

“I would rather not be wearisome to you” Saint Augustine’ as preacher

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1. *The burden of preaching*

“What business is it of mine to be wearisome to people; to say to the wicked, ‘Don’t act wickedly, act like this, stop acting like that’? What business is it of mine to be burdensome to people? I have received instructions how I should live; let me live as I have been told to, as I have been commanded. Let me sign for what I have received; why should I give an account for others? The gospel terrifies me; because nobody could outdo me in enjoying such anxiety-free leisure. There is nothing better, nothing more pleasant to search through the divine treasure chest with nobody making a commotion; it is pleasant, it is good. But to preach, to refute, to rebuke, to build up, to manage for everybody, that is a great burden, a great weight, a great labour. Who would not run away from this labour? But the gospel terrifies me” (s 339,4). Thus Augustine addresses his flock on one of the anniversary days of his bishop’s ordination, in which year we do not know. He might have been still young, deploring his lost monastic freedom and peace and not yet having come to terms with the hustle and bustle of the manifold duties of a bishop. If he was already old he was certainly tired of a lifelong battle against the sins and failures of those entrusted to him as a pastor, yearning for repose in order to care only for his own peace of soul.

In any case it certainly seems as if Augustine – though being a trained professional orator – did not enjoy preaching but rather considered it a burdensome duty, which becomes understandable when one considers how many sermons he must have been giving throughout his lifetime. For almost fourty years Augustine preached every Saturday and Sunday, on all liturgical feasts and feastdays of the saints during the year, during Advent, Lent and Easter Seasons daily, and often even twice a day. The corpus of Augustine’s sermons preserved to us and recognised as authentic comprises 559 “Sermons to the people”, i. e. sermons for all occasions during the current liturgical year; a complete set of over 150 homilies on the Psalms, the *enarrationes in Psalmos*”, (because quite a number of Psalms are treated twice); the “Tractates on St. John’s Gospel”, and the homilies on the first epistle of John. Compared to his overall preaching activity this represents, however, only a rather measly number of at least 4000 if not up to 8000 sermons he must have given during his service as priest and bishop - and that

on top of all the rest of his duties: writing many hundreds of letters, big books, attending to the pastoral needs of his diocese, passing judgment and settling conflicts, participating in synods, travelling etc. etc.

One understands well that Augustine was sometimes weary and tired and would have liked to just quietly participate in a liturgy, but wherever he was people wanted to hear him and none else. At the beginning of sermon 94, given in the cathedral in Hippo on the occasion of the dedication of a shrine in honour of St. Stephen, for which a number of fellow bishops had come to assist, Augustine complains to them straight away in public: “My lords, brethren and fellow bishops have indeed been good enough to visit us and cheer us with their presence; but goodness knows why they refuse to help poor, weary me. The reason I have said this to your graces while they are listening, is in order that your hearing it may somehow appeal to them on my behalf, to preach a sermon or two themselves when I ask them to. Let them invest what they have received, let them be good enough to work, rather than make excuses. Tired though I am, and scarcely able to speak, accept ungrudgingly a few words from me ...”. And then Augustine indeed gives one of his shortest sermons of only a few minutes.

2. The qualities of a preacher

Albeit therefore Augustine himself felt the task of preaching to be a burden and not always up to it, his contemporaries saw him in quite a different light altogether. Augustine’s friend and biographer Possidius, bishop of the Numidian Calama, who assisted him on his death-bed, judges about Augustine’s qualities both as author of books and as a preacher the following way: “In his writings Augustine proves himself – this one can plainly perceive in the light of truth – as a priest pleasing to God, who lived upright and good in faith, hope and love of the Catholic Church, a fact all acknowledge who profit from the reading of his writings about divine matters. I, however, believe that those could even profit more who had a chance to see and listen to him in church, and above all who were acquainted with his conduct amongst the people. For he was not only a writer learned in everything regarding the kingdom of heaven, who brings out from his treasure what is new and what is old (Mt 13,52), and one of those merchants who on finding a pearl of great value sold everything he owned in order to buy it (Mt 13,45–46), but he also belonged to those persons, for whom it is written: ‘So speak and so act’ (James 2,12), and about whom our Saviour said: ‘Whoever thus acts and teaches will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.’”

