



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

### Homily for Saint Augustine of Hippo (28<sup>th</sup> August) 2025

Most Christians, I suspect, if they have any knowledge about Saint Augustine of Hippo at all, think that the only thing they know is that he prayed, "Lord, make me chaste, but not yet;" and that, for many years, he had a concubine and a son.

Actually, we bump into his ideas all the time. The doctrine of original sin, which now underlies the practice of baptizing babies flowed from his quill, likewise ideas, which feed into our understanding of the Apostolic Succession of the bishops. His theological writings on marriage, including its identity as a Sacrament, have influenced the thinking of the Church ever since: the preface to the marriage service bears his fingerprints with its enumeration of the character and purposes of marriage.

There are other issues raised in his works such as the question of predestination, which were vigorously debated at the time of the Reformation, but about which people do not talk much nowadays.

In some ways, Saint Augustine sits alongside Saint Paul as a major influence on the development of the theology and practice of the Church. Unlike Paul, of course, his writings are not included in the canon of Holy Scripture and they are not read by most lay Christians in any systematic way.

On the other hand, although Saint Augustine's works do not enjoy the authority of canonical texts, since their author has been designated a Doctor of the Church - an honour reserved to only a few theologians - his works do enjoy a greater authority than that of most theological writing. Recently, Pope Benedict was known to be much influenced by Augustine and Pope Leo is an Augustinian friar - a connexion onto which, so it seems, he intends to hold more firmly than did Francis his Jesuit phase; and both Leo and Benedict refer to Augustine often.

However, the distinction between the canonical authority of Biblical texts and the writings of people like Saint Augustine is not as simply drawn as some suppose. On the one hand, the texts of Holy Writ are subject to interpretation; and the fact of the matter is that not every statement included in Scripture enjoys straightforward assent: we do not now require women to wear hats in church, for example, despite the injunction of Saint Paul.

On the other hand, the consistent reference to aspects of Saint Augustine's works has, over the centuries, accorded them a *de facto* status, which adds weight to a proposition when they are cited in support of it. To be sure, not every word he wrote is so honoured - some of his writings are quietly forgotten.

Furthermore, for many theologians, the thinking of Saint Augustine has provided, as it were, a springboard for further elaboration of ideas and there is within the Church a living Augustinian tradition.

All of this contributes to the continuing place of Saint Augustine of Hippo in the life of the Church. It is, perhaps, extraordinary that a man who lived most his life on the fringes of the Christian sphere - in a place that most of us would struggle to find on the map - has consistently influenced the thinking and practice of Christians ever since. It is for this reason that we rightly honour his memory today.