SERMON 43: ON WHAT IS WRITTEN IN ISAIAH: UNLESS YOU BELIEVE, YOU SHALL NOT UNDERSTAND

The starting point of a good life, right faith

1. The starting point of a good life, whose due what’s more is eternal life, is right faith. Now faith means believing what you don’t yet see, and the reward of this faith is to see what you believe. So in the season of faith, which is like the season for sowing, let us not falter, and right to the end let us not falter but persevere instead, until we reap what we have sown. When the human race, you see, had turned away from God and was lying weltering in its transgressions, we needed a savior in order to come to life again, just as we needed a creator in order to exist. God in his justice condemned humanity; God in his mercy sets humanity free. The God of Israel will himself give strength and courage to his people. Blessed be God (Ps 68:35). But it’s those who believe that receive this gift; those who disdain him don’t.

2. Even about faith itself, however, we mustn’t boast as though we could manage it on our own. Faith isn’t a mere nothing, you know, it’s something serious and important. If you possess it, then of course you have received it. For what do you possess that you did not receive? (1 Cor 4:7). Take note, dearly beloved, of what it is you give thanks for to the Lord God, in order not to be continuously ungrateful for any gift of his, and because you are ungrateful to lose what you have received. I cannot in any way at all unfold before you the priceless value of faith, but any believer can reflect upon it. On the other hand, if in some respect you can reflect upon it as it deserves, is there anyone who can adequately reflect on how many gifts of God himself faith is to be preferred to? And if we are in duty bound to acknowledge God’s lesser gifts to us, how much more should we acknowledge the one that so surpasses them?

Made to the image of God

3. We owe it to God that we are what we are. From whom, if not from God, do we get it that we are not nothing? But sticks and stones also are, and from whom do they get it but God? Aren’t we anything more, then? Sticks and stones aren’t alive, but we are alive. Still, though, being alive is something we have in common with trees and shrubs. Vines too, after all, are said to be alive. If they weren’t alive, it wouldn’t have been written, He slew their vines with hail (Ps 78:47). It’s alive when it’s green; when it dies it withers.

But this kind of life is without sensation. What more do we have? Senses. We all know the five senses of the body. We see, we hear, we smell, we taste, and by touch all over the body we distinguish soft from hard, rough from smooth, hot from cold. So we have a fivefold sensitivity. But so too do the animals. So we must have something more yet. Even so, my brothers, if we consider just these things we have listed, how many thanks, how much praise do we not owe for them to our creator?

However, what more have we got? Mind, reason, judgment, which animals haven’t got, nor have birds, nor have fishes. It is in this respect that we were made to the image of God. What’s more, when scripture relates that we were made, it adds that he not only puts us ahead of the beasts, but also puts us over them, that is to say that they have been subjected to us. Let us make man, he says, to our own image and likeness, and let him have authority over the fishes of the sea and the birds of the sky and all cattle and creeping things that creep upon the earth (Gn 1:26). What gives him this authority? The image of God. Which is why he says to some people by way of rebuke, Do not be like horse and mule, which have no understanding (Ps 32:9).

Understanding, though, is one thing, reason another. We've got reason even before we understand, but we wouldn’t be able to understand unless we had got reason. So he’s an animal capable of reason, or to put it better and more neatly, a rational animal, imbued with reason by nature, and he has already got reason before
he understands. After all, that's why he wants to understand, because he surpasses other animals in reason.

Believe in order to understand

4. So we ought above all else to cultivate in ourselves this quality in which we excel the beasts, and somehow or other refashion it and chisel it afresh. But who ever will be able to do that, except the craftsman who fashioned it in the first place? We were able to distort God's image in us, we are not able to restore it.

So then, to run over it all again quickly, we have existence in common with sticks and stones, life in common with trees, sense in common with beasts, understanding in common with angels. So we distinguish colors with the eyes, sounds with the ears, smells with the nostrils, flavors with the sense of taste, temperatures with touch, conduct with the understanding. Everybody wants to be understood; there isn't anybody who doesn't want to understand; not everybody wants to believe.

Someone says to me, “Let me understand, in order to believe.” I answer, “Believe in order to understand.” So when an argument of this sort somehow starts between us, so that he says to me, “Let me understand in order to believe,” and I answer him, “On the contrary, believe in order to understand,” let us go with this argument to a judge, don't let either of us presume to give judgment for his own side. What judge are we going to find? After considering all sorts of men, I don't know whether we can find a better judge than a man through whom God speaks. So in this matter, over this argument, don't let's go to secular literature, don't let us have a poet judge between us, but a prophet.

