

Deep Wells Of Desire

St Augustine wrote very respectfully of desire. He knew that the untaught heart has desires that are chaotic and untrustworthy; but he also knew that in their depths human hearts desire only the One in whom they can find their rest. His account of his own life is the story of desire being refined and unified, more and more clearly recognising the hidden call of God to the one he has chosen to love. How is desire to be cleansed and redirected, until it is something pure?

Fulfilment

I can resist everything, said Oscar Wilde, *except temptation*. Yes; and there is one easy way to be rid of temptation: and that is to give in to it. But what happens if you *resist* temptation? Firstly, you are left with an unfulfilled desire, which is awkward and can become obsessive; and secondly, you start learning to flex muscles you didn't know you had. Starting to take exercise is always tough; but as the frame gets used to its new tasks, there is a growth in power that makes it easier to progress. It remains to find a new way of thinking about that desire; and there are desires which, like the thirst in today's first reading, can be an absolute torment.

Different Desires

Some desires that need to be answered at once; and thirst is one of them. If you decide to deprive yourself of drink, be very careful: it doesn't take long before you damage your life in this way. Everyone needs water. But there are many other things that we can *decide* we need, that are not in fact necessary to us at all; when we call our luxuries *necessities* we are rotting away at our hold on justice. If Lent relegates such things to a more proper perspective, it's already done us a good turn. It is only when we are rich that we mistake the little decorations and comforts for the true bread of life; and the voluntary poverty of Lent allows us to be freed from enslavement to the self-centred need to control our every moment, to gratify our every wish. No sooner do we sense a slight peckishness than we are opening the fridge door and feeding in the chocolate or sausage roll or onion bhaji we have suddenly decided to "need". Heaven forbid that we should actually live with unfulfilment for a single unnecessary moment! The dread feeling that we are no longer in control is more than we

could bear! Yet we are precisely *not* in control if our petty desires have the power to set us on our feet at a moment's notice. We are no more in control than a dog who has smelt a biscuit and can think of nothing else until he's gobbled it up. And we hanker after much more important and serious things than dog-biscuits!

What Augustine Thought

He thought that desire was one of the principal agents for growth in the human personality: but only if it is allowed time to grow, to deepen, to develop. He likened human desire to a leather bag; it can be stretched in all directions, until it grows great enough to contain massively; and because Augustine believed that our desire is actually designed to prepare us for sharing the divine life, we need to *delay fulfilment* very industriously indeed. No-one looking forward to a seven-course banquet should even contemplate stopping off on the way for a cream bun. No-one who is ardently seeking to desire the greatest of all fulfilments - the vision of God - should become entangled in even the brightest of alternatives. When he had cause to admonish his community - he had gathered a sort of monastery about him in his Diocese - it was about the discovery that someone was infringing the vow of poverty. He once challenged all his monks to hand over any hidden personal possessions, on pain of expulsion and excommunication. He knew that nothing was more important than keeping the edge of desire sharp; if monks were sitting on secret hoards of money or nest-eggs, this would never be possible.

This Lent

Of course, not all of us are monks with a vow of poverty, and there are many desires we have to live with that have good purposes to achieve: for example the education of children, the possession of a house, the provision of holidays and transport; but I only have to name such things to remind myself how they can become a trap and a betrayal of my calling to come to God. Lent can be a time of undoing the shackles that bind us to disguised greed and re-establish the priorities in our life. Simply fasting from food can begin a process of liberation that leads us directly to Easter joy. *Fr Philip*