Quite undoubtedly Augustine himself, asked what he regarded as the highest and most indispensable quality of a preacher, would have answered: That he acts as he speaks, that he himself gives the first and splendid example of a life according to the truth he proclaims to his flock from the pulpit. In book four of *De doctrina Christiana*

(151–154), his manual for the preacher, he writes: “More important than any amount of grandeur of style, to those who seek to be listened to with obedience is the life of the speaker. A wise and eloquent speaker who lives a wicked life certainly educates many who are eager to learn, although it is ‘useless to his own soul’” (Ecclesiasticus 37,2). It is true that even a wicked preacher may teach the truth and people learn from him “for they may seek their own thing, but they dare not to teach their own words from the elevated position of the episcopal chair, which sound teaching has established” (*doctr chr IV 152*). But it does imperil the faithful, as they might be prone not to believe his words but rather follow his deeds and so be led to destruction. “There are plenty of people who look for a justification of their own evil lives from those in authority who teach them; they reply within their hearts or even, if they blurt it out, with their lips. ‘Why don’t you practise what you preach?’ That is why people do not listen with obedience to the man who does not listen to himself, and they despise the word of God preached to them as well as despising the preacher” (*doctr chr IV 153*).

However: “How are you going to exuse yourself at the judgment of Christ? Are you going to say, ‘The reason I acted badly was that I saw my bishop not leading a good life’? You will get the answer, ‘You have chosen for yourself someone to be condemned with, not someone to be set free with. You have imitated him leading a bad life; why did you prefer to imitate him, rather than to listen to me through him? After all, hadn’t I said to you in my gospel, that when you see bad people in authority you should do what they say, but not do what they do (Mt 23,2)?’” (*s 340A,9*). Therefore Augustine admonishes the preacher with the words of St. Paul to Timothy (1 Tim,12): “Be an example to believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, and in purity” (*doctr chr IV 154*). Pastors not acting upon their own preaching kill the sheep entrusted to them: “‘How do they kill them?’ you say. By leading bad lives, by setting a bad example. Was it for nothing that a servant of God was told, one prominent among the members of the supreme shepherd, *Offering yourself in all company as an example of good works* (Tit 2,7); and, *Be a model to the faithful* (1 Tim 4;12)? You see, even a strong sheep often enough, when he notices his pastor leading a bad life, if his eyes wander from the rules of the Lord and are attracted by human considerations, well he begins to say to himself, ‘If my pastor lives like that, who am I not to behave as he does?’ He has killed a strong sheep” (*s 46,9*). No less than 19 times Augustine repeats this warning in front of his audience in those 559 sermons preserved to us.

3. God’s word and the arts of rhetoric

The preacher is nothing else than the servant of God’s word. *S 114,1*: “The holy gospel, as we heard when it was chanted, was advising us about the forgiveness of sins. That is what I have to remind you of in my sermon. You see, I am a servant of the word,

not mine but God's, of course, our Lord's, whom nobody serves without honour, nobody ignores without punishment."

This fact that the preacher is only a servant of God's word, not its master, fundamentally changes his attitude towards the rhetorical arts he nevertheless is not only entitled but even obliged to apply. St. Augustine knew that from his own experience. He had been a professional orator all his lifetime. Rhetoric formed his life from his earliest youth right unto his death. School education in Greek and Roman antiquity consisted mostly of studies in languages and literature, wherein Augustine, as he himself records in his *Confessions*, particularly excelled (*conf I 16*). He received the best education available in the Western Empire in Thagaste, Madaura, and Carthage (in the east he would have had to go to Caesarea, Constantinople, and Athens as Basil the Great and Gregory of Nazianzus had done). All his training aimed straight at taking up the profession of an orator, and he purposefully advanced to the top of his profession first as teacher of rhetoric in Carthage and Rome then as official rhetorician of the imperial court in Milan.