The prophetic word

5. The blessed apostle Peter, with two other disciples of Christ the Lord, James and John, was up the mountain with the Lord himself, and heard a voice coming down from heaven, This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased. Listen to him (Mt 17:5). To remind us of this and draw it to our attention the same apostle said in his letter, We heard this voice carried down from heaven when we were with him on the holy mountain. And after saying We heard this voice carried down from heaven, he went on to add, And we have more certain the prophetic word (2 Pt 1:18-19). That voice echoes from heaven, and the prophetic word is more certain.

Pay close attention, dearly beloved, may the Lord assist both my will and your expectation, so that I may say what I wish to and as I wish to. After all, can any of us fail to be astonished that the prophetic word was said by the apostle to be more certain than the voice carried down from heaven? Well sure, he said more certain, more certain, not better, not truer. That word from heaven was as true as the prophetic word, as good, as useful. So what can he mean by more certain, but what is more convincing to the hearer? And why should it be this? Because there are unbelieving people who disparage Christ by saying that he used the arts of magic to do what he did. So unbelievers, indulging in human guesswork and misplaced ingenuity, may also refer that voice carried down from heaven to magic arts. But the prophets lived before, I don't just say this voice, but before the incarnation of Christ. Christ was not yet man when he sent the prophets. So, anyone who says he was a wizard, if he employed magic arts to get himself worshiped even when he was dead, was he a wizard before he was even born? So there you have why the apostle Peter said We have more certain the prophetic word. The voice from heaven, to admonish believers; the prophetic word, to convince unbelievers. As far as I can see, beloved, we have achieved an understanding of why the apostle Peter said We have more certain the prophetic word, after mentioning the voice carried down from heaven.

The fisherman

6. And what extraordinary consideration on Christ's part! This Peter who speaks in this way was a fisherman, and nowadays a professional orator[4] wins great acclaim if he is able to understand the fisherman. That's why the apostle Paul said, when speaking to the first Christians, Consider your calling, brothers, that not many of
you are wise according to the flesh, not many powerful, not many noble. But the weak things of the world God chose, to confound the strong; and the foolish things of the world God chose, to confound the wise; and the ignoble things of the world and the contemptible ones God chose, and things that are not, as though they were, that the things that are might be made void (1 Cor 1:26-28).

You see, if Christ had begun by choosing an orator, the orator would say, “I was chosen for the sake of my eloquence.” If he had chosen a senator, the senator would say, “I was chosen because of my rank.” Finally, if he had first chosen the emperor, the emperor would have said, “I was chosen because of my authority.” All these types have to keep quiet for a little while and be put on one side; let them keep quiet—they are not being left out, they are not being ignored, they are just being put on one side for a time, in that they are likely to boast about themselves in themselves.\footnote{15}

“Give me,” he says, “that fisherman, give me a common man, give me an uneducated man, give me one whom the senator doesn't deign to talk to, not even when he's buying fish. That's the one to give me,” he says. “If I fill that one, it will be obvious that it's I who am doing it. Though I am also going to do it with the senator and the orator and the emperor; some time or other I am going to do it with the senator, though it's more certainly me with the fisherman. The senator is in a position to boast about himself, so is the orator, so is the emperor. The fisherman isn't in a position to boast about anything except Christ. Let him come first, to give a salutary lesson in humility. Let the fisherman come first; the emperor is best brought along through him.”

Unless you believe, you shall not understand

7. So remember this fisherman, this holy, just and good man, filled with Christ, in whose nets cast throughout the world this people too, along with all the rest, was destined to be caught\footnote{16}. So remember that he said, We have more certain the prophetic word. So therefore, give me a prophet to act as judge in that argument.

What were we arguing about? You were saying “Let me understand in

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order to believe”; I was saying “In order to understand, believe.” An argument has arisen, let us put it before a judge, let a prophet judge, or rather let God judge through a prophet. Let's both of us keep silent. What we have each said has been heard: “Let me understand,” you say, “in order to believe.” “Believe,” say I, “in order to understand.” Let the prophet make his reply: “Unless you believe, you shall not understand” (Is 7:9).

8. Do you imagine, beloved, that the one who says “Let me understand, in order to believe” is really saying nothing very much? After all, what are we on about now, but getting people to believe—not those who don't believe at all, but those who do, though still not enough. If they didn't believe at all, they wouldn't be here. It's faith that brought them here, to listen. Faith brought them into the presence of the word of God, but this faith which has sprouted needs to be watered, nourished, strengthened. That's what we are concerned with right now. I, he said, planted, Apollo watered, but it is God who gave the increase. So neither the one who plants is anything, nor the one who waters, but God who gives the increase (1 Cor 3:6-7). By speaking, exhorting, teaching, persuading I can plant and water, but I cannot give the increase. That man he was talking to, who asked him to help his faith, which was budding and still tender and still weak and really very hesitant, but some sort of faith for all that and not no faith at all—he knew who it was to whom he said, I believe, Lord (Mk 9:23).

