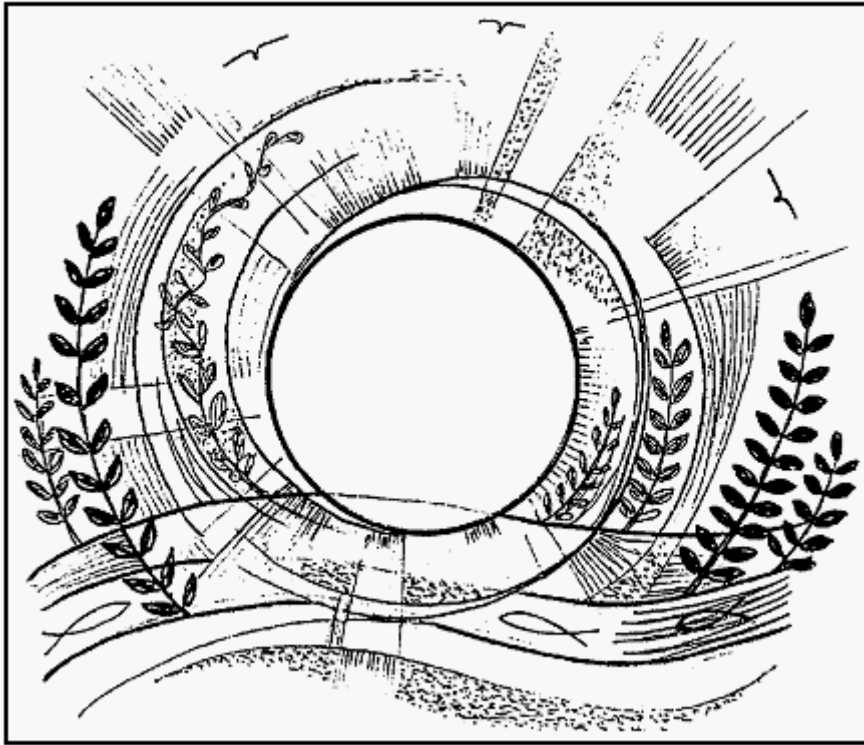


**FRIENDS OF AUGUSTINE**

# **AUGUSTINE FOR TODAY**



## **THE GOODNESS OF CREATION**



## THE WORD

And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.  
(Genesis 1.31)

O let the earth bless the Lord  
To him be highest glory and praise for ever.

And you, mountains and hills, O bless the Lord.  
And you, all plants of the earth, O bless the Lord.  
And you, fountains and springs, O bless the Lord.  
To him be highest glory and praise for ever.

And you, rivers and seas, O bless the Lord.  
And you, creatures of the sea, O bless the Lord.  
And you, wild beasts and tame, O bless the Lord.  
To him be highest glory and praise for ever.  
(Daniel 3.52-59, the song of the three young men in the fiery furnace)

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground without your father's will.

(Matthew 10.29)

## FROM AUGUSTINE

I questioned the earth, and it said 'It is not me.' And all the things on the earth confessed the same thing. I questioned the sea and the depths and the creeping animals, and they replied, 'We are not your God; look above us.' I questioned the breezes, and the whole atmosphere with all its inhabitants replied, 'Anaximenes was wrong. I am not God.' I questioned the sky, the sun, the moon, the stars: 'No, we are not the God whom you are seeking,' they said. I said to everything that existed outside my flesh, 'Tell me about my God - since you are not him - tell me something about him.' Then they cried out with a loud voice, 'He is the one who made us.' My attentiveness was my question, and their beauty was their reply.

(*Confessions* X.9)

I could speak at length without lying in praise of the worm. I could point out the brightness of its colour, its smooth rounded shape, the way that the parts of its body suit each other, and strive to keep it in one piece, as far as fits its humble nature.... The soul of even a worm makes it move in a well ordered way, to seek whatever is good for it, to avoid or overcome difficulties.... Its soul even more clearly than its body suggests the unity that underpins all natures, as it directs everything at the single aim of keeping safe.

(*On True Religion* 77)

## REFLECTION

Augustine spent ten years of his youth following the religion of the Manichees, who believed that the material world was produced by an evil power, a rival to the true God. After Augustine's conversion, he constantly returned to the theme of the goodness of creation, especially by repeatedly meditating on the opening chapter of Genesis. Every single thing that God has made, and continues to hold in being, is good. Moreover, each created thing - even worms and scorpions

and maggots! - reflects the goodness of God, in the beauty and order of its nature, each with its own proper form and unity, and its own way of life that preserves these. Since Augustine's day, Christians have agreed in theory that every created being is in itself good. But do we really treat the world around us as if we believe that? Do we give every other creature the reverence that is owed to something that is the handiwork of God?

On the other hand, Augustine was deeply aware of the immeasurable gulf between even the highest of created things and their Creator. We should never treat creatures as if they are of unlimited value, to be worshipped; and we should never treat God as something in any way limited: God is not an item in the universe, but its source and ground. It is the true goodness and beauty of the created world that allows us to look beyond it to its Creator, and to respond to its existence with gratitude and praise. Because it comes from God, we can rejoice in its goodness; because it is given by God, we must give thanks. And one of the ways that we give thanks is by learning to live in a way that respects the rest of the world, and allows it its own space to flourish. For when it does flourish - when bluebells flower and thrushes sing and sunlight sparkles on clear water - then their limited beauty allows us to glimpse the infinite beauty of God.

#### **POINTS TO PONDER**

- Everything in the world was created by God: what happens when we forget this?
- Nothing in the world is of value without God: what happens when we forget this?
- How would we treat the environment if we took the doctrine of creation with real seriousness?
- How would we pray if we took the doctrine of creation with real seriousness?

## WHAT OTHERS SAY

Glory be to God for dappled things -  
For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;  
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;  
Fresh firecoal chestnut-falls; finches wings;  
Landscapes plotted and pieced - fold, fallow and plough;  
And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.

All things counter, original, spare, strange;  
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)  
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;  
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:  
Praise him.

(‘Pied Beauty’, Gerard Manley Hopkins)

There is one sin: to call a green leaf grey,  
Whereat the sun in heaven shuddereth.

(G.K. Chesterton ‘Ecclesiastes’)

I said to the almond tree, ‘My almond tree, speak to me of God.’ And the almond tree blossomed.  
(Nikos Kazantsakis, *Report to Greco*)

Each of the various creatures, willed in its own being, reflects in its own way a ray of God’s  
infinite wisdom and goodness.

(*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 339)

### A FINAL THOUGHT FROM AUGUSTINE

The one who made the angels in heaven,  
also made the worms on the earth.  
(*Exposition of Psalm 148* 10)