

One of the features of the worship of the Church of Ireland, in common with the rest of the Anglican Communion is the Collect of the Day. This is a short prayer that gathers together our thoughts. Some are related to particular seasons such as Christmas or Easter, others are more general. Some are relatively recent in origin and composition, others go back to the early centuries of the Church. And so in themselves they are a reminder to us, as Archbishop Henry McAdoo used to remind us, that we confess a faith ‘once for all delivered to the saints.’

The Collect of Today, the 17<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity, is one of those collects that has its roots in the early days of the Church.

Almighty God,  
you have made us for yourself,  
and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you:  
Teach us to offer ourselves to your service,  
that here we may have your peace,  
and in the world to come may see you face to face;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

It picks up on words of St Augustine, Bishop of Hippo in North Africa. Augustine was born in 354 AD. His mother Monica had brought him up as a Christian but he rebelled against this and in his early years adopted a dissolute life style and following pagan philosophy. His mother, as mothers do, never gave up on him and eventually he was converted and was baptised alongside his son he had fathered in earlier years. There is a prayer attributed to him in the lead up to his conversion, as he struggled with the faith and the implications of faith, ‘Lord make me chaste, but not yet.’ Following his conversion he was eventually ordained and later made Bishop of Hippo in North Africa. Augustine became one of the key thinkers of the early Church and his writings have influenced theologians of all traditions, including John Calvin, the father figure of modern Presbyterianism.

His words from his work ‘Confessions’ that form the opening lines of our collect,

Almighty God,  
you have made us for yourself,  
and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you:

speak of a restlessness that was in his heart in the period leading up to his conversion.

I just want to leave that thought of a restlessness in the heart of St Augustine to one side for a moment.

Every now and then I find myself returning to a book by Dr Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of Great Britain and the Commonwealth, called ‘The Dignity of Difference.’ It was a book written in the period following the 9/11 attack on New York and seeks to explore the relationships between faith communities coming from very divergent backgrounds and cultures. At the start of his book, in a passage I have referred to several times before, Jonathan Sacks refers to a multifaith meeting he attended at the headquarters of the United Nations 8 months before the tragic events of 9/11. He was struck by the variety of those present; in the same chamber there were imams, rabbis like himself, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, native Americans along with the whole panoply of Christian groups, each in their own traditional dress. It all took place in the debating chamber of the United Nations headquarters. The contrast between that group and the politicians that usually met there made a deep impression on Jonathan Sacks. He wrote of that occasion;

‘In the great conference chamber normally reserved for politicians debating the issues of the day, here were men and women who devoted their lives not to the noise of now but to the music of eternity, not to the shifting sands of the international arena but to the inner landscape of the human spirit.’ (*The Dignity of Difference Jonathan Sacks p5*)

I just want to stay with that contrast between ‘the noise of now’ and ‘the music of eternity’.

We turn now to our Gospel reading, the Parable of the Dishonest Manager.

This passage refers to someone in a position of great trust and responsibility, whose values had been skewed. Priority was given to self rather than to faithfulness. It is a timeless story of human frailty in the face of temptation, of greed played out in every generation. To go back to the language of the Chief Rabbi, he was more attuned to the noise of now rather than the music of eternity.

How is the music of eternity to be heard in the offices, the shops, the board rooms, the streets and homes of our community? To be heard by others, that music must first be heard by us and then replayed in hearts and lives. For us to hear, we must first of all be attentive. Jesus tells his followers

Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. <sup>10</sup> For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. *Luke 11:9,10*

Asking, searching, knocking are all attitudes of openness – an openness to the God who is open to our search, who seeks us out, who, as we have been thinking over the last couple of weeks, works in and through our humanity, as a potter working and reworking the clay, as a shepherd seeks out the sheep that is lost.

Until we too discover in the asking, searching and knocking the one who is the answer to our prayer:

Almighty God,  
you have made us for yourself,  
and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you:  
Teach us to offer ourselves to your service,  
that here we may have your peace,  
and in the world to come may see you face to face;  
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