Being called to the priesthood in Hippo Augustine was also mainly prompted by his being well known as a highly educated rhetorician. Bishop Valerius, being a Greek and unable to express himself fully in Latin needed an accomplished preacher, even if so far his theological knowledge was not quite complete yet. In fact after his ordination Augustine asked for a leave of absence to study the scriptures in order to prepare for his task as preacher.

In general, the art of rhetoric is a common tool for everyone who wants or needs to relate a message without any intrinsic value. It can be used for any subject whatsoever, right or wrong, good or bad, valuable or idle: "rhetoric is used to give conviction both to truth and falsehood" (*doctr chr IV 4*). The fundamental difference between the wordly orator and the preacher is that "the profane rhetorician is a master of the word, the preacher its servant". The orator chooses content and aims of his speech and forms them applying the means of his art; the preacher, however, does not choose either subject matter (or the ends of his sermon, both of them are given: the word of God as proclaimed by Holy Scripture, and the guidance of God's people towards him. Indeed, the preacher applies the very same rhetorical rules, for "the rules of eloquence are valid in spite of the fact that they can be used to commend falsehood. Since they can also be used to commend the truth, it is not the subject itself that is reprehensible, but the perversity of those who abuse it") (*doctr chr 11 132*). The preacher is even obliged to use the tools of rhetoric: "Since rhetoric is used to give conviction to both truth and falsehood, who could dare maintain that truth which depends on us for its defence, should stand unarmed in the fight against falsehood? This would mean that those who are trying to give conviction to their

falsehoods would know how to use an introduction to make their listeners favourable, interested, and receptive, while we would not; that they would expound falsehoods in descriptions that are succinct, lucid, and convincing, while we would expound the truth in such a way as to bore our listeners, cloud their understanding, and stifle their desire to believe ... No, oratorical ability, so effective a resource to commend either right or wrong, is available to both sides" (*doctr chr IV 4-5*).

Both the profane orator and the ecclesiastical preacher are fundamentally guided by the three main aims of rhetoric "instruct, delight, move" (*docere, delectare, movere*), and Augustine expressly quotes the pertinent passage from Cicero's *De Oratore* 69 (*doctr ch IV 74*), but their aims differ widely. While the profane orator may teach whatever he likes, even in order to deceive people and lead them astray, the preacher is bound by the divine truth which must be his only subject. The profane orator may excel in dazzling phrases that delight the ear but mean nothing, while the preacher's aim in speaking in a delightful way is to "grip the hearer and make him listen in order to be able to communicate the truth and move him towards it" (*doctr chr IV 75*), not to excel in grand words without meaning which always looms up dangerously: "There is a danger of forgetting what one has to say while working out a clever way to say it" (*doctr chr IV 11*). What aim the profane orator moves his audience to is of his own choosing and liking, the preacher has nothing else to envisage than to move his hearers towards God, i. e. their salvation.

4. The preacher and his audience

The foremost rhetorical requirement of any orator consists in adapting his speech both to the subject matter and to his audience. To speak inadequately (*ineptum*) is the grossest fault he can commit. When, therefore, Augustine in his sermons applies a rather simple, commonplace style, this does not mean that he is neglecting rhetoric, on the contrary, he is adequately adapting to his task. We know that his audience consisted of all levels of society and education, from senators and highly trained teachers down to the so-called "rudes", uneducated, often even illiterate people. The task of a sermon is to teach everyone present the truth of faith in a way they can understand. In his sermons Augustine's style is therefore simpler, less learned, more popular, more direct, more personal than in his treatises, but nevertheless never vulgar. He explains both in easily understandable words and delights at the same time by catching phraseology lest he bores the better educated.

