and then feeds the baby with it in milk form at her humble breast. In the same sort of way the Wisdom of God has fed us with that bread, because the

Word became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1. 14). Notice the humility of it; man has been given the bread of angels to eat 'he gave them the bread of heaven' (Psalm 77. 24); the eternal Word, equal to the Father, on which the angels feed, man has eaten too. Angels thrive on him because 'being in the form of God he did not think it robbery to be equal to God'; but so that man could eat the angels' bread, 'he emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, taking on the likeness of men; and being found to be in the condition of a man, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to the death, even the death of the cross' (Phil. 2. 6), so that from the cross the Lord's flesh and blood could be committed to us as the new sacrifice from now on.

For he changed his features, you see, before Abimelech that is before the kingdom of his father. The kingdom of his father was the kingdom of the Jews, the kingdom of David and Abraham. The kingdom of God his Father is the Church rather than the Jewish people, but of his father according to the flesh it is the people of Israel. As it says in St Luke, 'And God will give him the kingdom of David his father' (Luke 1. 32). It is clear then that according to the flesh our Lord's father is David; while according to his godhead Christ is not David's son but his Lord. Now the Jews knew Christ according to the flesh, but not according to his godhead. So he put a question to them, 'Whose son do you say Christ is?' They answered, 'David's'. 'How then says he, does David in spirit call him Lord, where he says: "The Lord said to my Lord, Sit on my right hand until I put all your enemies under your feet"'. If then David in spirit calls him Lord how can he be his son?' (Matt. 22. 42). And they could not answer him, because they did not recognize anything in Christ our Lord except what they could see with their eyes; they missed what it only to be understood with the mind. If they had had eyes inside as well as outside, they would have recognized him as David's son from what they could see outwardly, and from what they could understand inwardly they would have realized he was David's Lord.

*(To be concluded)*