

Pressing on

‘Thou hast formed us for thyself, and our hearts are restless until we find our rest in thee.’ Thus, famously, wrote the great Christian theologian of the 4th and 5th centuries, Augustine of Hippo. And it is a quote which sums up Augustine’s own life. The words come from Augustine’s renowned book ‘The Confessions’ which reflects upon his life and his conversion to Christ. And in retrospect Augustine sees his early life as both a search for truth but also an evading of the truth, as it is found in Jesus Christ. He recognises a kind of restlessness in his early years, a listlessness as he sought and yearned for truth while yet resisting it at every turn. Until eventually, in a dramatic moment, he heard God speaking to him through the voice of a child in a garden and the rest, as they say, is history. This restless seeker finally found rest in God. This lost soul found his goal.

People often speak of salvation that way – of finding rest, finding peace after turmoil and upheaval, reaching home at the end of a journey. Paul, however, in his letter to the Church at Philippi from which we have read this morning, does not exactly see it that way. Writing from prison and facing the prospect of death, Paul also reflects on his own life in a kind of confession. He begins with a description of his former life as a devout and upstanding Jew, an upholder of the law and a fierce defender of his faith. The phrase he uses twice to describe his former life is ‘confident in the flesh’ - confident in his status as a circumcised Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, a Pharisee, a zealous persecutor of the early Christian church. These were things he boasted of! But then he encountered Christ and everything was thrown upside down and much was thrown away – all that he had found confidence in, all that gave his life shape and stability. It was all jettisoned when he met Christ. And if Paul was Augustine, or if he were modelling his confession on any number of Christian testimonies since, we might expect Paul to conclude that he had now reached his goal. We might expect him to say that he had been restless, searching, a stranger to the truth but now he had found it, had gained Christ. Yet Paul does not say this. In verse 8 he speaks of throwing away all that he had valued ‘in order that I may gain Christ’ – so he has not yet fully gained him. He speaks here of ‘wanting to know Christ’ - so he does not yet fully know him. And he

says in verse 12 quite explicitly: ‘Not that I have already obtained this or reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own. In other words Paul does not see himself as having ‘arrived’, having got there. He is not at rest. He is restless as he yearns to know Christ more.

To change the image. This season of Lent is one associated with fasting, as we recall the 40 days Christ spent fasting in the wilderness. I have never fasted for a prolonged period but I’m told that by the ninth or tenth day the hunger pangs have greatly decreased. You may in fact feel quite good. You may begin to feel confident that you can maintain this fast indefinitely. The cravings cease. But just imagine if at that moment you eat a mouthful of food, or a small snack. Suddenly all the cravings return. Hunger pangs grip you and you long for more food. Well, maybe that is a picture of Paul. His former life as a devout Jew was like a fast. He was lacking the most essential nourishment, Christ, the staple diet of the soul. But now in his conversion he has taken a bite. He has tasted of the bread of life. And suddenly his appetite is aroused, the hunger pangs have kicked in and he wants more. And his whole life is now a restless quest as he yearns for the prize which is Christ: ‘I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Jesus Christ.’

I would suggest that the discipline of fasting is a reminder that as Christians we are called to hunger, called to a state of spiritual hunger. We are called to hunger for justice and for right and for peace. And we are to hunger for God and for God’s Kingdom. And salvation in the Bible is often pictured as a great banquet, a feast, but for the meantime – here and now - we taste only a sample, a morsel, a foretaste. That morsel, however, should awaken in us a hunger, a desire for more. And perhaps our problem as Christians is that we are just not hungry. Many of us are sated and filled by the junk-food of affluence and materialism and comfort and distracted by other things. And we have simply lost the hunger for God.

Today we gather round this table where God comes to us in bread and wine, food for our souls. Here we are reminded of the great banquet that awaits us when God’s Kingdom comes in fullness. In this season of Lent let us pray that as we eat and drink we are not satisfied, that we are not filled. Rather let our hunger be aroused: our hunger for God and for the Word of God, and for Christ, the very bread of life. Amen.

Holy and gracious God,
all glory and praise and honour be to you,
eternal and sovereign Maker,
you who are our beginning and end,
our source and our goal,
in through whom and for whom we have been made
and blessed.

In you alone do we find truth and meaning and purpose;
in you alone do we find truth and life;
in you alone do we find our true selves.

And you have created in us a hunger for you,
a thirst for you that cannot be quenched by anything else.

You have created us for yourselves,
and our hearts are restless until they find rest in you.

O God forgive us that we settle for so much less.

Forgive us that we are filled with other things
and lose our hunger for you.

Forgive us that our hands are filled with other things
and so we do not hold them out to you, empty.

Lord have mercy upon us and forgive us.

assure us of your love and grace.

And as we gather here today around your table

help us to feed on you,

to find our nourishment.

Make us hungry and thirsty for you,

And so draw us into your way and your truth and your life.

We pray in Jesus' name

and in his words we pray together, saying...