

A detailed stained glass window depicting St. Augustine. He is shown from the chest up, wearing a mitre and ornate vestments in red, green, and gold. He holds a crozier in his right hand and a flaming heart in his left. The background is a deep blue with floral patterns. The window is divided into panes by dark lead lines.

Lessons for Christian living

Augustine's Life of Prayer, Learning and Love

Cally Hammond

I am so grateful for this delightful and accessible introduction to Augustine, one of the most fascinating figures of Christian history. Here is the wonder and challenge of the Christian faith through Augustine's most personal of writings, skilfully interpreted to show how our most human struggles and longings can bring us to the love of God.

Revd Angela Tilby, Canon Emeritus of Christ Church, Oxford

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For the Chapel Clerks of Caius College:
I thank you for your service to our Christian community –
you have made time for me to write this book –
and let me share Augustine with you.

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Contents

Introduction	7
1 Augustine's journey towards faith.....	13
2 Conversion, baptism and getting to grips with the Bible	27
3 Augustine on debates and disagreements	39
4 After conversion: living as a Christian	51
5 From learner to teacher	65
6 Augustine learns to pray with others	81
7 Augustine learns to pray alone.....	99
8 Augustine talking about God: beauty, light, truth.....	115
9 Going deeper: learning, teaching, praying, loving	127
Further reading	139

Introduction

Back when Christianity was still a young religion, a boy was born in north Africa who would grow up to be one of the greatest and most influential Christian thinkers who ever lived. He asked all the hard questions, and he answered them in ways that are still convincing today. He faced temptations and distractions, and he struggled within himself: he was afraid of being laughed at for his faith, but he was also desperate to be done with his old selfish lifestyle, which he was sick of but didn't know how to let go. At the same time as working out what he believed and how to live his faith, he had to earn a living and look after his family and exist somehow in a world that was much more interested in money, success and celebrity than in goodness, service of others and love of God.

Some things don't change! Even though he lived 17 centuries ago, his problems were not much different from ours. So as we learn about him, we can be sure to learn about ourselves at the same time.

There are lots of books that tell the life story of Augustine. This is not one of them. I've put some suggestions at the end of the book for those who want to look deeper into his life and his world. This book is about how he became a Christian – the problems he faced and the doubts he struggled with – and how he made sense of his belief in God and shared it with other people. It is about how he learned to read the Bible and pray. And it is about the word which is at the heart of his Christian life – *love*. Finally, it is about how he can help us, the Christians of today, to become wiser, kinder and more prayerful too.

I'm starting this journey of exploration with only a brief description of his background. He lived some 1,600 years ago (AD 354–430),

mostly in north Africa, and he was brought up and educated to be a public speaker. His mother was a Christian, but his father wasn't (though he converted just before he died). After his conversion to Christian faith, he went on to be a famous preacher and teacher – probably the most famous Christian of his time. But his path to discipleship was a rocky one.

He tells us a lot about himself in his best-known book, *Confessions*. It tells the tale of someone who grew up hungry for – well, what? Hungry for something, that's for sure. Hungry for wisdom and understanding, but also hungry for praise and admiration. He was desperate to make sense of his life, but also to understand how all humanity fitted into God's plan. He longed for certainty, but he longed for people's respect and admiration too. He wanted to be wise, but mainly because it would impress others not because it would make his relationship with God better. Being valuable to God was not as important to him, in those early days, as being respected by other people. He wanted to enjoy all the good things in life, but he also knew that possessions are a snare and a distraction. And he had no idea, to start with, how to cope with these conflicting aims.

If all this makes you think, 'Hang on, Augustine sounds just like me,' you are in good company. The reason why people still read him, still study and admire him, is that he got deeper than anyone else (since Bible times) into the mystery of God's love for us, and ours for God. I'm writing this book because that is what happened to me. I began by studying Augustine's writings. I have ended up praying his words, preaching his ideas and encouraging everyone I can to get to know him for themselves. But that is not an easy thing to do when he lived so long ago and wrote in Latin. And some of his ideas have been taken up and developed in ways that are not so helpful. I'll come back to that later.

In the first few chapters of this book, I am going to look at some of the stages in Augustine's discipleship as he himself describes them in the *Confessions*. I'm not doing this to give you historical background,

but rather to hold up a mirror, because at every turn, as Augustine tells you about *himself*, you will keep finding *yourself*.

