

ST AUGUSTINE'S SERMON ON PSALM XXXIII—III

TRANSLATED BY EDMUND HILL, O.P.

THE eyes of the Lord are upon the just'; no need to be afraid then of your difficulties; the Lord's eyes are on you. 'And his ears are open to their prayers.' What more could you want? If the complaints of a slave in a large household didn't reach the head of the family, he would have something further still to complain about, and say: 'What we have to put up with here, and nobody takes any notice of us!' You cannot say about God, can you, 'The things I endure and no one takes any notice'?—Well, if he did take any notice of me, perhaps you will say, he would remove my troubles for me. I clamour and I am in trouble.—You just keep to his ways, and when you are in trouble, he will notice it. But he is a doctor, and there is still something or other festering in you. You yell, but he goes on cutting, and he doesn't ease off until he has cut as much as he considers necessary. Indeed, it is the doctor who takes any notice of a man's yells and spares the festering wound, that is the cruel one. How mothers scrub their children in the baths! Don't the little things just howl under their hands! And do you call the mothers cruel because they don't pay any attention to their tears and let them off? On the contrary, surely, they are just full of mother-love. Yet the little boys bellow, and are not let off. In the same way our God is full of charity. But he appears not to listen to us, so that he can cure us and spare us for eternity.

'The eyes of the Lord are upon the just, and his ears are open to their prayers.' So the bad men say, perhaps, 'It's quite safe then for me to do wrong, because the eyes of the Lord aren't on me. God is busy just now with the just, he isn't looking at me, so whatever I do I can do safely.' The Holy Ghost knows the way men's minds work, so he added immediately: 'But the Lord's countenance is upon those who do wrong, to efface their memory from the earth'.

'The just clamoured and the Lord heard them out, and pulled them out of all their troubles.' The three young men were just;¹ they clamoured to the Lord from the fiery furnace, and the

¹ Dan. iii, 49.

flames cooled off as they sang his praises. The fire could not approach and harm the innocent and just young men as they praised God, and he pulled them out of the fire. Someone will say, 'There you do have a case of some just men who were really listened to. But I have clamoured, and he hasn't pulled *me* out. Either then I am not just, either I am not doing what he tells me, or perhaps he doesn't see me.' Don't worry, just do what he tells you, and if he doesn't pull you out bodily, he certainly will spiritually. He rescued the three young men from the fire, but did he rescue the Maccabees² from the fire too? The one lot sang hymns in the flames, the others died in the flames. Wasn't the God of the three young men also the God of the Maccabees? He pulled one lot out but not the other. He saved the three young men in such a way that even the fleshly, worldly-minded were flabbergasted. But he refrained from saving the Maccabees in that way, so that their persecutors, who thought they had suppressed God's martyrs, would have all the severer punishment. He pulled Peter out, when he was chained in prison and the angel came and said to him, 'Get up and go out',³ and the chains were suddenly broken and he followed the angel out. But you don't suppose Peter had stopped being a just man, do you, when God did not save him later on from the cross? And didn't he in fact save him, then, too? Of course he did. Or do you think he lived a long time merely in order to become unjust? Perhaps he heard him to better effect the second time, when he pulled him out of all his afflictions, than the first time, when he saved him from prison only to endure so much later on. The second time God sent him where he could never suffer wrong any more.

'The Lord is beside those who have bruised their hearts, and he will bring the humble of spirit safely through.' God is high up, the Christian must be humble and lowly. If he wants the high God to be his neighbour, he must humble himself low down. This is a great mystery, brothers. God is high above everything; you draw yourself up to your full height and you still cannot reach him; you humble yourself and he comes down to you in person. 'Many are the troubles of the just.' Did he ever say, 'The reason Christians should be just and listen to my words, is to avoid having troubles'? He never made any such promise. What

² II Macc. vi, 3.

³ Acts xii, 7.

he did say is, 'Many are the troubles of the just'. Indeed, if they are unjust they may well have fewer troubles; if they are just, many. But the others, after few or no troubles will come into everlasting trouble; while the just will come after many troubles into everlasting peace, where they will never suffer any wrong again.

