

The Cardinal Virtues

Wisdom I loved; I sought her out when I was young and longed to win her for my bride, and I fell in love with her beauty. If riches are a prize to be desired in life, what is richer than wisdom, the active cause of all things? If prudence shows itself in action, who more than wisdom is the artificer of all that is? If virtue is the object of a man's affections, the fruits of wisdom's labours are the virtues; temperance and prudence, justice and fortitude, these are her teaching, and in the life of men there is nothing of more value than these. – Wisdom 8:2,5-7

Temperance

Meditations

The Difference

Bought a new car a year or so back – well, not new in itself of course, but a lot newer than the one I traded in. Took it for a test drive first, of course. Drifted down through the lanes, all fine, visibility good, nice handling on the corners. Had a go on the motorway – went right down to Bristol. It took the speed well, and again, good visibility. Drove it around Bristol for a bit, to see how it handled in town traffic. Didn't go anywhere in particular, just drifted around, took the easiest route. Found myself back at the motorway, came back to the garage and okayed it. All felt nice and easy.

Went down to Bristol again, only a week or so later. Almost the same route – over to the junction, down the motorway to the city, then across to the multi-storey car park by the ice rink. I don't suppose anyone looking at me would have noticed much difference between the two trips – but were they different for me! I was going somewhere, so I had to be in the right lane – not the easiest lane any more, the right lane. I had to think beforehand where I should be at each junction. I had to visualise how heavy the traffic was, and judge the best way: the direct route crosses that busy loop at Greyfriars – would I be better on the back road past the hospital? Did almost the same trip, took almost the same time, had almost the same traffic – and came back gasping for coffee.

They say you often can't tell the difference between a Christian and a non-Christian. I'm sure that's right, just as you couldn't have told the difference between my two drives – from outside the car. Even inside, there were probably only a few actual differences of route, only a few decisions that came out differently. The real difference was that one journey was nothing but a journey; the other was really going somewhere. And temperance is knowing where you're going.

Take me to your Leader

It's your life, of course. It's what you choose, isn't it. Really?

Just think for a moment, how much could you actually change? Without the whole thing collapsing round your ears? And without getting approvals, permissions, agreements, whatever.

Could you change your house? If you live by yourself, maybe, but most people share in some way or another: wife, husband, partner, child, parent, or just friends or colleagues. Could you just up and move, without getting someone else to move too?

Your car? Well, yes if you're just swapping it for another one, but suppose you swapped it for something different, a thirty ton artic, say, or a tricycle. A real change. Or maybe gave up having your own transport altogether. Well?

Your job? Just like that? Have you actually tried? You've no one who might just feel they should have a say? Mm. OK.

Your food? There'd be no problem going on a gelignite diet or whatever, I mean, you can easily keep to it while your kids carry on with the fish fingers, though of course you won't be able to have any of those lunch time meetings.

And what about coffee? Tea? Beer? That little glass of sherry that gets you through the day? Is there nothing you couldn't give up? You have tried, of course? I'm not asking you to give them up altogether, just change them. To absinthe, say, or prune juice. No problem?

Then there's your friends. You do have some friends? You'd have no trouble cutting with them and finding new ones, would you? Just like that?

That's all the easy ones. Now the hard stuff. What about how you think of yourself? How you see yourself in the mirror? What about all those restrictions and assumptions you've been taught to make, about what you are and what you're capable of? Because of where you were born, how old you are, skin colour, accent, school, gender, what your parents were? Can you even see them, let alone change them?

It's your life, is it? And you can change so little? You'd better not try changing anything big, then. Like your religion, for instance. That could easily mean you having to make big changes without anyone's permission, and you know you can't do that. Better not get too interested in religion, then. Too dangerous. Too many consequences. After all, it's not as if you can't make up your own mind. It's your life.

Prayers

For Temperance

Lord Jesus, look at me.
See where I am
See where I am going
See what is driving,
For I cannot see.

Lord Jesus, look at me.
See where I should be
See where I should be going
See what should be driving me
For I cannot see.

Lord Jesus, take me.
Put me where I should be
Aim me where I should be going
Teach me to drive,
And help me see.

Dedication

Jesus, to you I give my life which is not mine to give. At times I have fought for it, at times I have let them win, but I have never truly owned it.

