

Exposition on Psalm 115

Augustine of Hippo

Patristic · Nicene & Post-Nicene · Exegesis

STROMATA 27

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INTRODUCTION

Composed as part of the bishop of Hippo's long labor of preaching through the entire Psalter to his North African congregation, this exposition takes up the Psalmist's mockery of idols, mouths that do not speak, eyes that do not see, and turns it into a meditation on how the invisible God is known through His works rather than displayed to the eye. The sermon belongs to the *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, the first complete Christian commentary on the Psalms and the seedbed from which centuries of monastic and medieval Psalter exegesis would grow. Augustine moves between the pagan worshipper outside the church door and the distracted believer within, pressing both toward the same recognition: that to fashion a god from gold is to make oneself less than what one worships. Read it as a pastor's argument delivered aloud, patient with the listener but unwilling to let the question of where one's God may be found rest in easy answers.

Exposition on Psalm 115

St. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo

Although perhaps there is one connection of all the Psalms visible to such as carefully regard them, so that none succeedeth which may not follow from the preceding one; nevertheless, let us so consider this, as if both were one, this, namely, and the preceding one. For as in the former it was said, Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto Thy Name give the praise, for Thy loving mercy, and for Thy truth's sake: that the heathen may not say, Where is their God? because we worship an invisible God, Who is known unto the bodily eyes of none, and to the pure hearts of few; as if the heathen might say, Where is their God? because they can shew their gods to the eyes; he first reminded us, that the presence of our God is shewn by His works; for since He is in heaven above, in heaven and in earth He hath done whatsoever pleased Him. And as if he should say, let the heathen shew their gods; Their idols, he says, are silver and gold, even the work of men's hands; that is, although we cannot display our God to your carnal eyes, Whom ye ought to recognise through His works; yet be not seduced by your vain pretences, because ye can point with the finger to the objects of your worship. For it were much worthier for you not to have what to point to, than that your hearts' blindness should be displayed in what is exhibited

to these eyes by you: for what do ye exhibit, save gold and silver? They have indeed both bronze, and wood, and earthenware idols, and of different materials of this description; but the Holy Spirit preferred mentioning the more precious material, because when every man hath blushed for that which he sets more by, he is much more easily turned away from the worship of meaner objects. For it is said in another passage of Scripture concerning the worshippers of images, Saying to a stock, Thou art my father; and to a stone, Thou hast brought me forth. But lest that man who speaketh thus not to a stone or stock, but to gold and silver, seem wiser to himself; let him look this way, let him turn hitherwards the ear of his heart: The idols of the Gentiles are gold and silver. Nothing mean and contemptible is here mentioned: and indeed to that mind which is not earth, both gold and silver is earth, but more beautiful and brilliant, more solid and firm. Employ not then the hands of men, to create a false Deity out of that metal which a true God hath created; nay, a false man, whom thou mayest worship for a true God; one whom any man who should receive into his friendship as a true man, would be insane. For resemblance of figure, and the imitation of the limbs, hurrieth away the weak hearts of mortals with its degrading affection: but as thou shewest each member as it is constructed, so also shew the duties of each of those members, whose figure, O human vanity, doth attract thee.

For they have mouths, and speak not: eyes have they, and see not. They have ears, and hear not: noses have they, and smell not. They have hands, and handle not; feet have they, and walk not; neither cry they through their throat. Even their artist therefore surpasseth them, since he had the faculty of moulding them by the motion and functions of his limbs: though thou wouldest be ashamed to worship that artist. Even thou surpassest them, though thou hast not made these things, since thou doest what they cannot do. Even a beast doth excel them; for unto this it is added, neither cry they through their throat. For after he had said above, they have mouths, and speak not; what need was there, after he had enumerated the limbs from head to feet, to repeat what he had said of their crying through their throat; unless, I suppose, because we perceive that what he mentioned of the other members, was common to men and beasts? For they see, and hear, and smell, and walk, and some, apes for instance, handle with hands. But what he had said of the mouth, is peculiar to men: since beasts do not speak. But that no one might refer what hath been said to the works of human members alone, and prefer men only to the Gods of the heathen; after all this he added these words, neither cry they through their throat: which again is common to men and cattle. Whereas if he had first said it, when he began to enumerate the members from the mouth, they have a mouth, and speak not; even thus every thing will apply to human nature, nor would the perceptions of the hearer remark any thing common to beasts. But since he said of the mouth what is peculiar to man, and after enumerating the parts of the body which he seemed to have concluded by the mention of the feet, added, neither cry they through their throat; he hath attracted the attention of the reader or listener, so that while he seeketh why this was added, he findeth himself admonished, that he ought to prefer not men only, but even beasts, to the idols of the heathen: so that if they are ashamed to worship a beast whom God hath created with sight, hearing, smell, touch, powers of walking, crying with its throat, they might see how shameful a thing it is to worship a dumb idol, destitute of life and sensibility; possessed of a resemblance to human limbs for this reason, that a soul devoted to carnal senses might yield its affections to a figure that seemed to live and have animation, when it saw those members which it knew to be endued with life and animation in its own body. How much better then do mice and serpents, and other animals of like sort, judge of the idols of the heathen,

