



SERMON

9 April, 2009. Lent 4

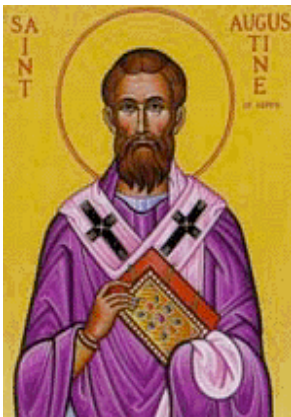
Title: "Be What You See. Receive Who You Are"

Based on Sermons #227 & 272, St. Augustine

J.J.

Some years ago, my spouse and I would attend Grace Cathedral from time to time (in fact, for awhile, we were members of the Cathedral congregation). There was one occasion I will never forget. The Dean, The Very Rev. Alan Jones, was presiding at the Eucharist, and at the moment of the invitation, you know, when the priest says: "The Gifts of God for the people of God"— the Dean added these words: **"Be what you see. Receive who you are."** And, that caught my attention . . . At first I thought it was outrageously presumptuous . . . but then, I discovered a connection that I had never made before when receiving the Eucharistic Bread and Wine . . . And that has made a lasting impression on me, as I wrote about it in my "Viewpoint" article for the April "Window."

Now, the words are not unique or original with the Dean. No . . . they date back some fifteen hundred years, all the way to St. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, who used these words in sermons he preached in the 5th Century (391-430 C.E.), to those who were about to be confirmed and to receive the Eucharist for the first time. And so, tonight, on this Maundy Thursday, as once again we remember the night in which our Lord Jesus Christ was betrayed . . . as we recall the institution of the Lord's Supper . . . tonight, I thought it would be helpful (and in good keeping with our Episcopal tradition of looking back to the early Church Fathers) . . . I thought it would be helpful if we ourselves would hear once again those wonderful words of the good Bishop, reminding us all: **"Be what you see. Receive who you are."**



St. Augustine

"I promised you, who have now been baptized, I promised you a sermon in which I would explain the Sacrament of the Lord's Table, which you now look upon, and where you last night were made participants. You ought to know what you have received, what you are going to receive, and what you ought to receive daily. That Bread which you see on the altar, being blessed by the Word of God, is the Body of Christ. That chalice, or rather, what is in that chalice, being blessed by the Word of God, is the Blood of Christ. Through that bread and wine, the Lord Christ gives to you His Body and Blood, which He poured out for us unto the forgiveness of sins. If you receive worthily, you are what you receive" (St. Augustine: Sermon 227).

In another sermon, the Good Bishop says: "Indeed, what you see is bread and a cup of wine; that's what your eyes tell you. But what your faith asks to be instructed about is this: the bread is the body of Christ and the cup is the blood of Christ. Now, it took no time to say that, and indeed, that may be enough for faith: the bread is the body of Christ and the cup is the blood of Christ. As the prophet Isaiah says: "If you do not stand firm in faith, you shall not stand at all" (Is. 7:9). But faith also desires instruction, and so, you can now say to me: "You have asked us to believe; but now explain, so that we may understand." Some such thought as this, indeed, may cross everybody's mind: "We know where our Lord Jesus Christ took flesh from; from the Virgin Mary. He was suckled as a baby . . . was reared . . . grew up. . . He came a man . . . suffered persecution . . . was hung on the tree . . . was slain . . . was taken down . . . (and) buried . . . He rose again on the third day . . . (and) ascended into heaven . . . and that's where he's going to come from to judge the living and the dead. (But), how can bread be his body? And how can the cup, or what the cup contains, how can it be his blood?"

"Well, brothers and sisters, the reason these things are called sacraments is that in them one thing is seen . . . but another is to be understood. What can be seen has a bodily appearance (bread and wine) . . . what is to be understood provides spiritual fruit (the body and blood of Jesus Christ). So if you want to understand the body of Christ, listen to what the Apostle Paul tells the faithful: "Now, you are the body of Christ and individually members of it" (1 Cor. 12:27). So if it's you who are the body of Christ and members of it, then, the mystery here is that you have been placed on the Lord's table. It is this mystery to which you say "Amen," and

by so replying you express your assent. What you hear, and what you see, is the body of Christ, and you answer, Amen. So, I invite you to be the member of the body of Christ that you are, so that your "Amen" may ring true!

“But, you ask, what role does the bread play? We have no theory of our own to propose here; listen, instead, to what St. Paul says about this sacrament: "The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (I Cor. 10: 16-17). Understand and rejoice in this unity, in this truth, in this faithfulness, in this love. "One bread" . . . "One Body. " What is this one bread? Is it not the "one body," formed from many? Remember: bread doesn't come from a single grain, but from many. When you received exorcism, you were "ground" into flour. When you were baptized, you were "leavened." When you received the fire of the Holy Spirit, you were "baked." Therefore, **Be what you see; receive who you are.**”

“That is what the apostle said about the bread. And he has already shown clearly enough what we should understand about the cup—“The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ” (I Cor 10:16). After all, just as many grains are mixed into one loaf in order to produce the visible appearance of bread, so, too, with the wine. Brothers and sisters, just remind yourselves that wine is made from many grapes, all hanging in a bunch, but the juice of the grapes is poured together in one vessel. That too is how the Lord Christ signified us . . . how he wished us to belong to him.”

“Therefore, I invite us all to turn to the Lord our God, the Father almighty, with pure hearts . . . giving God sincere and abundant thanks, as much as we can . . . beseeching God in his singular kindness with our whole soul, graciously to listen to our prayers . . . and by his power to drive out the enemy from our actions and thoughts, to increase our faith, to guide our minds, to grant us spiritual thoughts, and to lead us finally to God’s own glory through Jesus Christ, his Son. Amen.”
(St. Augustine: Sermon 272).

And so tonight, as you approach the altar, and receive the bread and wine, the body and blood of Jesus Christ, I invite you: **“Be what you see. Receive who you are.”** Amen.

SDG

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