This is reassuring. It tells us that Augustine is not a model of Christian perfection, not someone we aspire to imitate only to fall short. The story he tells in the *Confessions* is not like any other autobiography, because he isn't telling it to the reader; he's telling it to God. In fact, the whole book is perhaps the longest prayer ever. He talks to God in the same way Moses did: 'the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, *as one speaks to a friend*' (Exodus 33:11). This is where our journey with Augustine will begin: eavesdropping (with his encouragement) on a private conversation between himself and God. Later, we will learn from his conversation with God how to talk to God ourselves – and, more importantly, how to listen to God when he speaks to us.

Once we are, like Augustine, clearer about the fact that we do talk with God, and hear him respond, we will tackle another foundation of the faith – how to read the Bible. Augustine was one of the first people to ask, 'How should we read it?' We could put that another way, by asking why the Bible isn't like any other book. Here, too, Augustine's story is one of struggle to understand for himself, and then to help others understand. Reading the Bible with Augustine will not be a sterile search for facts; it will be like falling in love. The more we learn, the greater our love becomes. And by falling in love with God, we will find that talking to him in prayer is easy, and brings us the joy and peace we long for.

From Augustine's story a picture begins to emerge. Human beings have an instinctive yearning for God, which needs nurture and support. Fellow Christians ('the church') are there for us, showing us the way. They can show us how to read the Bible and make sense of it. With this support, we can begin to say some things about God himself – who he is, what he is like, why he makes himself known through his Son Jesus and through the Holy Spirit. And when we have worked through all that, we will be ready to let Augustine

lead us into our own conversation with God, so that we can learn to speak with the one 'who made us for himself', so that 'our hearts are restless until they rest in him'.

In each chapter of the book I have let Augustine speak directly in his own words (using my own translation). You will quickly get to know the man himself: passionate, impetuous, dissatisfied with himself, hungry for knowledge, eager for love. And you will soon see why we should be eager to learn from his example, because then our faith will be enriched by his honesty, his curiosity and, above all, his enthusiasm for a real and deep relationship with God.

I have ended each chapter with some questions, whether for discussion in a group or personal reflection, and with a prayer drawn from Augustine's writings. I hope that you will find these helpful and that they will encourage you to discover more about this remarkable Christian and about your own faith.

Bible passage for reflection

Job answered the Lord:

'I know that you can do all things,
and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.
"Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?"
Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.
"Hear, and I will speak;
I will question you, and you declare to me."
I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,
but now my eye sees you.

JOB 42:1-5

For many Christians, faith means a battle within themselves not to listen to the questioning voice within them that wants answers, that

pleads to understand God's ways. Job shows us that not only it is all right to ask questions of God, it is good and proper for us to do so. What is more, we have been given reassurance that we have within ourselves the capacity to see God and that, if we are able to admit our human frailty and confess God's divine power, he will bless us as we search deeper into his truth. This is what Augustine does, and in following his example we shall be able to open ourselves to the kind of faith, hope and love that characterised him.

Questions

- 1 Which is more important, our duty to family, friends, colleagues and society or our duty to God? Why?
- 2 Is it wrong to have doubts about our faith?
- 3 Why do we care so much about what other people think of us?
- 4 Is talking with God difficult – and if it is, why has God made it so?
- 5 Who in your life has been a key Christian inspiration to help you in your faith?

Prayer

*Lord God, you have made us for yourself,
and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.
Teach us to live this life as travellers on a journey,
not seeking an abiding home
until we come to our Father's house,
with all its many rooms;
so that there we may lay down,
and find our home, our rest. Amen*

1

Augustine's journey towards faith

On one level every human story is the same: we are born, we live and we die. On another level, every human story is different: we are born into wealth or poverty, peace or war, nurture or exploitation, education or ignorance, conformism or rebellion. Our identities are made up of a mixture of factors – genes, parental influence, peer pressure, public goals and private dreams.

Augustine's story is no different. He belongs in history, his own time, as we do in ours. But he also belongs to all time, because for 1,600 years people have been meeting him through his writings, listening to him and finding him to be a reliable guide for Christian discipleship. Few could be more aware than he was that life is limited and that our human vision and understanding are partial and imperfect. But he was also convinced that for faithful Christians the story of one life can be the story of every life. And so, in his early years as an adult Christian, he sits down to write his *Confessions*. What we find out about him in this chapter comes from that book. It is so small compared to some of his other works, but so massive in terms of its influence and power and the effect it has on almost everyone who reads it.