Help my unbelief

9. Just now when the gospel was being read, you heard If you can believe—the Lord Jesus said to the boy's father, If you can believe, all things are possible to one who believes (Mk 9:23).\footnote{17} And the man took a look at himself, and standing in front of himself, not in a spirit of brash self-satisfaction but first examining his conscience, he saw that he did have some faith in him, and he also saw that it was tottering. He saw both things. He confessed he had one, and he begged for help for the other. I believe, Lord, he says. What was to follow, if not “Help my faith”? That's not what he said. “I believe, Lord. I can see this something in me, which I'm not lying about. I believe; I'm telling the truth. But I also see this other heaven knows what, and I don't like it. I want to stand, I'm still staggering. I'm standing and speaking, I haven't fallen, because I believe. But
yet I'm still staggering: Help my unbelief” (Mk 9:24).

And so, beloved, that other man too whom I set up against myself, calling in the prophet as referee because of the argument that arose between us, he too isn't saying just nothing when he says “Let me understand, in order to believe.” Of course, what I am now saying, I am saying to help those people believe who do not yet believe. And yet, unless they understand what I am saying, they cannot believe. So what this person says is partly true—“Let me understand, in order to believe”; and I on my side, when I say, just as the prophet says, “On the contrary, believe, in order to understand,” am speaking the truth. Let's come to an agreement, then. So: understand, in order to believe; believe, in order to understand. I'll put it in a nutshell, how we can accept both without argument: Understand, in order to believe, my word; believe, in order to understand, the word of God.

NOTES

11 This is the heading for the sermon given by the Maurist editors, and it explains why the sermon is included here among sermons on the Old Testament. However, the sermon survives primarily in a manuscript collection of sermons “On the words of the apostle” and so the editor of our text gives the heading in this collection (which, however, he declares to be not altogether genuine), “On the words of blessed Peter the apostle, We heard a voice carried down from heaven, This is my beloved son, and we have more certain the prophetic word.” The Maurist heading represents a more just appreciation of the content of the sermon, which is in fact dealing with the question posed by the quotation from Isaiah—one of Augustine's favorite quotations.

The quotation follows the Septuagint text, and is slightly different in the Hebrew: “If you will not believe, surely you will not be established”; the words are addressed to King Ahaz, who was not showing sufficient trust (belief) in the Lord, when he was being threatened by an alliance of his northern neighbors against him. It concurs with Augustine's main point, that faith, or trust, must come first, and is the very basis and foundation of everything else.

No one has suggested any particular date for the sermon. The subject is one that was close to Augustine's heart throughout his life. It governs his exploration of the mystery of the Trinity. So one might plausibly date this sermon to the time when he embarked on his great work on that doctrine, that is, to about 400. Another little peculiarity of the sermon may support this guess: he addresses the congregation several times as “Beloved” (carissimi). This is, of course, a conventional mode of address in sermons, but not one, in fact, that Augustine used very commonly. Now it is my general impression of him that he grew less conventional, not more so, the older he got. So the frequent use of an ecclesiastical convention that is not in fact characteristic of him suggests an early rather than a late date. Furthermore, had he been preaching on this subject after 412 or so, I think he would almost certainly have brought in some reference to the Pelagian controversy. As it is, the only controversy he mentions here is one that he quite frankly manufactured himself.


13 That is, man, of course, though he doesn't actually say so. He just turns suddenly to this generalized manner of speaking, only to drop it again at the beginning of the next section.

14 He is referring, with ironic self-mockery, to himself. There is a rhyming cadence in the Latin impossible to reproduce in the English. *et modo magnum laudem habet orator, si potuerit ab illo intellegi piscator.*

15 See by contrast 1 Cor 1:31; 2 Cor 10:17.

16 *This people too*—the Africans. He is taking a side swipe at the Donatists. Not that they denied that Africans had been caught in the net, but that they in effect maintained, according to Augustine's polemic, that only Africans were retained in the net.
The Latin (following indeed many Greek manuscripts) misses the full effect of Jesus' reply as given in the most authentic Greek text: “If you can? All things are possible etc.,” echoing the man's plea, “Help us, if you can.”

That is, of course, what I am saying cannot help them to believe, unless they understand it.