

THE REFINERS' FIRE

Baptism and Confirmation

Presentation of Christ in the Temple

Grosvenor Chapel

Sunday, January 31st 2016

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‘Take my camel, dear’, said my Aunt Dot, as she climbed down from this animal on her return from High Mass.’

These words are the splendid and whimsical beginning to Rose Macaulay’s novel *The Towers of Trebizond*. Alongside L.P. Hartley’s *The Go Between* ‘The past is another country – they do things differently there’, and Dickens’ ‘It was the best of times, it was the worst of times’, from *A Tale of Two Cities*, it is one of those classical starters to a novel. In this case it launches us into her partially autobiographical novel tracing Macaulay’s fragile but mystical Anglo-Catholic journey of faith.

Macaulay, of course, worshipped here at the Grosvenor Chapel, living as she did almost next door to the Methodist shrine of Hinde Street Church, just north of Oxford Street. The novel - set partly in Anatolia, in eastern Turkey - reminds us of the internationalist flavour of this church. Florence Nightingale, another intrepid traveller worshipped here, as did Dwight D. Eisenhower, later President of the United States. Each of these had lives which included a fascinating journey of faith alongside their lifetime achievements.

Now, just for a moment, I’d like to transport you to another location abroad. This time it’s Milan. I’m not sure whether any others of your celebrated past worshippers were either Milanese or Italophiles, but some of you will know the city with its splendid arcades and its glittering cathedral. Doubtless John Betjeman- another of your earlier alumni - would have had much to say of the great basilica with its myriad turrets, crenellations and spirelets – it looks like a forest of tiny spires from the ground.

If you make your way round to the west front of the building you will be standing above a place of enormous historic significance for western civilisation. For, in the year 387, Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, baptised the 23 year old Augustine of Hippo (as he became known) in the octagonal font beneath the piazza. You can still go down beneath the cathedral and still see the font.

Augustine was born at Thagaste, near Carthage in North Africa. He remains one of the key influences not only on the development of the Christian faith, but also on western culture more widely. His theological and philosophical writings are seminal, but his life story too is both interesting and accessible. For, even though he died almost seventeen hundred years ago in the year 430, we can read his autobiographical reflections in his so-called *Confessions*. Pick up a copy and read it

Augustine had lived a fairly exciting and profligate life – he had a son Adeodatus, through his mistress, whose name we never learn. He was caught up into a strange sect, the Manichees, but Monica, his mother, was a Christian and prayed fervently for his conversion. Eventually conversion came, and the rest I’ve hinted at already. The dénouement of all this, then, was in his baptism and confirmation – all in one go – in Milan in 387. It transformed his life and helped fashion one of the great makers of western civilisation.

So, I hardly need to labour the point, this day is for Ruth and Daniel, a momentous moment. It is a profound moment too for the babes that I shall anoint later. We cannot promise that each of them will write volumes that will transform our civilisation; we can hope they won’t have to suffer some of the conflicts of mind Augustine knew. But we do know that this is a

transformative moment, a milestone. In baptism and confirmation we die in Christ and are raised with him. Drowned in the font, we are raised in the Spirit.

From the numerous writings of Augustine that have survived many memorable quotations still inspire and nurture the soul. But as you, Ruth and Daniel, like your esteemed journeying forebears here in the Grosvenor Chapel take this key step along the road of faith, perhaps these words which capture the spirit of today best are Augustine's Prayer to Christ:

'Late, late have I loved thee, O Beauty so old and yet so new; far far have I sought thee, where thou art. But here, here have I found thee, deep in my heart.'

Amen

Readings

Malachi. 3. 1-5.

Luke. 2. 22-40.