

Augustinian Friends Prayer Resource Guide

When Winter Comes, Can Spring be far behind?

The Age Old Question

Recently my wife's friend lost one of her twins at full term and had to be rushed to hospital for emergency surgery. To save the mother's life a full removal of her reproductive system was required. In the ensuing weeks, with the funeral and recovery of surgery there has been additional pain and sadness.

It caused us both to question deeply how such a terrible thing could happen to good people who are friendly, hard working and community minded. To pose the age old question:

Why do bad things happen to good people?

This question is central to our faith and one often asked of Christians by non-believers. It is also the title of a wonderful book by an American rabbi, Harold S. Kushner, who lost his son, to a rare genetic disease causing premature aging, at the age of 14.

It is a wonderful book with warmth and a reflective depth that could only come from a deep love of God and humanity. It explores the many pat answers given to parents grieving in such a situation – "it was for the best", "it is a test to make your faith stronger", etc.

Rabbi Kushner explores each of these questions using many examples from his own experience and from the many grieving families he has counseled in times of tragedy. He looks at natural disasters and freak accidents searching for the meaning of these events in creation.

Essentially, his answer to the question is that God grieves with us and provides us with strength. 'Strength beyond our imagining' as Brother Roger of Taize – one of the great spiritual writers of our time – would put it. Of course, this is a free gift. God would never impose on our wills.

Rabbi Kushner is honest in saying that, even though he is a better rabbi and counselor since his son's death, he would happily go back to being a fairly ordinary rabbi if that meant getting his son back. Any parent would understand this sentiment.

It is difficult to do justice to the depth of his insights in a short article, but it is highly recommended reading.

For us as Christians, the Resurrection raises similar questions. Christ's death on the

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The Purpose of the Prayer Resource Guide

Each of us is on a journey to God like our patron Augustine.

The Friends prayer resource is offered to you as a support in your day to day prayer and will be sent to you 4 times a year.

It is centred on the Gospel readings for coming Sundays and quotes from Augustine. It also contains a prayer orientated letter from our Chaplain and some tips on Lectio Divina – the traditional Augustinian method of scriptural reflection and meditation.

cross has no meaning without the Resurrection.

The many examples of God providing 'strength beyond imagining' in Rabbi Kushner's book demonstrate that God is resurrecting us as we speak – from sadness, from suffering and pain, from the Winter of despair to the Spring of new life - in spite of ourselves but also because of the indomitable human spirit He has implanted in our very nature. Beyond this, I am still reflecting on the great depths of this book, which are Augustinian in their clarity and insight. This is a life's work.

Lectio Divina

One of the most insightful reflections on the meaning of pain and joy is contained in the Introduction to Michael Luenig's wonderful book of poems and drawings *The Prayer Tree*. Below are some excerpts from his Introduction that provide fruitful material for Lectio Divina.

Nature requires that we form a relationship between our joy and our despair, that they not remain divided or hidden from one another. For these are the feelings which must cross-pollinate and inform each other in order that the soul be enlivened and strong. It is the soul, after all, which bears the burden of our experience. It is the soul through which we love and it is the soul which senses most faithfully our function within the integrity of the natural world.

Nature requires that we be soulful and therefore requires a dimension within us where darkness and light may meet and know each other. Mornings and evenings somewhere inside, with similar qualities to the morning and evenings of the earth. Qualities of gradual but vast change; of stillness and tender transference, fading and emerging, foreboding and revelation.

...The matter requires our imagination. In particular, it requires the aspect of imagination we have come to know as prayer.

We pray. We imagine our way inwards and downwards and there, with heartfelt thoughts or words we declare our fears and our yearnings; we call out for love and forgiveness; we proclaim our responsibility and gratitude. The struggling, grounded soul speaks to the higher spirit and thus we exist in the mornings and evenings of the heart: thus we are affected and changed by the qualities we have created within ourselves.

