



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

Homily for S Augustine of Hippo's Day (28th August) 2024

The epistle for today's feast focuses on the theme of love - the love of God and the love that we should show one another. The reason for this is that love was a central concern of the prolific writing of Saint Augustine as it was for Saint John. More recently, Augustine's focus on love was a significant influence on the equally extensive theological output of the late Pope Benedict.

Many people, perhaps most, suppose that they know love when they experience it. I am not sure that this is necessarily the case, since various emotions and impulses can masquerade as love in our minds; and this, in turn, can confuse our understanding of love.

Scientists, I think, would tell us that love is created by an interaction of chemicals with the neurons in the brain. Without dismissing those mechanics at all, Christians would suggest that behind those biological processes lies an uncreated love emanating from, so to speak, the heart of God, which flows through the created order.

At the same time, the love which we experience on earth is a shadow of the divine love from which it evolves and, in some ways, seems often to be altered as it is refracted through the frailty of our human nature.

Earthly love has a tendency to be divisive. It creates hierarchies of priority in our lives in that we have a strong bias towards those whom we love; and, indeed, we can expect a lot from those who claim to love us. Human love can adjust our perspectives and values: to take a simple example: how many parents with five pounds in their pockets would choose to buy an ice-cream for their child rather than a sandwich for a hungry vagrant? Love, as experienced by human beings, has a tendency to create silos of introverted mutual preoccupation.

Unmediated divine love, by contrast, is unifying in its effect. In the High Priestly prayer, Saint John records Jesus asking that His disciples might be one as He and the Father are One. Divine love seeks to further the cause of drawing humanity together by encouraging the sort of reciprocal regard and concern, which will permit all to flourish: and, indeed, enable us to see that the flourishing of others contributes to our own flourishing.

Yet, perhaps, we have to recognise that love is so powerful a phenomenon that only God is able, as it were, to manage it fully: certainly, we need to develop our expertise of loving and being loved.

Some years ago, I was driving back from Venice through Germany. Aware that there were no speed limits on German motorways, I thought it would be interesting to see what it was like to drive at a hundred miles an hour. I never quite got to there, since somewhere after eighty miles an hour I began to feel that I was losing control of the car, which, as well probably was not really built for such speeds.

For human beings - certainly most of us - the fullness of divine love is a similarly overpowering phenomenon. Under the influence of love we can feel ourselves losing control of our lives: learning to manage love is a capacity, which needs to be built over time; and with each step we adapt ourselves for the next stage, slowly progressing towards the practice of love, which ever more fully reflects that character of its source in the heart of God: a pursuit, which Saint John the Evangelist, Saint Augustine of Hippo and the late Pope Benedict would all tell us is central to the character of Christian discipleship.