



## The Parish Churches of S Philip and S Augustine and S Matthew with S Mary the Virgin Newcastle

### Homily for Easter III (14<sup>th</sup> April) 2024

More often than not, if people only know one thing about Saint Augustine of Hippo, it is his prayer, "Make me chaste, but not yet." They infer from this and, maybe, the presence of his long-term, but un-named concubine that his was a fairly colourful youth and that herein lay his reluctance to embrace the Christian Faith of his mother.

In fact, although hardly perfect, Saint Augustine's younger years were not particularly wild when compared with others of his age and situation. His hesitations about Christianity had little to do with a hankering for self-indulgence, but rather that he found the Christian Faith as he had learned it as a child intellectually unsatisfying.

Then he arrived in Milan, at the time the centre of the Western Roman world. The bishop there was Saint Ambrose, a man of exceptional intellectual gifts, whose sermons and lectures captured Augustine's imagination, introducing him to the world of allegorical interpretation of the Scriptural texts, weaving together of the Christian tradition with concepts from the world of Greek and other philosophies.

Allegory is a method of interrogating a text by finding layered meanings in its words; and although many Christians are, perhaps, unfamiliar with, as it were, the science of allegory, most will encounter its fruits in the practice and presentation of the Faith. It can be used, for example, to iron out apparent discrepancies between texts by identifying a subtler purpose to a narrative than the preservation of historically accurate detail.

Few, today, I suspect would dispute that there is an element of this layered meaning in the Biblical texts and that the authors had a range of intentions in writing as they did; but we should be cautious, all the same.

In the first place, finding the allegorical meaning of particular narratives is often a speculative undertaking. The authors rarely, if ever, unambiguously disclose their underlying theses; and whilst scholars and preachers may feel that they have, so to speak, broken the code, further investigation might suggest a refinement or even correction to an initial approach. There is, furthermore, always the prospect of finding what we want to find rather than what is actually there.

More basically, we need to be careful not so to allegorise the details of our Faith that we remove from them all historical anchors, seeking to turn them into a set of timeless concepts.

The danger of this had become apparent as the Church began to formulate the Creeds, which are still a yardstick of faith today. They are a mixture of high theological assertion and the firm assertion of a historical context of particular events in and from which the Faith emerged.

In the codification of the Creeds, we see the continuation of a process, which was begun early on in the development of Christianity as is clear from the first reading this morning. Here the God's overarching Purpose in Christ is revealed through concrete historical events, which would have still been available to the memory of those hearing the speech or reading the narrative.

We should never forget that for all the layers of theological interpretation, which have developed the Christian Faith over the centuries, it all rests on a set of historical events, including the objective rising of Christ from the Death inflicted on Him at Calvary. Layers of meaning help us to understand the Truths, which issue from this fact, but they do not and cannot diminish or replace this historical given, without which our Faith had been in vain.