'The Lord preserves all their bones, and not one of them shall be crushed.' This should not be taken literally either, brothers. Bones are the firmness of the faithful. As our bones make for firmness in our bodies, so faith makes for firm qualities in a Christian soul. The patience and endurance which come with faith are the soul's inner bones. It is these bones which cannot be broken. 'Not one of them shall be crushed.' If he said this about our Lord, as is also foreshadowed somewhere else, where there is talk about killing the lamb, and it says, 'Do not break a bone of it', then it *was* fulfilled literally in his case, because when they came and found him dead on the cross already, they did not break his legs, to fulfil what was written.⁴ But this promise was made to Christians as well as Christ. The Lord preserves all their bones, not one of them shall be broken. So, brothers, if we see some good holy man in trouble, and so cut about by a doctor, for example, or so beaten up in a persecution that his bones are broken, we must not say, 'This man cannot have been just, because the Lord promised his just ones he would preserve all their bones'. Do you want it proved that he meant other bones, which I call the firm qualities of faith, namely, patience and endurance in all troubles? You can see it illustrated in the story of our Lord's passion. He was crucified with two thieves, one on either side of him. One jeered at him, the other believed in him; one was condemned, the other justified; one had his punishment both here and in the next world, the other was told by our Lord: 'Amen I tell you, you shall be in paradise with me today'.⁵ Yet both of them had their legs broken. So there you are; couldn't he have preserved the good thief's bones? The Lord answers: 'I did indeed preserve them, because the firmness of his faith could not be broken by the blows which broke his legs'.

'The death of sinners is the worst possible.' Now remember brothers all that I have been saying. Truly the Lord is great, and

⁴ John xix, 33.

⁵ Luke xxiii, 43.

great is his mercy, who truly gave us his body to eat, in which he suffered for us, and his blood to drink. How do you suppose he regards nasty-minded people who say, 'That man died a horrid death, eaten by beasts; he can't have been a just man, that's why he came to such an unpleasant end'? He wouldn't have died, of course otherwise eh? And so the other man who dies at home in his bed is just, is he?—That's exactly what puzzles me; I know all about his wicked deeds, yet he died a good death in his own home, not being carried off in his prime, or dying an exile in a distant land.—But listen; 'the death of sinners is the worst possible'. What you consider a good death is the worst possible, if you could only see inside. You only see the outside, the man lying in his bed; can you see inside, where he is being carried off to hell? Listen, brothers, and discover from the gospel what is the worst possible death. There were two men, weren't there, one rich, clothed in purple and fine linen, who used to feast sumptuously every day; the other poor, who used to lie at the rich man's gate covered with sores which the dogs used to come and lick, and he longed to be filled with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table. It happened that the poor man died (he was a just man, this poor fellow) and was carried away by angels to Abraham's bosom.⁶ But people who saw his body lying at the rich man's doorstep with no one to bury it, what do you suppose they were saying? 'So may that enemy of mine perish; oh, to see that man who torments me lying like this!' His body is desecrated and spat on, there is a stench from its wounds—and he is at rest in Abraham's bosom. If we are Christians we must believe it, if we don't believe it brothers, don't let us pretend to be Christians. Faith is our guide. Things are as our Lord said they are. Or is what the astrologers tell you true, and what Christ tells you untrue? And what sort of death did the rich man die? A splendid one, you may be sure, a most magnificent death in purple and fine linen. And what a funeral he would have had, what spices to bury his corpse in! But he was in hell in torment, and when he wanted just a drop of water to drip on his tongue from the finger of the despised poor man, he did not obtain it. So learn what it really means to say 'the death of sinners is the worst possible', and don't judge by the beds draped in fine covers, and the body wrapped in a small fortune, and the official mourners, and the weeping

⁶ Luke xvi, 19.

family, the crowd escorting the body on its way, and the marble gilded monument. If you go by these things, they will mislead you into thinking that the death—not of slight sinners, but of really wicked men, is the best possible, seeing that they have managed to die and be buried in such style. Judge instead by the gospel, and it will show your faith the rich man's soul burning in the punishments of hell, not helped in the least by the last honours and services which the vanity of the living has paid his dead body.

But there are many different sorts of sinners, and not to be a sinner is hard, perhaps indeed impossible in this life; so he goes on immediately to explain just what sort of sinners have the worst possible death. 'And those who hate the just one, he says, shall fail.'⁷ What just one, if not him who justifies the ungodly? What just one, if not the Lord Jesus Christ, who is also the appeasement for our sins?⁸ Those who hate *him* then have the worst possible death, because they die in their sins, not being reconciled through him to our God. For 'the Lord will redeem his servants' souls'. Death whether the worst possible or the best, is to be understood as it affects the soul, not as it happens to overtake the body in what men consider mean or magnificent circumstances. 'And all who hope in him shall not fail.' There is the limited measure of human justice and virtue for you; since this mortal life, whatever progress we make in it, cannot be free from serious shortcomings, at least let it not fail in this, hoping in him namely, in whom is the remission of sins, Amen.

⁷ Rom. iv, 5.
⁸ 1 John ii, 2.