

Yesterday was the feast day of St Augustine of Hippo (Hippo was a place in North Africa) – he isn't the same as St Augustine of Canterbury who came over from Rome to convert the English to Christianity. Augustine of Hippo was a fifth century bishop and theologian, but he had led a distinctly rackets life before becoming a Christian. He was the man who prayed: 'Lord, make me chaste, but not yet.' Augustine argued strongly against a doctrine proposed by another fifth-century theologian called Pelagius, who believed that someone can take the first fundamental steps towards salvation by their own efforts; they can choose good by virtue of their own free will, without needing the direct intervention of divine grace. This doctrine, Pelagianism, is sometimes called the 'British heresy', partly because Pelagius was born in Britain. It's been described as 'pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps', and it was consistently popular in Britain, where self-improvement has long been seen as a virtue.

Christian theology was developing fast and disputatiously in the fifth century. Rival sects developed, frequent appeals were made to popes and to church councils, competing theologians declared each other and different doctrines to be heretical. Looking at it all from a twenty-first century perspective, it is often extremely difficult to understand what all the arguments were about. But Pelagius's support for free will was in direct contention with Augustine's advocacy of original sin. Augustine, who had the advantage of being a bishop, called the Council of Carthage to persuade the pope to excommunicate Pelagius, and later managed to have him and his doctrine declared to be heretical. Interestingly, several modern theologians have come to the conclusion that Pelagius wasn't really a heretic and that his teachings contain much which is valuable – in fact his opinions were no more heretical than those of Augustine. But Augustine won the argument in the fifth century, was recognised as a saint and his books are still read by every Christian scholar, whereas poor Pelagius has become almost invisible.

But why is any of this relevant this morning? Bear with me for a few more minutes. Apart from Augustine's advocacy for original sin, this led to a significant argument about justification. Technically, 'justification' means becoming righteous in the sight of God. I'll spare you all the detail – suffice it to say that the means of justification became a major item of controversy at the Reformation. The extreme Protestant position (held by Lutherans and Calvinists) was that justification was an act of God alone. God declares a person to be righteous – thus we get 'justification by faith' or 'by grace'. What the individual did was of no account; the only thing that mattered was what they believed. But the more moderate view was that man had to co-operate in the process, so justification was not just by faith but also by 'works'. As it says in the Epistle to the Ephesians, we must 'labour for salvation by doing all those good works that God has prepared for us to walk in'.

Still with me? This lands us fair and square in the middle of today's Epistle: 'Be doers of the word and not merely hearers'. James knew that listening to the word, whether from scripture, from teaching or a sermon, isn't enough. I'm prepared to bet – and I won't be in the least put out if you admit that it's true – that by tomorrow morning you will probably have forgotten everything I'm saying now. There's that story of the vicar who preached his first sermon to a new congregation. The sermon was the same the following week, and the weeks after that. Eventually someone asked why he always preached the same sermon, to which he replied: 'When I see any evidence that anyone is acting on it, we can move on.' It's a standard reminder for teachers: 'I hear, and I forget. I do, and I understand'. For something to become real, to become a part of who you are, it has to be put into practice. James talks about being quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger. Act in this way, care for widows and orphans, avoid the temptations of the world, and you will be blessed.

James makes very simple what the Old Testament made very detailed. Not just the ten commandments, but the law that takes up twenty-seven chapters of the book of Deuteronomy. It was a complete legal and practical code – a rule of life – for the wandering Israelite tribe which was under God’s special protection. The law was to be read, understood, put into practice in everyday life and passed on, unaltered, down the generations. It was this law that the Pharisees used to challenge Jesus about his disciples’ behaviour. The reply Jesus gave them demonstrated very clearly that how someone behaves – what they do – shows what their true self is like. Banging on about the letter of the law simply isn’t enough – it misses the point entirely.

Sometimes a preacher can be well into their sermon when they realise that it is actually saying something important to them, no matter what it may also be doing for – or to – their audience. It’s certainly happened to me on more than one occasion. If there is a message for me this morning it could well be ‘Practice what you preach!’ Listen more. Talk less. Be more patient. Don’t get wound up so easily. And while there aren’t too many literal widows and orphans to care for, there are certainly many people who need understanding and practical support. Some of them are quite close at hand.

Maybe this is the message for you too. Don’t worry too much about Augustine and Pelagius knocking theological chunks off each other over free will and original sin. You can forget all that stuff about the reformation and which sort of justification we should hang our hats on. But be doers of the word. ‘Love God, and love your neighbour as yourself’ isn’t a theological concept. It is a call to action, to be taken out of the door at the end of the service and put into practice every day. Don’t be hearers who forget – be doers who act, and be blessed in what you do.