

A SERMON OF ST AUGUSTINE ON THE TITLE OF PSALM 33: II

Translated by EDMUND HILL, O.P.

So he changed his features before Abimelech, before the kingdom of his father, before the Jews. And he sent him away and off he went.

HE sent away this Jewish people and went off.¹ Look for Christ nowadays among the Jews, and you won't find him. What did he send them away for? Because he changed his features. You see, they *would* stick to the sacrifice after the fashion of Aaron, so they missed the sacrifice after the fashion of Melchisedech. They lost Christ, and the gentiles began to possess him, although he had not sent them any warning in advance. He had sent the Jews plenty of warning, through David himself, through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, through Isaias, Jeremias and the other prophets, and a few of them did recognize him as a result—few, that is, compared to the number that failed to and were lost. In fact we read that there were several thousands that believed—as it is written, 'A remnant shall be saved' (Rom. ix, 27). But look for circumcised Christians nowadays, and you won't find any. When the faith was in its infancy there were thousands of them. Look for them now and you won't find any. And that is as it should be, because he changed his features before Abimelech and he sent him away, and off he went. He also changed his features before Achis and sent him away and off he went. The reason the names are changed is to make us alive to the mysterious meaning of the event; it's as if he were saying to you: 'There is something locked up here. Knock, don't stick at the letter, because the letter kills; be eager for the spirit, because

¹ Augustine interprets the text: 'he changed his features . . . and he sent him away and off he went', as if the subject of all three verbs were David (representing Christ). He knew, of course, that in the story it was Achis who sent David away, and not vice versa. But the grammatical form of the sentence, three verbs in succession with the subject left to be understood, made it possible, and indeed more correct according to the rules of grammar rigidly applied, to construe the sentence in the way he did. If this seems to us to be a procedure arbitrary to the point of perversity, we must remember that for Augustine and his contemporaries the sacred text had the quality of an oracular utterance, and it is customary for oracles to speak in riddles, the solution of which calls for a highly artificial manipulation of the terms they are couched in.

the spirit gives life. A spiritual understanding is salvation for the believer.'

So just watch now, brothers, how he sent king Achis away. Achis I told you means 'how can it be'. Now remember the gospel. When our Lord Jesus Christ was talking about his body, he said: 'If anyone does not eat my flesh and drink my blood, he will not have life in him, because my flesh really is food, and my blood really is drink' (John vi, 54). And his disciples were shocked and horrified; they thought our Lord was saying something simply frightful, that they were to eat his flesh and drink his blood as they could see it there before them; and they could not stomach it, as much as to say: 'How can it be?' Error and ignorance and foolishness are personified in king Achis. Where people are saying 'How can it be' there is a lack of understanding; and where there is no understanding there is the darkness of ignorance. So they were under a reign of ignorance, the reign of king How-can-it-be. Our Lord then was saying: 'If anyone does not eat my flesh and drink my blood'. And because he had changed his features this sounded like raving lunacy, giving men his flesh and blood to eat and drink. So David was regarded as a madman, and Achis said: 'This is a raving lunatic you have brought me'. Doesn't it sound utter madness, Eat my flesh, drink my blood? Yes, but only to king Achis, to the fools and ignorant. That is why he sent them away and off he went. Understanding slipped out of their minds, so that they would not be able to grasp him. And what did *they* have to say about it? 'How can it be', almost in so many words. 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?' (John vi, 53) they said. They thought our Lord was raving, quite off his head. But he knew what he was saying in changing his features like that; as though in a fit of lunacy he was proclaiming the sacraments, 'and affecting and drumming on the doors of the city'.

Now we must go on to find out what that means. It is not without reason that it says he fell forward at the doors of the gate and that spittle was dribbling down his beard. None of this is said just for fun. If stretching out the sermon a little brings understanding as its reward, it ought not to seem tiresome. You all know, of course, brothers, that these Jews before whom he changed his features are having a holiday today.¹ But if they who

¹ It was a Saturday.

lost Christ are having a pointless holiday, *we* ought to be having a fruitful holiday, spent in trying to understand Christ, who sent *them* away and came to *us*. None of this was done aimlessly.

There he was affecting, then. What does that mean? It means he had affection, which he showed by showing sympathy for our ailments; that is why he was willing to take our flesh on himself, in which to put death to death. Because of this fellow-feeling for us, this affection, it says he affected. That is why St Paul lashes certain people for being without affection, without mercy (Rom. 1, 31). Where there is affection there is mercy. So Christ had mercy on us from on high. If he had not been willing to empty himself, and had just stayed in the form of God in which he is eternally equal to the Father, we would just have stayed eternally in death. But to set us free from the everlasting death which the sin of pride had brought us to, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to the death, even the death of the cross. And because a man who is being crucified is stretched out on wood; and to make a drum, flesh—that is the hide—is stretched out on wood; it says he was drumming, that is he was being stretched out on wood and crucified. And he was affecting, treating us with such affection that he laid down his life for his sheep (John x, 15).

He was drumming at the doors of the city. We have a door which is opened so that we can believe in God, a door which we had shut against Christ and opened to the devil. But because we men had shut our minds against eternal life, and could not see the Word which the angels see, he the Lord our God set about opening the minds of mortal men with the cross; that is what it means, to say he was drumming at the doors of the city.

'And he was being carried in his own hands.' Now I just cannot see, brothers, how this could possibly happen with a man. Whoever carried himself in his own hands? By other people's hands, yes, but no one could carry himself in his own. In fact it is impossible to make sense of this when applied literally to David; but it makes sense with Christ. Christ was being carried in his own hands, when he gave them his body and said, 'This is my body' (Matt. xxvi, 26). He was carrying that body in his hands. Such is the humility of our Lord Jesus Christ, a humility much to be recommended to men. He wants us to live up to it, brothers, to copy it, to strike Goliath, to conquer pride by clinging to

Christ; because 'he was falling at the doors of the gate'. He was falling means he was abasing himself in humility. At the doors of the gate means at the beginning of the faith by which we are saved. You can only begin at the beginning of faith, as it says in the Canticle, 'You will come and pass through from the beginning of faith' (Cant. IV. 8, LXX). One day we are going to come face to face; as St John writes, 'Beloved, we are God's sons, and it has not yet appeared what we shall be. We know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is' (I John iii, 2). When will that be? When all this has passed away. And now listen to St Paul; 'We see now by a mirror in a riddle, but then it will be face to face' (I Cor. xiii, 12). Before we can see the Word face to face as the angels see him, we still need the doors of the gate at which the Lord fell down, humbling himself to the death.

Now what is this about spittle dribbling down his beard? Spittle as though to say baby-talk, because babies dribble. Wasn't it after all baby-talk to say 'Eat my flesh and drink my blood'? But behind these babyish words was hidden strength, which is what the beard stands for.

So now I think you have understood the title of this psalm. If I went on straight away to explain the psalm itself, I am afraid that what you have heard about the title would slip from your minds. But tomorrow is Sunday; so let us put it off till tomorrow, when I owe you another sermon, and you can have the pleasure then of hearing the text of the psalm explained to you.

(Concluded)



COMMENT

THE DOMINICAN SISTERS OF THE EUCHARIST

being an adaptation of the leaflet issued by the Mother House at Sens

THE congregation of the Dominican Sisters of the Eucharist, contemplatives of the Conventual Third Order, came into being on Christmas night, 1920, in the city of Sens, under the shadow of the ancient primatial cathedral of Gaul and Germany. That night the first Sisters of the Congregation, led by their foundress and in the presence of the priest