

Homily

February 12, 2017

Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

In today's Gospel Jesus seems to contradict Himself. On one level He says, I've not come to call the 'virtuous' but sinners, and yet today He tells us the path of virtue we must follow if we are to reach the Kingdom of Heaven - so what's going on? I think there is a difference, though a thin line between being virtuous and being 'sanctimonious.' And to some degree the scribes and the pharisees of Jesus's day were 'sanctimonious' you know, because they insisted on the ritual law and the purification laws, so that they looked good, - they were missing the message.

Jesus says the ultimate truth is that we should look behind the law to the 'virtue' that is involved. So for example, 'thou shalt not kill,' it's all about where the passions are - are they under control, are they virtuous? It's not about hedging our bets, keeping the letter of the law, but not its spirit. And the interesting thing is that this idea - letter not spirit - seems to run through the parts of the Old Testament, but reaches its climax in the revolutionary and upturning teachings of Jesus. Moses teaches virtue in the first reading when he says you have a choice between water and fire, and in another reading he says you can choose life or death, because the virtues are ultimately about what we make of ourselves- are we integrated and whole, or disintegrated and incomplete.

So I looked up what our Church teaches about the virtues, and I found an answer in the New Catechism - it's a bit bigger than the old Penny Catechism- and I found 'the Four Cardinal Virtues.' Can anyone remember them from their days at school? Hmmm..... well, and they use some quite old fashioned, yet very profound language. The four cardinal virtues are: Prudence, Justice, Fortitude and Temperance.

Before I go on to explain them, I'll read the prologue to this section of the Catechism. 'Human virtues, it says, affirm attitudes, stable dispositions, habitual perfections of the intellect, and will order our passions, and guide our lives according to reason and faith.' What I love about all that is that Jesus, in the Gospels says this is something we can work at- our human response to His teachings. The Church's teachings are that these human virtues can enable us to develop good habits, good dispositions, and thus bring us closer to God. I remember being taught by the nuns in St Anne's Keighley - the importance of developing good habits! We're all good at bad habits- but good habits carry you through those moments when you're feeling down or not up to it. We've lost the idea, the virtue, of developing good habits.

But back to these Four Cardinal Virtues which are based on Scripture, and relate so well to today's Gospel.

The first is Prudence- it's rather a lovely word isn't it? Prudence is the virtue that disposes practical reason, to discern our true good in every circumstance, and to choose the right means of achieving it. Isn't that fantastic?! It's the use of our 'noggin' to discern the true good in every circumstance. I was listening to a radio programme on Friday which was all about perception, and it was fascinating. It said that in many cases the brain is trained to make quick decisions, and in many important ways this quick response can be wrong. Advertisers use this, don't they, to get us to buy things? If we would only pause another nano second, and ask is this the right decision, we would make better decisions, working out what is the true good in every circumstance - and that is what Prudence is.

The second cardinal virtue is the easy one- Justice. Justice is the moral virtue that consists of peoples constant and firm will to give their due to God and neighbour. Do you know- I can see why this is a 'cardinal' virtue. To have a good disposition- a good habit, of being just to other

people, even when you don't like them- and this is a virtue we have to develop- it doesn't come naturally.

And then the third cardinal virtue-Fortitude- we don't hear that word very often any more, do we? Fortitude is the moral virtue that ensures firmness in difficulties, and constancy in the pursuit of the good. Perhaps the better modern word would be courage. When I was on holiday in Ireland, I came across road signs that said 'yield' - not 'give way' - 'yield.' This is a wonderful word in the context of Fortitude. It means we will not yield to temptations and to others who try to lead us away from the good, the right thing, in any particular situation. Firmness in difficulties. You know, our young people in particular, and indeed all of us need to develop this virtue. Our young people are surrounded by all kinds of temptation - 'oh you don't go to church do you' - you know that sort of thing. The temptation to conform. In fact I would say that this virtue, if worked at and developed will assist us - help us, to not 'yield' to other peoples pressures and desires for us to conform to the lowest common denominator. Firmness in difficulties, that's courage! You can see why it's a cardinal virtue.

And the last one- Temperance- which is a word you don't hear of again. Temperance, it's a lovely old fashioned word- and they're all based on Scripture. Temperance is the moral virtue that moderates the attraction of pleasures, and provides balance in making choice. It goes right back to the basic thing of not being over indulgent and looking instead to the needs of others, of being moderate and sober in our choices.

The thing is, these Four Cardinal Virtues, the traditional teaching of the Catholic Church, dovetail so beautifully with what Jesus is getting at in today's Gospel about virtue going deeper, far deeper, than just superficial appearances.