... ..The person contemplates the tree.

The tree sends its roots beneath the surface, seeking nourishment in the dark soil: the rich "broken down" matter of life.

As they reach down and search, the roots hold the tree firmly to the earth.

Thus held and nourished, the tree grows upwards into the light, drinking the sun and air and expressing its truth: its branches and foliage, its flowers and fruit. Life swarms around it. Birds and insects teem within its embrace, carrying pollen and seed. They nest and breed and sing and buzz. They glorify the creation.

The tree changes as it grows. It is torn by wind and lightning, scarred by frost and fire. Branches die and new ones emerge. The drama of existence has its way with the tree but still it grows; still its roots reach down into the darkness; still its branches flow with sap and reach upward and outward into the world.

A person kneels to contemplate a tree and reflect upon the troubles and joys of life. The person imagines mornings and evenings in a great forest of prayers, swarming and teeming with life.

The person is learning how to pray.

Paul Griffiths

From our Chaplain

September 30th. 2003

Dear Friends,

as soon as I finished my last letter to you describing the impact seven weeks of flu had made on me, I took myself off for two weeks of rest and recuperation spent in a caravan that friends of mine have permanently parked at Crescent Head. I figured I had enough energy to sweep the sand out of the annex every second day, but that was as much as I could do. The offer of a house or apartment would be too much to cope with, but a caravan seemed just about right.

My experience of Caravan Parks is not great, but the two weeks turned out to be the best thing I could have done for myself. I took a pile of books to read, a radiator for the cold nights, and warm sweaters for the day and I had maps to show me which walks to take and which headlands had the best view of the whales that were passing by at that time of the year.

The park was not crowded but a number of travelers came and went around me and they were all very friendly. Some gave me fish they had caught to cook for my tea, and others stopped by to talk as I read the paper in the sun each morning. One couple who camped opposite my site were a retired Presbyterian minister and his wife and eventually I told him that I was an Augustinian priest. His response was immediate and truly astounded me.

"Ah! The great Augustine!" he said, and without a blink he quoted, "You love us so much it is as if we were the only ones". I immediately took that to mean that we don't have to be jealous that anyone would earn more of God's love than us because his care for us is so unique it is as if we were the only ones. Over the days we had a number of talks and I was greatly impressed by the minister's breadth of learning and his kindness towards all other denominations that speak the truth about Christ. I also made up my mind to look up the quote when I got back home!

In Book Three of the Confessions St. Augustine is describing a dream his mother had which consoled her to such an extent that she agreed to live under the one roof with him once more. She is reassured by a radiant young man (Christ) that "*where she stood there also stood I*"

"This was to reassure her. She took heed, and saw me standing close beside her on the same rule. How else could this have happened, if not because your ears were open to the plea of her heart, *O good and all-powerful God, who care for each of us as though each were the only one, and for all alike with the same tenderness you show to each?*" (Conf. 3 (11) 19)

It occurs to me that this is the key to understanding why hospitality is such a strong feature of Augustinian spirituality. In the same way that God holds us each in such tender regard, so we are meant to treat each person that we meet with an equal kindness that is available to all, not just the ones with whom we are more at ease. If we are able to offer this fraternal care (or more importantly, maternal care) to others it gives them a glimpse of what God's love for them might be like, all inclusive and complete.

What we need to develop in our time is a spirituality of embrace, the sanctification of feelings. We have been told that the greatest of these is love, but we do not really believe it. Not on the rational level. We have been told to be willing to repeatedly turn the other cheek but we do not risk it. Not on the social level. And yet, until we have the grace to abhor the sight of brutality anywhere in the world, what hope can we possibly have for the success of divinity's great experiment — the mind of God in the human heart?