We can't look at the whole story in detail, so instead I have selected for us to explore together some key moments in Augustine's life up to the time of his conversion. These are moments that show us universal human experiences and give voice to universal questions:

What is sin really about? Why do so many people live their life in fear? How is it that our dreams and our reality fail to match up to each other? What does it mean to become a Christian, to repent and to be baptised? They are all only moments, only fragments of a life, but they are moments common to many of us. Looking at these moments will help us get to grips with the power of Augustine's faith and with his potential to inspire faith in us and in others. This is essential before we turn to the difficult questions of ideas and beliefs about God (what some Christians call 'theology'). Understanding the man will give us the confidence to learn from him and to tackle new ways of praying that perhaps always seemed way beyond us. It could be a rollercoaster ride!

Augustine was very clever. He knew it, too. But being so clever did not make him happy. Instead he could not understand why his being intelligent didn't help him live his life better. He used his cleverness to win praise from people instead of seeking God's approval. But he knew their praise was worthless, even though he was desperate to win such admiration. He knew that people were really only judging him according to what they saw on the surface, not according to the deep-down reality of his confused, disordered self. He couldn't help but notice how often people condemned trivial faults in others, but didn't worry about their own serious character flaws or abusive behaviour. Being a fundamentally honest person, Augustine knew he too was guilty of such hypocrisy:

In schoolboy games I was desperate to excel, and strove to win, even if it meant cheating. I was determined not to let others cheat me, and denounced them harshly if I spotted it, but I was doing the exact same thing to them! If I was caught in the act, I chose to get angry rather than to admit the truth. So much for the innocence of youth. There is no such thing, Lord!

It is hard to read that and not think of cheating scandals in sport, such as the case of cyclist Lance Armstrong. Such attitudes are constant down the years. So is the Christian challenge to them – to

be honest, whatever the cost; to put truth before personal vanity. There is also the Christian belief, rooted in the apostle Paul's equally hard-won life experience, that sometimes to lose is to win. Augustine comes to see that childhood is not a time of innocence that is gradually corrupted as life goes on; instead, weakness is part of human nature from the beginning:

Human failings are the same from the childhood time of carers and teachers, trivia and playtimes, as in the adult transition to citizenship, work and money – they are exactly the same! But more severe punishments take the place of discipline fit for children.

Some people think that Christianity is obsessed with sin. That is not true, but sin is a vital part of understanding our relationship with God. Unless we are honest about our failings, we cannot make any progress in that relationship. Augustine was firmly convinced that we are responsible for our own failings; we cannot shuffle off responsibility by blaming them on upbringing or circumstances. Somehow, we have to accept that they are part of who we are. Only then can we move forward and begin to live life with the freedom of the gospel.

Admitting our sinfulness is liberating! Once we have confessed the worst, we can get to work on becoming who God would have us be. This is the process Augustine shows us in *Confessions*. In one way, it is like a long riff on Paul's experience in the New Testament. A move away from the kind of faith that is all about judgement and repression, to faith which is 'the glorious liberty of the children of God'.

No one, before Augustine, had tried to express what it means, what it feels like from the inside, to be a human being, from birth and childhood into adulthood – to be aware of our own existence, governed by conscience, questioning, conflicted and inspired in equal measure. Arguably, no one has done it better since. Even when

he is explaining the problem of sin and how we fall short of God's ideal, he can also see how closely his failings and his talents are bound together. And vitally, he comes back again and again to that small inner voice that challenges the louder voices of temptation and distraction in his life – remember that, as usual in *Confessions*, he is talking to God:

I was alive and self-aware, and able to protect my sense of self. My wholeness was a trace of your mystical unity, which I was part of. Some inner consciousness guarded the purity of my senses; and I delighted in truth.

Within him, as within each one of us, there is a self-awareness and an inner voice. These things connect us to God, who is beyond all that we can imagine. If we can only learn to listen to that inner voice, it will soon become clear that, what really delights us, above all else, is the truth. Because nothing can be really beautiful or worthwhile unless it is also true – and that includes God. He has to be more than a noble idea; it is God's living reality, his truth, that gives meaning to our own.

In our modern world, many people have turned away from religious faith. Instead they turn towards themselves and look within to find meaning. Like Augustine, they are aware of themselves, sometimes as individuals, sometimes as part of some wider identity, such as nationality. But cutting God out of the picture means that they cannot see themselves as *gifted* with talents and abilities, because they do not believe that there is anyone doing the giving. The missing aspect, which gives such strength to the Christian view of human life, is *gratitude*. Christians sometimes give this a specifically religious label, 'thanksgiving', but the word 'gratitude' is more helpful, because it shows us how all that is best in us comes from what God has given and not from what we can achieve for ourselves. Also, because it is understood by believers and non-believers alike, it shows that the same instinct is there in all of us. We may not believe in the God who made us, but he believes in us.