Own it now, Lord. Take with your power what I have never held in my weakness. Keep it, Lord, or give it back to me, as you choose, for even if you keep it, it will still be more truly mine than it ever was, and even if you give it back to me, it will still be yours, and yours alone, now and for ever.

A Few More Thoughts on Temperance

Let's clear up one thing straight away – 'temperance' does not mean 'no alcohol'! Temperance is far and away the most misunderstood of the virtues; more so even than faith, because the word has been hijacked for something very different.

Temperance is control – self control. It doesn't mean not drinking alcohol – but it does mean making sure that you control the alcohol, not the alcohol control you. It doesn't mean not having sex; it does mean being sure that you – and the relationship – control the sex, not the sex controlling you or dictating your relationships. Enjoy – pleasure is good – but stay in control. Remember the pleasure is for your benefit, not you for the pleasure's.

Justice

Meditations

What is Justice?

It's not fair! No, it isn't. Life isn't fair. But we know what fairness is; we know when life is being unfair, and how that is different from all the other nasties life throws at us. We know instinctively what is fair – we know instinctively what is just.

For Justice is being fair. And therefore Justice is being open and honest in your dealings. Fair: if your boss treats you badly you don't take it out on your juniors. Open: don't pretend you're running a survey when you are actually selling or evangelising. Honest: don't kid your lover everything's fine when you are actually seeing someone else behind their back. And dealings – all dealings. Commercial, sexual, family, religious, duty; with an employer, an employee, taxman, shopkeeper, customer, sergeant-major, wife, child, grandfather, queen, country, friend, lover, enemy. And that most of all: justice is especially being fair, open and honest in your dealings with your enemy.

Lord See My Clean Hands

Corruption? It is everywhere. I was shocked, I can tell you, I wasn't in Ruritania for an hour before I had heard stories – well. Here, see, I cut some of them out of the newspaper and tucked them in my – that? It's a bag of fifty-fiori pieces. Worth just over a penny each, but they're exactly the same size as our ten pence pieces. The travel agent told me that – he brings back a bag every trip and uses them in slot machines. Anyway, see this cutting? Police Chief in Szleb extorting money from his own bosses! Would you believe it? How could – oh, yes, er, I'll have the Bœuf Wellington, and we'll have the number 54 – the Château Rothschild. I can afford to splash out a bit with what I made on my expenses. Oh, here's a good one. Three Army sergeants running a protection racket in North Urzb – that's over in the west, near the border with Falkenstein. Isn't it disgusting? What sort of a country is it where people behave like that? We clinched the deal with Warings, by the way, I owe you one. For the info – you know! About him and that – yes, that info. After he knew we knew, it was plain sailing. Here's another. Gang of smugglers got the local customs official so drunk he actually helped them carry the boxes! And this – oh no, sorry, that's the green card for my new car. Yes, of course it's a Merc. The VAT man never found out about the Psylo deal and we cross-siphoned a good half-million between the Isogon and the Acme accounts, so the car hasn't really cost me a penny. Oh, and you must see this one. A shopkeeper claimed that the price of stamps had gone up, and sold them for an extra thirty percent markup! And then, would you believe, he faked a robbery, kept all the money for the stamps for himself, and tried to claim on the insurance! I mean, have they no shame? Oh, give it me, it's my turn to pay. Hey, they've forgotten to bill for the wine! I'll leave a good tip, and we can be out before they notice. Come on!

Right and Wrong

It's strange, isn't it, how people claim that morality is old fashioned. Yet you'll hear them being disgusted at the idea of GM foods, appalled at the way battery chickens are reared, shocked at the whole idea of hunting, horrified by the radiation discharges from Sellafield. And yet they claim to have no morality. Of course, what they mean is "I have no personal morality – it's they, it's everyone else who's doing wrong. I don't need to change, because I am perfect; it's they who need to change."

Unfortunately, every I is someone else's they.

Am I Just?

I wonder how I can tell whether I'm being just? Oh, I know that sometimes there's a reality test, I can in the long run decide whether I was right about next door's dog; DNA testing on the sausages, that sort of thing, but that's not really about justice. That's about truth, which is different. How can I tell if I'm being just?

Perhaps the most obvious question is, Do I benefit? Do I profit from my judgement? If I do, It's very difficult to believe I'm being just.

Now, there's the obvious profit, I suppose. The little bit of financial assistance to help me make up my mind. Nobody's going to believe I'm just if I take the money.

