

TWENTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME. 2025

What characterizes a truly good person? The sacred author of the Book of Wisdom (Wisdom 8:7) and the not so sacred but humanly sensible philosopher Aristotle answer that question in the same way. A truly good person is characterized by Temperance, Prudence, Justice, and Courage. These are called the “Cardinal Virtues”, because all other virtues hinge on these. Without Temperance, Prudence, Justice, and Courage, all lesser virtues, such as cleverness or charm, quickly turn to evil and become sinister in their effects. Further, the Cardinal Virtues come as a package. No one is truly a good person without all four of them.

Today’s first reading, a Lesson from Jeremiah (38:4-6, 8-10), and today’s Gospel from Luke (12:49-53) speak directly to courage. Certainly, no one can be truly good without Courage, or perseverance in the face of danger and difficulty. Imagine someone who had Temperance, or self-control, without Courage. As soon as there was pressure from others to guzzle alcohol, indulge in recreational drugs, or engage in promiscuous sex, that person’s self control would collapse. Imagine someone who had Prudence, which is to say good judgement about possible risks, but did not have Courage. As soon as people taunted that person for being a “chicken”, or whatever insult is in fashion these days, that person’s Prudence would disappear, and he or she would join the other idiots in foolishly self-destructive behavior. Imagine someone who had Justice, or a desire to give God and other people their due, but did not have Courage. As soon as there was any pressure to join in crime or sacrilege, that person’s Justice would collapse, and he or she would be among the crooks or blasphemers. No, the other Cardinal Virtues are so unreliable as to be almost fictitious without Courage.

On the other hand, what does Courage, or perseverance in the face of difficulty and danger, look like without the other Cardinal Virtues? Imagine someone who had Courage without Temperance, or self control. Under the influence of the chemical substance of the moment, or perhaps under the influence of sexual infatuation masquerading as “love”, that person’s retreat into cowardice could be very speedy. Imagine someone who had Courage, without Prudence, or good judgement about possible risks. Being around that fool would quite possibly get you killed. Imagine someone who had Courage without Justice, or a desire to give to God and others their due. Such a person would simply be a dangerous criminal. Without Justice, Courage simply makes someone a menace to the rest of the human race.

Courage, Temperance, Prudence, and Justice, all together, and only all together, make someone a truly good person.

“The prudent man looks where he is going”, says the Book of Proverbs (14:15). Prudence is the virtue of looking ahead to anticipate reasonably foreseeable consequences of possible actions. It is thinking before you do something - and thinking is a holy thing! It should happen more often. I remember friends once urging me to join them on a difficult looking rock climb without any equipment.. I declined. One friend shouted, ‘Hey, James - you only live once!’ I was actually clever enough to respond right away “That, my friend, is the point.” A rock climb with proper training and equipment is one thing. That adventure was quite another. “Keep sane and sober in your prayers”, urged St. Peter (1 Peter 14:15); which is to say, pray for the ability to think, and then use the brains and mind God gave you. St. Thomas Aquinas famously defined Prudence as “Reason in Action”. What a beautiful definition! Act! But think before you act. Dear Old Dad, reflecting on a career with middle school kids, observed that if you asked an 8th grader why he just did something stupid, and he answered “I don’t know”, he

was probably telling the truth. That is so natural at that age that it is hard to blame the kid too much; but the older we get the more pathetic that is. We have minds for a purpose. With truly good people, reason guides their actions, and their actions are reasonable. Truly good people have "Reason in Action." Truly good people have Prudence.

Clearly, truly good people also have Justice. Justice seeks to give God His due, and therefore Justice flows into Praise and Thanksgiving. Justice also seeks to give other people their due, which is to say, it respects the rights of others and seeks to uphold the common good. Justice does not seek to impose a tyrannical equality upon human variety. Instead, justice seeks to treat everyone with respect and fairness. "Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, knowing that you have a Master in Heaven." (Colossians 4:1). Happily actual slavery has been banished to the dark corners and attics of the world for sometime - unhappily, it still exists in those dark corners and attics. Still, there are undeniably social levels, sometimes informal, based on money and prestige, and sometimes formal, based on ranks. Justice does not seek to make everyone equally poor or equally obscure, nor does Justice seek to abolish formal ranks in those places, such as the military or the Church, where formal ranks are needed. Rather, Justice says that whatever that person's wealth or lack of it, whatever that person's fame or lack of it, and whatever that person's rank or lack of it, that person is to be treated with fairness and respect. Justice really is that simple, in the end. Recently, someone I know went on rather cloudily about what a Christian public policy would look like. St. Paul already told us what it would look like, in quite simpler terms: "Render to all men what is due to them - taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due" (Romans 13:7). Beyond that, all that Justice requires is extending basic fairness to all. This is not easy, surely, but it is fundamentally simple.

Temperance is self control especially regarding the use of this world's good things. The Sacred Scriptures frequently call us to self control. "Do not follow your own inclination and strength, walking according to the desires of your heart" (Sirach 5:2). "We ought to live sober, upright, and godly lives in this world." (Titus 2:12) Authentic self control doesn't refuse to use the things of this world to the degree that we need them to do our duties. I remember reading a story about a knight whose fasting made him physically weak. When he was knocked down in battle, a friend rescued him, but then added "That's the last time I'm rescuing you today, Sir Bread and Water." Temperance is the ability, acquired with practice and the help of God's Grace, to use this world's goods in a way that builds ourselves and others up, and does not tear ourselves or others down.

And, then, of course, there is Courage, the Cardinal Virtue praised in today's first reading and Gospel. The Sacred Scriptures tell us that the best foundation for Courage, or perseverance in the face of danger and difficulty, is Faith. "The Lord is my strength and my song." (Psalm 118:14) "In the world, you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world." (John 16:33). Nothing should deter us from doing what we know God wants us to do, since the Lord Jesus, the Conqueror of Death, is on our side. Death will come to us, one way or another. It will pass away. We will not. Fear is natural, but we must not let fear control our actions. Rather, Faith must control our fear, and keep it in check. If we are acting justly and faithfully, even should the immediate result be suffering and death, the eventual result, in Christ, will be Life and Glory.