There is no Christian virtue, except forgiveness, more powerful than gratitude as a way of helping us draw close to God. This is what Augustine is trying to express when he tells God how he feels about him, and how he got confused between God and the things God has made, mixing up creator and creation:

Surely a living creature like myself is something completely wonderful. But all my qualities are gifts from my God. I did not give them to myself. They are good, and I am the sum of all their parts. So the one who made me is good... and I rejoice in him for all the good things of which I consisted even in childhood. My sin consisted in seeking pleasure, inspiration, truth not in God himself but in the things God has made – things like me myself. As a result, I tumbled headlong into distress.

It is difficult to say anything about Augustine's understanding of sin without mentioning what he calls 'original' or 'birth' sin. He used it as a term to explain why no perfect human being has ever been born (save one, who was also truly divine – Jesus). I will be saying more about that later in the book. For now, we can simply say that it is a way of making sense of the plain fact that, as Paul puts it, *we do not do the right we want to do, but the wrong that we do not want to do, that is what we do*. We do not begin perfect in babyhood and get gradually corrupted by a sinful world eroding our goodness – like silver plating wearing off to expose base metal beneath. We are born human, which is to say frail and fallible, and we go on that way, because that is what being human really means.

There is a famous story in *Confessions* that helps us to understand human sin and frailty; Augustine tells it precisely because he knows that it looks trivial, silly, unimportant. Yet it sums up the whole truth of why our restless hearts are always searching for a way home to God. It isn't a story of grand sin. Augustine was not a Herod, a Judas or a Pontius Pilate, not a child murderer, betrayer or coward. He doesn't hurt anyone by what he does. He is not noticeably damaged by it himself. It seems to be an incident that has no cost or

consequence and therefore no real significance. But we shall soon see that this is far from the case!

There was a pear tree near to our vineyard, laden with fruit that was neither attractive nor tasty. We set out in the dead of night – a gang of good-for-nothing youths – to steal its fruit. We carried off loads, not to eat ourselves but for throwing to pigs (we did eat a few, as what we were doing was enjoyable because it was forbidden).

Look, O God, and see my heart, see my heart! For you had mercy on it. How was it that I became a wrongdoer for nothing? It was loathsome and I loved it. Human friendship is sweetened by a precious bond, forging unity out of many souls. Yet even in pursuit of these good things, sin gains an entrance. The pears were attractive, but my poor soul did not desire them. I had plenty of better fruit at home; I plucked these only for the sake of thieving. I threw away what I had stolen. I feasted on my own wickedness. If one morsel of fruit passed my lips, it was sin that sweetened it.

Now, O Lord my God, what was it about the theft that gave me pleasure? Had I been alone, I would not have done it (I remember thinking so at the time). So what I loved about it was participating with others in doing what I did. My pleasure was not in the pears; it was in the actual sin that a fellowship of sinners committed together. Out of a lark came an eagerness to do harm, a taste for inflicting losses on others without myself gaining anything. Once someone says, 'Come on, let's do it,' it is shameful to be anything but shameless.

I deviated from you, I have wandered from the path, my God. In my teens I was too inconstant in your steadfastness, and I made myself into a barren land.

When Augustine tells this trivial anecdote of his teenage years, and shares his thoughts on it with God, and with us, trying to make sense of what it means to be a human being, he is looking back after ten years as an adult Christian. His faith is not new; its roots are not shallow. He has spent a long time thinking about the mystery of faith, and what God wants of him and of all of us. And he is honest and realistic about human sin. People distort the truth; they deny God; they prefer the broad way to destruction, not the narrow path that leads to life (Matthew 7:13).

Our default setting all too often is to do what is easy rather than what is right. Many Christians would stop at this point and make the Christian message mainly one of warning and denouncing. We are wrong, we are bad, we let God down and we betray his trust. Augustine does not do this. Instead he takes the harder path, trying to find answers to questions other people hadn't even thought of asking. It wasn't until I read *Confessions* that I really started to ask myself how we can actually know anything about God at all. Perhaps this is a question you're now ready to ask yourself. The fact is, we *experience* God long before we try to know things about him. We reach out to him in wordless prayer, or go to church and worship, or share faith with fellow Christians, and we feel our hearts strangely warmed. Then we start to puzzle out what it all means, and how we have come to have these insights into our own nature – how we come to be convinced that we are not alone and that we are created, redeemed and sustained by God.