But there are less obvious profits. Is the decision going to make it easier for me, easier to borrow money, easier to trade, easier to make contacts? Easier to hire staff – or keep the ones I've got? These are all money in the bank, even if it didn't come in a brown envelope.

Or what about my reputation? At the moment, is it politically correct to be a severe judge, or a lenient judge? I might do myself quite a bit of good – sorry, I mean it is sensible to learn from the current climate and produce the acceptable kinds of judgement.

To look at it another way, our system is just, so if I get promotion as a judge, I must be being just. Mustn't I? I mean, it's profit, certainly, but not so anyone would notice. Everyone will just think I'm doing a good job.

Yes, but I'm not going to be caught like that. I'm not corrupt. But am I just?

Am I, for example, not benefiting myself, but benefiting people like me? Not profiting me, but profiting Us – as opposed to Them? After all, we are the judges. We have a duty to stay in control. And we can only stay in control by making sure that They don't get – above themselves. Even if it means stretching justice a little.

It's a pity justice won't stretch at all.

In fact, the only way I can be sure I am just is by making sure that my judgements really hurt me. Say, by getting me crucified. Though that does seem a bit drastic. Maybe it'll be enough if I imitate a judge who has been crucified, make my judgements follow his, align with his, agree with his. Well, I'd judge it to be worth a try.

Prayers

For Justice

O God my Lord
May I serve in your court
May I see as you see me
May I hear as you hear me
May I judge as you judge me
May I condemn as you condemn me
May I forgive as you forgive me
Amen

Your Honour

My Lord,
As it pleases your honour may I speak
As it pleases your honour may I stand
As it pleases your honour may I see
As it pleases your honour may I hear
As it pleases your honour may I act
As it pleases your honour may I bear witness
To your honour, glory, forgiveness and love
May I please your honour

Show me

O God my Lord and my Judge
Measure me against your rule
Show me
that I am not good, but forgiven
that I am not innocent, but justified
that I am not perfect, but completed
that I am not needed, but wanted
that I am not holy, but hallowed
that I am not special, but chosen
that I am not clean but washed
that I am not loveable, but loved
Amen

A Few More Thoughts on Justice

Justice is too often a they-virtue. They should do this. They shouldn't act that way. They shouldn't be so cruel. They shouldn't be so intolerant. That is not justice.

Justice is only real justice when it's an I-virtue. I should do this. I shouldn't act this way. I shouldn't be so cruel. I shouldn't be so intolerant. That is justice.

Prudence

Meditations

Christian Prudence

A tale is told of a particularly prudent Archbishop; if I remember rightly, an Archbishop of Milan. He argued, as many would, that the Bible recommends that every Christian should tithe, spend a tenth of income on the Church and the work of the Church. He argued, too, that the feeding, clothing and general maintenance of an Archbishop was a legitimate work of the Church. He therefore spent one tenth of his income on himself, and gave away nine tenths – yes, I mean nine tenths – to the poor and sick. When this was remarked upon, he retorted that he had duly given a tithe of his income to the Church, and surely he had every right to handle the remainder totally selfishly – to invest the remainder where he personally would gain the most from it – in heaven. For him, giving money to the poor was being selfish. That is Christian prudence.

Measures

How do we measure ourselves? Bank balance? Company car? Seat on the Board? Or perhaps that our sons and daughters are doing very well. After all, if we are doing well, we must be doing good.

I remember when I was at school: how desperately important it was to be wearing the right clothes, to get a place in the Second Eleven (though even the House teams were beyond my reach!) to have the biggest collection of train numbers. Our teachers told us again and again that what mattered were exams, grades, qualifications – but we knew better. We knew what really really mattered. And many of us still do.

Do you suppose that when we are in heaven this collection of banknotes will be any more important to us than that collection of train numbers is to us now?

Consider the lilies of the field

Consider the lilies of the field. And the dandelions, the daisies, the plantains, the docks, the meadowsweet, the speedwell, the ladysmock, forgetmenot, cranesbill. All of them. Now try to find an ugly one. Yes, I know it's a cliché, I know it's twee, old fashioned, Victorian, all-things-bright-and-beautiful, yes, I know; but just try it. Well, most of them there's no doubt about. The beauty of daisies, of forgetmenot, of all the standard poetic flowers has been obvious from day one. The plantain, perhaps? The dock? No showy colours, but strong architectural forms and subtle shadings of colour, especially in the leaves. Like all the other flowers, when you see them against the grass they have their own beauty, their own strength. They make a statement, as garden designers say.