He usually enters into a dialogue with his audience which they are normally eagerly responding. In sermon 164,3 Augustine explains Gal 6,2.5 saying "Bear your burdens for each other" and "Each one will bear his own burden" and tells his people: "You heard it briefly and understood it quickly. I have not seen into your minds; but I heard

your voices bearing witness to your minds. So now, as being sure of what we have understood, let us discuss the matter a little more widely.” It was quite common that Augustine’s audience reacted with applause, cheering, shouting and general unrest.

In sermon 131,5 the hearers anticipate Augustine’s further argument by shouting understanding and approval; maybe, as Augustine is quoting Psalm 2,11–13 by simply continuing to pray the Psalm aloud:¹ “I see by your shouts that you have got there ahead of me. I mean, you know what I am going to say, you have got in first with your shouts. And where do you get the ability to do this from? It can only be that you have been taught by the one whom you have come by believing in him. So in fact it is what he says. Listen then to what you know already; I am not teaching you, just reminding you by preaching it. In fact, I am neither teaching you, because you know it already, nor reminding you, because you remember it. But let us both say together what you and I both hold together.”

In sermon 332,4 Augustine sees and hears the reaction of his congregation and reacts to it: “Scripture mentioned fornicators; I heard you beating your breasts. I heard, yes I heard, I saw; and what I did not see in your bedrooms, I saw in the sound, I saw in your breasts, I saw when you beat your breasts.” And a little later, speaking about 1 Cor 7,4: “*The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does.* Yes, you were delighted at that, you felt grand, you clapped yourself on the back.... You have all applauded. Listen to what comes next, listen to what you don’t like, to what I beg you to like. What is that? Listen: *Likewise also the husband, that lord and master; likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.* One can literally imagine the long faces of the men in the church after that, because -and Augustine says it time and again- many of them expected their wives to be absolutely faithful to them as a matter of course, but they themselves never even thought of behaving likewise.”

This dialogue with the audience does not simply make the sermon more lively and helps to keep their attention, but it aids Augustine to meet the needs of the congregation. In sermon 335A,2 people applaud, but not all of them, because they haven’t grasped the point. This is for Augustine the sign that he needs to enlarge further: “Those of you who clapped and applauded have understood; but for the sake of those who have not understood, permit me, you that have done so, to open up for a few moments what I have just said.” In sermon 23,8, however, Augustine notices from the murmuring in the congregation that some of them have not understood what he said, and others try to explain it to them while Augustine goes on with his sermon. But he does not do so, he notices it on doubles back in his tracks to take everyone along: “I am sure many of you have caught on straightaway.

1. Cf. Hill III/4 (1994) 323 note 11.

I can see, from the conversations you are having with each other I can tell that those who have caught on are trying to explain it to those who haven't yet caught on. So let me put it a little more plainly in order to get home to all of you".

So Augustine and his audience enter into an actual dialogue, they react to one another openly for the advantage of both sides: Augustine gets to know when he is not understood or when his congregation agrees or disagrees and can then try to enlarge and correct; and the congregation is not left alone with the problems they might have with Augustine's preaching.

Augustine's audience, however, did and did not consist only of those attending his services. His contemporaries considered him to be both the most accomplished theologian and the most trustworthy pastor of their times. The copious number of letters and numerous treatises Augustine composed on request of inquirers all over the Roman empire bear witness to the high esteem in which his word was held. It is well known how impatient his friends grew when after fourteen years of toiling on twelve books "On the Trinity" Augustine nevertheless did not consider his manuscript complete and worth publishing yet. They pinched the unfinished manuscript, had it copied and distributed without the author's knowledge or consent, whereafter Augustine only with the greatest of difficulties could be persuaded to complete the enormous task in eight further years. There existed a veritable "international market" for Augustine's writings that eagerly awaited every new publication of his and sold it as far as Italy, Spain and Gaul thus initiating the different strands of transmission of his works.