Augustine shows us the answer to this puzzle. Given the sinful state in which we live, ignoring God, disobeying him, shutting him out, how could we ever have any knowledge about him in the first place – unless *he put it there for us to find*? Our search for God, our 'restlessness' (to use Augustine's word), our 'hearts aflame for the one' who made us (his words again): all are prompted by that sense, deep within us, that God simply *is*. Who, what, how, why God is – all this comes later. But *that* God is, is our starting point. So we can take our belief in God for granted, and often do – without stopping to

ask how it is that we can even think such thoughts, have such ideas, unless God somehow made us a field ready for sowing. The seeds of faith are already germinating in the field of our hearts without any effort on our part.

It is odd to think that over all these centuries, from Bible times up to today, we still all face the same experience. Basically, it comes down to being tempted to give up on God in favour of some easier way, being afraid to do the right thing for fear of being judged. Most of all, making wrongdoing easier by not doing it alone. The story of the pears brings the whole thing into focus. Each one of us always has a choice; but being with others when they choose wrong and sin makes it harder for us (why?) to say no ourselves, and makes it easier for us to join in and go astray. We are not alone. Our weaknesses are part of what it is for all of us to be human; and we must face those weaknesses as Augustine eventually did. Honestly. Saying sorry. Determining not to be a prisoner of the past but accepting that we are free to choose what is good.

One of the biggest issues faced by today's Christians is sexual morality. There is so much disagreement about what is right, normal and good. You might think that it was all much clearer and simpler in earlier times, but that isn't so. Augustine was brought up in a society in which different customs and beliefs clashed all the time – just like our society, in fact. One thing he was 100% clear about, though, was that for a Christian, sex outside marriage was wrong. And those who committed that sin were condemned. And that was a big problem for him. He had done the usual thing for a young man from his background and chosen a woman to be his bed-sharer ('concubine') – a girlfriend, we would probably call her. She came from a lower social class, which in those days meant he was legally unable to marry her. They lived together, faithful to one another, for years. They even had a son together and called him Adeodatus, which means 'Given by God'. But the customs of his time meant that if he wanted to become a Christian, he would have to give her up. And he could not bring himself to do it.

This was one great obstacle in his way – how he could commit himself to Christ, when he thought he was incapable of living without a sexual partner. But this was only part of the problem. In fact, it wasn't the real problem at all; it was the *excuse*. In other words, as long as he could keep saying, 'I can't become a Christian because I could never live up to the Christian ideal of chastity,' he would not have to respond to the insistent voice of God within him, calling him to come home. He didn't want the upset, the change to his pattern of life. He didn't want other people to laugh at him either. This was a constant anxiety. Right from his childhood, he had been afraid of people laughing at him, mocking him. And that fear of others' scorn never really went away.

Most of us are influenced by our families and friends, for better or worse. We feel that they know us best, so we respect their judgement. Augustine had a close childhood friend whose opinion he valued, and they loved one another dearly, as friends do. One day the friend fell ill, and his illness made Augustine stop and think. Where would his friend go if he died? To heaven? To hell? To nothingness? They had shared everything as they grew up together, but now his friend (he never tells us his name) was about to go where Augustine could not follow. He had fallen unconscious, and while he was unconscious he had been baptised. For a little while, he recovered, and Augustine tried to get him to go back to their old ways – laughing at baptism as if it were nothing, making light of faith. But the friend had changed. He didn't feel that way any more. Baptism had liberated him from all that childish preoccupation with other people's opinions. He no longer cared what other people thought of him or how they might judge him. He was a Christian now.

Soon after being baptised, his friend died, and Augustine was plunged into a terrible grief. The grief was compounded by the choking fear that overcame Augustine, as he grew more and more anxious about death and judgement. Separation from his dear friend was bad enough – how, he asked, could the rest of the world go on living, as if nothing had happened? He was torn between two kinds

of hopelessness. On the one hand there was the possibility that after death came oblivion, nothingness. And on the other was the equally terrifying possibility that there *would* be life after death, but that he would be excluded from it because of not being a Christian himself.

