

CHRISTIAN GENEROSITY

St Augustine
(Sermon 42)

This sermon seems to have been preached when St Augustine was an old man, and in poor health. In the second half he rather appears to lose the thread of what he had started preaching on. But while it lacks his usual liveliness and vigour, there are occasional flashes of his old self, and there is something very moving in listening to the old man gallantly carrying on at his supreme pastoral duty in spite of his infirmities.

BROTHERS, I have little strength, but God's word has plenty. Let it be effective in your hearts. You can listen strongly to what I am saying slowly and feebly—by complying with it. As though from his own thunder-cloud the Lord has thundered from the prophet Isaias; and if you have any sense, it has made you shiver. He spoke quite plainly, and these words need no explanation, only action. 'What use have I', he says, 'for the multitude of your sacrifices?'¹ (Isaias i, 11). Who demanded these things from your hands? God wants us, not our possessions. But the sacrifice of the Christian is generosity to the poor. This is what makes God lenient to sins. Unless God treats our sins with lenience, all that remains for us is sentence. Now the way for men to purge themselves of those sins and failings which nobody can lead this life without is by generosity; which is of two kinds, giving and forgiving, giving people the good things you have, forgiving them the bad things you suffer. Two kinds of generosity, and just listen how our Lord, the good master, who shortened his word on the earth (Rom. ix, 28) to make it fruitful, not burdensome, listen how shortly he put them in a nutshell: 'Forgive', he says, 'and things will be forgiven you; give, and things will be given you' (Luke vi, 37). That sort of generosity with which you pardon a man costs you nothing. There, he asks your pardon, you have granted it, you are none the poorer. Indeed you come home richer—in charity. But this other kind of generosity, where we are told to contribute to the needy, that

¹ Probably the first words of a lesson from Isaias i, which had just been read, including vv. 11-20.

does seem hard, because whatever a man has given away he will have to do without himself.

And yet even in this case St Paul reassures us by saying: 'According to each man's means, not to relieve others by impoverishing yourselves' (2 Cor. viii, 12). Let everyone measure his own means, then, but not with a view to hoarding on earth; give, what you give isn't lost. I am not saying, 'That isn't lost', I am saying, 'That is *all* that isn't lost'. The rest that you don't give and that you have plenty of and to spare—well, you either lose it while you live, or leave it when you die. And then, my brothers, just think of the promise he holds out to us. Forgive, he says, and things will be forgiven you, give and things will be given you. When he says 'Give and things will be given you', notice whom he is addressing. Man is being addressed by God, a mortal creature by the immortal creator, a beggar by such a landowner. And there is no question of his disclaiming what we have given. We have found someone at last to lend to on interest. Let us give at heavy rates—but to God, not man. We are giving to one who has enough and to spare, we are giving to one who has given us the wherewithal to give. And for little things, for trifles, for things that die and decay, for things of earth, we get eternal, indestructible things, things that last without end; but why should I make a long list of them? This promiser promises us *himself*. If you love him, buy him from himself.

And just to prove to you that in giving to the poor you are giving to him, listen to what he says: 'I was hungry and you gave me something to eat; I was thirsty and you gave me a drink; I was a stranger and you took me in; I was naked and you clothed me'. And they will say, 'When did we see you in such straits as these and take care of you?' 'When you did it for one of my smallest ones', he says, 'you did it for me' (Matt. xxv, 35-40). He gives from heaven and receives on earth. *He* gives, *he* receives. It is a sort of foreign investment you are making; you give here, and collect there. Here you give perishable things, there you get things that will last without end.

And from time to time you say to God, 'Deliver me, Lord, from a bad man' (Ps. cxxxix, 1)—we have just been singing it, haven't we? I know perfectly well with what feeling you say, 'Deliver me, Lord, from a bad man'. Is there anyone in this world who doesn't suffer from some bad man or other? Well, when you

say this to God, 'Deliver me, Lord, from a bad man', and say it too from the bottom of your heart, mind you take a good look at yourself first. 'Deliver me, Lord, from a bad man.' Let's suppose God answers, 'Which one?'—From Tom, from Dick, you will be saying, from goodness knows who may be vexing you. And he will answer, 'Aren't you going to say anything to me about yourself? If I am to deliver you from a bad man, the first man you have to be delivered from is yourself. You suffer from a bad man, don't suffer from a bad you.' Let's just see if he can find in you what another bad man may do to you. Whatever a bad man may do to you, don't you be bad yourself. Don't let greed dominate you, don't let your lusts tread you, don't let your anger thresh you. These are your inner enemies. Don't you go doing anything bad to yourself. Let's see what a bad neighbour does to you, or a bad landlord, or a bad boss; let's see the sort of thing he does to you. Let him find you to be a just man, find you a believer, find you a Christian, and what can he do to you then? Only what the Jews did to Stephen—by doing him evil, they sent him off for good, his own good. So when you ask God to deliver you from a bad man, look to yourself, don't leave yourself out; ask him to deliver you from yourself. How does he do that? By forgiving your sins, and giving you merits, giving you strength to fight your lusts, breathing virtue into you, giving your mind heavenly pleasures to knock all earthly pleasures out of the running. When God gives you all that, he delivers you from yourself, and then, amid the evils of this age that all pass away with time, you can look forward to the Lord's coming with those good things that no passage of time can touch.

That must be enough for you. I don't know how it is, but you can see for yourselves how I start so feebly and grow strong by talking to you. Your progress must mean so much to me, I have set my heart on it so. Like a farmer in his field, the higher his hopes of a crop, the less he notices his toil. You be my crop, so that with you I may be, all of us together may be, God's crop.