His sermons were therefore taken down by stenographers (*notarii*) in the pay of the people. Augustine himself refers to them a number of times in his sermons. In the "Expositions on the Psalms" 51,1 he says: "Since the brethren like not only to gather up my words with their ears and their hearts but also to put them down in writing, I must keep in mind not only my listeners but my future readers as well." And Augustine's biographer Possidius relates in his *Vita Augustini* 7,3-4: "Augustine taught and preached in private and in public, in his household and in the church.... And to those books and sermons, which came forth and issued from him through the wondrous grace of God, full of the treasures of reason and the authority of the Scriptures, even heretics, who came together with the catholics listened enthusiastically. And anyone who wished and had the means could have his words taken down by stenographers, who took down every word he said. And thus his brilliant teaching and the sweetest perfume of Christ (2 Cor 2,14) spread all over Africa, even the overseas churches of Christ participated joyfully when they heard of it. A quite clear testimony to the propagation and influence Augustine's preaching had far beyond the limits of Africa already in his own times.

That those stenographers did indeed take down every word spoken during Augustine's

sermons, – according to Cyrille Lambot “the stenographers, careful to let not a single word escape them, took notes feverishly and with an accuracy equaled only by their dexterity – is well testified by a number of sermons, where they even preserved interruptions and technical “asides”. From sermon 323,4 we learn that Augustine while speaking about the healing miracles wrought at the shrines of Saint Stephen, was interrupted: “And while Augustine was saying this the people round the shrine of Saint Stephen began to shout, ‘God be thanked! Christ be praised!’ In the midst of this continuous clamour, the young woman who had just been cured was led into the apse. When they saw her, the people prolonged their shouting for some time with great joy and weeping, not uttering any words, but just making a noise; and when silence was eventually restored, bishop Augustine said ... “And with that the stenographer ends his own report and returns to Augustine’s sermon, which, however, is concluded in a few sentences in order to be continued the next day. Fortunately the continuation has been preserved as well. Sermon 324 begins: “I must finish the sermon which was interrupted yesterday by a cause for much greater joy. You remember ...”

These two sermons do not only bear witness to the already mentioned fact that Augustine often prayed every day, but show how detailed and reliable the work of the stenographers was. The reader finds himself transported back in the middle of the pulsing life of Augustine’s times with all its colourful proceedings. And they prove both the accuracy of their transmission and the fact that Augustine did not revise them afterwards to make them more literary for publication. Reading the sermons of St. Augustine we may trust to have the originally pronounced text.

5. The preacher as interpreter of God’s word

What is the subject matter of preaching? Nothing else than God’s word. The preacher therefore is nothing else than the interpreter of God’s word, not proclaiming his own words. God is the author of the preacher’s words, he preaches through his mouth, and the better a preacher absolves himself of this task to proclaim God’s word in a convincing way the better he will give account for himself and for all those entrusted to him.

In sermon 339,4 Augustine clads it in very imaginative words: “We have our fellow poor to feed today, and we have to show them humanity and share with them; the rations I provide for you, though, are these words. I quite lack the means to feed everyone with visible, tangible bread. I feed you on what I am fed on myself. I am just a waiter, I am not the master of the house; I set food before you from the pantry which I too live on, from the Lord’s storerooms, from the banquet of that householder who *for our sakes became poor, though he was rich, in order to enrich us from his poverty* (2 Cor 8,9). If I were to set bread before you, when the bread was broken you would each just carry away a scrap; even if provided a great quantity, very little indeed would arrive in

the hands of each of you. Now, however, all of you get everything I say, and each and every one of you gets it all. You haven't, I mean to say, divided the syllables of my words among yourselves, have you? You haven't taken away, have you, one word each from my drawn-out sermon? Each of you has heard the whole of it."