Just as with sexual desire, so with human love and affection: what was made by God, and so was good, was being corrupted by Augustine's refusal to put God at the centre instead of himself. In this state of utter despair, he describes what we would nowadays call 'alienation', a feeling of being isolated from the community, the companionship of other people and social groups, and being separated from all that is good:

My soul should've been lifted up to you, Lord. It should've been healed. I knew it, but I didn't want to; I didn't have the strength. This was because to me you didn't exist; you were just an imaginary being. I was in an unhappy place where I could not bear to stay, but couldn't leave either. Where could my heart flee, to escape from my heart? Where could I flee, to escape from myself? Where could I get to, without ending up pursuing myself?

Augustine's mind was like a wheel spinning on a bike that has fallen to the ground – going round and round but getting nowhere fast. His own thoughts, instead of helping him through the grief of his friend's death, worsened that grief.

What strikes me now, as I reread those words of his, is how *strong* his mind was. How fiercely he fought against the pull of his heart which was trying to return to God. He wanted to be self-reliant, in control of his own intelligence, able to govern his emotions, but he couldn't. Something was in the way. Something invisible but huge.

That something was pride. 'Pride' is a word like 'thanksgiving' – it has a special meaning for Christians. We use it to describe that state of self-reliance in which we try to do without God, in which we ourselves

take credit for the gifts given to us, instead of acknowledging the one who made us. Augustine was like many people today: he wanted to find a path, a way to live life well, but he wanted to find it for himself and live it on his own terms. He was afraid of others looking down on him; he wanted a way of life that impressed people, not one they would laugh at.

Becoming a Christian wasn't going to impress anyone. Instead Augustine joined a trendy alternative religious movement called Manichaeism. This had a lot going for it that appealed to him at that time of his life. It claimed to offer a way of understanding how the world was made. It explained good and evil as being two forces locked in endless conflict. Throughout his life, Augustine was interested in the origin of evil, so this aspect of Manichaeism had a particularly strong appeal. And crucially, it offered two levels of commitment. There was an inner circle, which lived according to the highest, purest ideals, but there was also a lower level of membership, in which you got the benefits of the teaching and philosophy, plus all the affirmation that comes with being part of the group, but without having to give up sex and other physical pleasures such as food and drink.

Perfect. Or so he thought. He spent nine years as part of this group, always on that lower, less-demanding level of commitment. He was still too proud to become a Christian, too afraid to let go of physical appetites, and determined not to admit that he was not the controller of his own destiny.

Augustine's membership of this group drove a wedge between him and his mother. She was a Christian, and wanted nothing to do with what she saw as ungodly ways. She kept praying for him to find his way to true faith. It must have been hard to live through – for both of them, and for his brother and sister, too. Anyone who has let go of their parents' way of believing to embrace faith in their own way will recognise how hard this must have been for the whole family. But God was at work in it all. Augustine and his mother (Monnica) both

had to endure that time of unhappiness. There were no shortcuts to the shared Christian faith that brought them both such joy later. The way of the cross was not easy then, any more than it is now.

Bible passage for reflection

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge;
fools despise wisdom and instruction...

My child, if you accept my words
and treasure up my commandments within you,
making your ear attentive to wisdom
and inclining your heart to understanding;
if you indeed cry out for insight,
and raise your voice for understanding;
if you seek it like silver,
and search for it as for hidden treasures –
then you will understand the fear of the Lord
and find the knowledge of God.

For the Lord gives wisdom;
from his mouth come knowledge and understanding;
he stores up sound wisdom for the upright;
he is a shield to those who walk blamelessly,
guarding the paths of justice
and preserving the way of his faithful ones.

PROVERBS 1:7; 2:1–8

The book of Proverbs is all about wisdom – not human wisdom, but God's wisdom. It is frank, straightforward advice on how to live well, rather than abstract theorising about the meaning of goodness, love or justice. Augustine was inspired in his youth to search for wisdom, but he looked in the wrong places and could not find what he was seeking, until he heard God's word to him, and his life changed forever.

Questions

- 1 Do we become Christians because we fear God, or because we love God?
- 2 Thinking of your own family background, what have you learned from it about how to approach God?
- 3 Have you ever done something wrong for the sheer thrill of misbehaving or rebelling (don't feel that you have to answer this question if it makes you feel uncomfortable)?
- 4 Does it matter what other people (Christian or non-Christian) think of us when we declare our faith for the first time?

Prayer

*Lord God, you know how we fall short of our ideals:
how discontented we can be
with the life we have chosen for ourselves;
and yet how afraid of change, even change that sets us free.
Strengthen our trust that we can rest secure in you;
so that we no longer feel a need to flee,
or to escape from the old self that weighs us down.
Then call us to your side, to abide with you always,
in this life and the next. Amen*