so to speak, for they regard not the human figure in them when they see not the human life. For this reason they usually build nests in them, and unless they are deterred by human movements, they seek for themselves no safer habitations. A man then moveth himself, that he may frighten away a living beast from his own god; and yet worshippeth that god who cannot move himself, as if he were powerful, from whom he drove away one better than the object of his worship. For he drove away a thing that saw from a thing that was blind: one that heard from one that was deaf, one that had voice from one that was dumb, one that walked from one that could not move, one that had feeling from the insensible, the living from the dead, nay the worse than the dead. For as it is clear that the dead liveth not, so also it is clear that he hath once lived, wherefore even the dead surpasseth a deity who neither liveth nor hath lived.

What, my most beloved brethren, is more clear, what more evident than this? What child if questioned would not reply, that this was certain, that the idols of the heathen have mouths, and speak not; have eyes, and see not; and the rest, as the inspired text hath described? Why then doth the Holy Spirit take such care to insinuate and inculcate these things in many passages as if men were ignorant of them, as if they were not most open and notorious to all men; except that the figure of the limbs, which they have seen endued with life in living beings, and which we are wont to feel in ourselves, although, as they maintain, constructed for a certain statue and set on a lofty pedestal, when it hath begun to be adored and honoured by the multitude, produceth in each man a most depraved and deceptive feeling, so that, since he findeth not a vital power of motion, he believeth a hidden deity; and yet doth not think that the image, which is like a living body, is without a living inhabitant, being seduced by its figure, and influenced by the authority of seemingly wise institutions and reverential crowds. Hence such notions of men invite evil spirits to take possession of such idols of the heathen, by the varied deceptions of whom, when presiding over them, deadly errors are sown and multiplied. In other passages the inspired writers guard against these things, lest any one should say, when the idols have been ridiculed, "I worship not this visible thing, but the divinity which doth invisibly dwell therein." Thus in another Psalm the same Scripture thus condemneth these divinities: As for all the Gods of the heathen, they are but idols: but it is the Lord that made the heavens. The Apostle also saith, Not that the idol is anything, but that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to devils, and not to God, and would not that ye should have fellowship with devils.

But they seem to themselves to have a purer religion, who say, I neither worship an idol, nor a devil; but in the bodily image I behold an emblem of that which I am bound to worship. They therefore interpret these images, by stating one to represent the earth, whence they constantly call it the temple of Tellus; another the sea, as the image of Neptune; another air, as that of Juno; another fire, as that of Vulcan; another the morning star, as that of Venus; another the sun, another the moon, to whose images they give the same name, as in that of Tellus; the various stars too they represent by various figures, and so with other works of creation; for we cannot enumerate them all. And when they begin to be ridiculed for worshipping bodies, and chiefly the earth, and air, and the sea, and fire, all of which we use in common (for they are not so much ashamed of their adoration of heavenly bodies, since we cannot touch or reach them with our bodies, save by the light of our eyes) they presume to reply, that they worship not the bodies themselves, but the deities which preside over the government of them. One sentence of the

Apostle, therefore, testifieth to their punishment and condemnation; Who, he saith, have changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator, Who is blessed for ever. For in the former part of this sentence he condemned idols; in the latter, the account they give of their idols: for by designating images wrought by an artificer by the names of the works of God's creation, they change the truth of God into a lie; while, by considering these works themselves as deities, and worshipping them as such, they serve the creature more than the Creator, Who is blessed for ever.

But who worshippeth or prayeth with his eyes upon an idol, who is not so affected, as to imagine that he is listened to, as to hope that what he desireth is given him by his idol? Thus men who are bound by such superstitions, usually turn their back to the sun itself, pour forth their prayers to a statue which they call the sun; and when they are struck by the dashing of the waves behind them, they strike with their groans the statue of Neptune, as if it could perceive, which they worship in place of the sea itself. For this is a sort of necessary effect of this figure endued with limbs, that the mind which liveth in the bodily senses, should be inclined to suppose that that body which it seeth so closely to resemble its own body, is more apt to feel than a circular sun and an expanse of waves, and any thing which it beholdeth not formed with the same features as those which it constantly seeth endowed with life. In opposition to this affection, whereby human and carnal weakness may easily be snared, the holy Scripture setteth forth sentiments universally recognised, whereby it may arouse the minds of men sleeping in the thralldom of their bodies. The idols, it saith, of the heathen are gold and silver. But it is God Who made gold and silver. Their idols, he saith, are the work of men's hands: for they worship what they have constructed out of gold and silver.