As the preacher is only a servant administering the word of God, he himself is nourished by it and subject to it: "Therefore, brothers, if you wish to prepare yourselves for following the will of God, what I say to you, what I say first of all to myself, indeed what he says to everybody, he who says it with absolute assurance ..." (s. 32,18). "Step in with me, if you can, into the sanctuary of God. Perhaps there, if I can, I will teach you. Or rather, learn with me from the one who is teaching me even now ..." (s. 48,8).

The annunciation and interpretation of God's word being the subject matter of all preaching Augustine's sermons usually do not consist of anything else than the Bible. He normally departs from the liturgical readings which include the Psalms, either interpreting them verse by verse or using them to explain a general topic or problem. The presence of the biblical message in Augustine's sermons extends so far as to be omnipresent in his vocabulary. Many allusions are only heard by people who know the Latin text of the Bible by heart or check upon it very carefully with the help of a concordance.

Above all it is the duty of the preacher to explain difficult passages or parts of the Bible that seem to contradict one another, especially if enemies of the church, scismatics and heretics, try to use it for their own purposes. Sermon 1 against the Manichees, confronting Genesis 1,1 and John 1,1 is a splendid example for that. "These people, you see, have the nerve to set this kind of trap in front of the unwary: they say the scriptures of the New and Old testament contradict each other to the point that they cannot both be accepted by one faith. In particular, in their efforts to convince us that the openings of the book of Genesis and of the gospel according to John disagree with each other, since they oppose them to each other head on, almost like two bulls. Moses, they tell us, says *In the beginning God made heaven and earth*, and doesn't even mention the Son through whom all things were made; whereas John says *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. This was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was made nothing* (John 1,1-3)".

The solution Augustine finds on the basis of arguments taken from scripture, is: "That 'beginning', in which Genesis says God made heaven and earth is the Son of God ... God made heaven and earth in the Son, through whom all things were made and without whom was made nothing. And thus, the gospel being in agreement with Genesis, we may retain our inheritance in accordance with the consensus of both Testaments, and leave fault-finding quibbles to the disinherited heretics" (s. 1,2).

6. *Praying and preaching*

Finally, in order to being a faithful hearer of God's word himself and be able to explain it to the people entrusted to him, the preacher has to hear it internally and to turn to the author of these words for help and inspiration in prayer while being supported by the prayer of the faithful as well. Sermon 179,1 : "On the strength of this uttering flowing from the wellspring of truth, through the absolutely truthful mouth of the apostle, I too make bold to add my own exhortation to you; and while I am exhorting you, to take a look at myself. After all, it is a futile preacher outwardly of God's word, who is not also inwardly a listener. Nor are we, who have to preach the word of God to his various peoples, such strangers to common humanity and faithful reflection, that we are unaware of our own danger when we do so. However, he gives us the reassurance that while we are put in danger by our ministry, we are aided by your prayers."

Prayer is not only the indispensable preparation for the preacher as Augustine tells him in *De doctrina christiana* IV 32,87: "He should be in no doubt that any ability he has and however much he has, he derives more from his devotion to prayer than his dedication to oratory; and so, by praying for himself and for those he is about to address, he-must become a man of prayer before becoming a man of words," Augustine even inserts those prayers for the Lord's help into his sermons themselves: (s. 116,5). "So come then, Lord, make some keys, open, so that we may understand"; or s. 225,4: "I give you thanks, Lord, because you know what I am saying, or what I have wanted to say; still, from the crumbs of your table I have managed to feed my fellow servants; feed them yourself as well, and nourish inwardly those you have brought new birth."

Conclusion

With this prayer I shall conclude my few remarks on St. Augustine as a preacher. There is much more to say. Cardinal Michele Pellegrino wrote more than 100 pages introduction to the sermons of St. Augustine, and even that does by no means exhaust them. Maybe someone will write a book "Augustine the Preacher" as Fritz van der Meer wrote on "Augustine the Bishop". But that is a task for the future.