To embrace the other, to take the stranger into our lives, to trust that the 'other' is motivated by the same cares and loves as we are redesigns the human race. When we open our minds to the idea that the 'other' stands near us at the level of our feelings, then Islamics cease to be sinister, blacks cease to be dangerous, whites are no longer the incorrigible colonial dictators of the world, and there is a chance that we may be directed by our nobler feelings without fear. The time to exert hospitality is now, before autonomy destroys community and leaves us less human at the end of our evolutionary process than when we began.

May the great Augustine continue to give us the words to describe how God is dealing with each one of us,

with much love,

Paul

Tolle Lege (Take and Read)

It is suggested that you reflect on the readings taken from the Sunday liturgy during a quiet time in the previous week. "Take and Read" the text and be open to Augustine's question "What is God wanting me to know now?" Let God's grace illumine your understanding.

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| October 5 | Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time | Hebrews 2:9-11 |
| October 12 | Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time | Mark 10:17-30 |
| | <i>... The reason he was asking the Lord what good he should do to obtain eternal life was that he desired to flit from one lot of enjoyment to another, and he dreaded giving up the wealth he was enjoying at the moment, and so he withdrew, a sad man, to his earthly treasures. ... You see, if he loved even them in the right way, they too would do a flit and be transferred to heaven, where he would follow himself later on. God showed him a home to transfer it to, not a place to lose it. For he went on to say, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." (Sermon 38, 7-8)</i> | |
| October 19 | Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time | Mark 10:35-45 |
| | <i>"Christ calls them (the sons of Zebedee) back from the matter of where they wanted to go, to the matter of how they ought to go. There they were, aiming at such dizzy heights, and what answer did he give them? "Can you drink the cup that I am going to drink?" What cup, if not the one of humiliation, the one of suffering? ... This is Christian teaching, the rule of humility, that we should not take pride in anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Sermon 160, 5)</i> | |
| October 26 | Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time | Mark 10: 46-52 |
| November 1 | All Saints Day | 1 John 3:1-3 |
| November 2 | All Souls Day | Matthew 11:25-30 |
| November 9 | Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time | Mark 12:38-44 |
| | <i>Let's suppose that the kingdom of heaven is up for sale, for the price of almsgiving. A most fertile and valuable estate has been put up for us to buy, one which, after we have acquired it we won't leave to some successors but will always remain in possession of, never to leave it, never to move out of it at all. It remains for you to inquire how much it's worth, in case you are not able to buy it. You may not think you can make it, so I'll tell you its price: its worth whatever you have." (Sermon 105A,1)</i> | |
| November 16 | Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time | Mark 13:24-32 |
| | <i>No one should try to work out when the last day will be; but we should all be on the watch by leading good lives, or else the last day of each one of us may find us unprepared, and as each one makes his exit from here on his last day, so shall he be found on the world's last day. (Sermon 97, 1-3)</i> | |
| November 23 | Feast of Christ the King | John 18:33-37 |
| November 30 | First Sunday of Advent | 1 Thessalonians 3:12-4:2 |
| December 7 | Second Sunday of Advent | Philippians 1:3-6,8-11 |
| December 14 | Third Sunday of Advent | Luke 10:3-18 |
| December 21 | Fourth Sunday of Advent | Luke 1:39-45 |
| | <i>Therefore, this leaping, this greeting, so to speak, offered to the Mother of the Lord is miraculous; it is to be reckoned among the great signs; it was not effected by human means by the infant (John), but by divine means <i>in</i> the infant, as miracles are usually wrought. Therefore, I neither reject what happened to John, nor do I set it up as a norm of what is to be thought of infants; on the contrary, I pronounce that in him it was miraculous, because I do not find it in others. (Sermon 187, 7.23-25)</i> | |

**AUGUSTINIAN FRIENDS
SHARING THE SPIRITUALITY OF AUGUSTINE**

Editor and Chaplain: Paul Maloney osa (02) 9631 0340 Assistant: Paul Griffiths

PO BOX 679 Brookvale NSW 2100 Phone: (02) 9905 3049 Fax: (02) 9938 4465