But, it will be said, we also have very many instruments and vessels made of materials or metal of this description for the purpose of celebrating the Sacraments, which being consecrated by these ministrations are called holy, in honour of Him Who is thus worshipped for our salvation: and what indeed are these very instruments or vessels, but the work of men's hands? But have they mouth, and yet speak not? have they eyes, and see not? do we pray unto them, because through them we pray unto God? This is the chief cause of this insane profanity, that the figure resembling the living person, which induces men to worship it, hath more influence in the minds of these miserable persons, than the evident fact that it is not living, so that it ought to be despised by the living. For idols have more power in perverting an unhappy mind because they have a mouth, have eyes, have ears, noses, hands, feet, than in rectifying it, because they speak not, see not, hear not, smell not, touch not, walk not.

The result that ensueth is that described in the next verse: They that make them are like unto them, and so are all such as put their trust in them. Let them therefore see with open eyes, and worship with shut and dead understandings, idols that neither see nor live.

But the house of Israel hath hoped in the Lord. For hope that is seen is not hope; for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for? But if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it. But that this patience may endure to the end, He is their helper and defender. Do perhaps spiritual persons (by whom carnal minds are built up in the spirit of meekness, because they pray as higher for lower minds) already see, and is that already to them reality which to the lower is hope? It is not so. For even the house of Aaron hath hope in the Lord. Therefore, that they also may stretch forward perseveringly towards those things which are before them, and may run perseveringly, until they may apprehend that for which they are apprehended, and may know even as they are known, He is their helper and defender. For both fear the Lord, and have hoped in the Lord: He is their helper and defender.

For we do not by our deservings prevent the mercy of God; but, The Lord hath been mindful of us, and hath blessed us. He hath blessed the house of Israel, He hath blessed the house of Aaron. But in blessing both of these, He hath blessed all that fear the Lord. Dost thou ask, who are meant by both of these?

He answereth, both small and great. That is, the house of Israel with the house of Aaron, those who among that nation believed in Jesus the Saviour; for God was not well pleased with all of them. For what, if some did not believe, shall their unbelief make the faith of God without effect? God forbid. For they are not all Israel which are of Israel; neither, because they are of the seed of Abraham, are they all children; but, as it is written, a remnant was saved. For in the character of those who out of that nation believed, it is said, Except the Lord of Sabaoth had left us a seed, we had been as Sodoma, and been made like unto Gomorrha. Seed, because when it has been scattered over the earth, it multiplied.

For the great ones, of the house of Aaron, have said, May the Lord increase you more and more, you and your children. And thus it hath happened. For children that have been raised even from the stones have flocked unto Abraham: sheep which were not of this fold, have flocked unto him, that there might be one flock, and one shepherd; the faith of all nations was added, and the number grew, not only of wise priests, but of obedient peoples; the Lord increasing not only their fathers more and more, who in Christ might shew the way to the rest who should imitate them, but also their children, who should follow their fathers' pious footsteps. For he speaketh thus unto the mountains that skip like rams, but also unto the little hills that skip like young sheep.

Therefore the Prophet saith unto these great and small, the mountains and the little hills, the rams and the young sheep, what followeth: Ye are the blessed of the Lord, Who made heaven and earth. As if he should say, Ye are the blessed of the Lord, Who made the heaven in the great, earth in the small: not this visible heaven, studded with luminaries which are objects to these eyes. For the heaven of heavens is the Lord's; Who hath elevated the minds of some saints to such a height, that they became teachable by no man, but by God Himself; in comparison of which heaven, whatever is discerned with carnal eyes is to be called earth; which He hath given to the children of men; that when it is contemplated, whether in that region which illumineth above, as that which is called heaven, or in that which is illumined beneath, which is properly called earth, (since in comparison with that which is called heaven of heaven, the whole, as we have said, is earth) the whole therefore of this earth He hath given to the children of men, that by the consideration of it, as far as they can, they may conceive of the Creator, Whom with their yet weak hearts they cannot see without that aid to their conception.

There is another way of understanding these words, The heaven of heavens is the Lord's but the earth hath He given to the children of men, which I ought not to conceal, that your attention may not stray away from what I have said. For I had said, that the small and the great are signified by what followeth. Ye are the blessed of the Lord, Who made heaven and earth. If therefore we understand the great by the word heaven, the small by earth; since the small are destined to become heaven by growth, and in this very hope are nourished by milk; so those great ones are the heaven of the earth, when they nourish the little ones, that they may understand that they are heaven of heaven, when they consider in what hope the little ones are nourished. But nevertheless since they derive the truth and richness of wisdom, not from man nor through man, but through God Himself, they have received little ones who shall be heaven, that they may know that they are heaven of heaven, as yet however earth, unto which they say, I have planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. For to those very sons of men whom He made heaven, He Who knoweth how to provide for the earth through heaven, hath given earth upon which they may work. May they therefore abide, heaven and earth, in their God, Who made them,

and let them live from Him, confessing unto Him, and praising Him; for if they choose to live from themselves, they shall die, as it is written, From the dead, as though he were not, confession ceaseth. But, The dead praise not Thee, Lord, neither all they that go down into silence. For the Scripture in another passage proclaimeth, The sinner, when he cometh into the abyss of wickednesses, scorneth. But we, who live, will praise the Lord, from this time forth for evermore.

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