Against the grass. Had you forgotten the grass? Grass is a flower, too, and a special one – after all, the field wouldn't be a field without the grasses. Consider the grasses of the field; they toil not, neither do they spin, but Solomon was arrayed in glory because of the grasses. The wise may open their eyes to the beauty of the lilies of the field, the plantains and the docks, but the important plants to lay up your treasure in are the humble grasses.

Treasures in Heaven

The original idea was that you didn't need to pay parish priests. Instead, you gave them some land to cultivate and to live on – just like their parishioners. Thus they understood their flock not from above, from outside, but alongside them. It worked, too. That was the problem – it worked too well. As the years rolled and populations grew, the priest's land became valuable in itself, far more valuable than it needed to be to keep a priest fed and clothed. So the rich took the land over, and paid a substitute – a vicar – to do the actual priest bit. Shocking. We would never have allowed it to happen. When we became Christians we gave a great deal of our time to God. And surely we still do – we would never take it all back and delegate the Christian bit to a substitute, a vicar. Would we?

Treasures

What treasure do you have? After all, you can't be prudent unless you know what you own. It's time to do an audit. What treasure do you have?

Money, jewellery, goods, perhaps? You may be genuinely poor, or you may be genuinely rich. Don't worry for the moment about whether you ought to give it away or keep it or what; we're just reckoning up what you've got, for the moment. You've got a little money? Some income? Odds and ends? Note them down, honestly.

What about land? A house? Not really the same as money – but important and potentially useful. If you have any, put them on the list.

What about treasures of the mind, though? Books, hymns, poems, songs that really mean something to you. Or perhaps you have some qualifications, GCSE, A-levels, a degree. Or another language: Welsh, French, British Sign Language, Sanskrit. Or experiences that are well worth sharing. Reckon them all up, put them down. Just check to make sure you haven't missed anything – it's easy to do with this sort of thing.

Treasures of the eye and hand obviously follow next. Can you put up shelves, plant onions, arrange flowers nicely, paint guttering, fix a car, draw cats, make teddy bears out of sticky-back plastic and PVA glue, play the harmonica, morris dance, hit a googly to the boundary, knit a sweater? Write them down.

Which brings us naturally to blessings of the hand, to use the old phrase. Contacts, acquaintances, business partners, customers and clients, political contacts if you're into that sort of thing. Fellow club members, church members, sports colleagues – and competitors. After all, it's not what you know, it's who you know.

And of course, blessings of the heart. Friends, lovers, parents, partners, children – all your family, or at least the bits you still talk to! Real treasures, these are, you must put these down on the list.

Just a few things left, now. Health? Worries? Fears?

And finally, what about treasures of your soul? Faith? Salvation – and knowing you are saved? Jesus in your heart? Try and avoid the standard pious phrases, just be honest.

I bet you've got quite a list, now. Far more than you'd have guessed. As the old hymn says, you've counted your blessings, and I bet it has surprised you what the Lord has done.

Now you've done the audit, now you've got the inventory in front of you, now you can start deciding what to do with all this treasure, how to invest it, where to lay up what you can't invest.

But remember, you must do the audit first, or you're bound to miss things, to miss out on some valuable investment chances. And you wouldn't like that to happen, would you? After all, you're going to have to live on the income from these treasures for a very long time – for eternity, in fact.

Prayers

For Prudence

I would follow one path, O God of the thousand stars
I would trace one beauty, O God of the thousand flowers
I would wield one power, O God of the thousand flames
I would sing one joy, O God of the thousand waves
I would seek one end, O God of the thousand tales
I would trust one love, O God of the single cross

Treasures

Store my treasure, Lord, in a safe place.
My treasure of gold
My treasure of health
My treasure of knowledge
My treasure of insight
My treasure of joy
My treasure of hope
My treasure of love
Store my treasure, Lord, in your house
That all may profit from them

A Few More Thoughts on Prudence

Prudence – hardly the virtue for a can-do, go-getting dynamic Church! But then, prudence is hardly the virtue people think it is.

Prudence is essentially a virtue of perception. It is acting intelligently and with foresight and care, keeping the eye firmly on the main purpose, but within a Christian understanding of what that main purpose is. Prudence does not stop us being dynamic and go-getting; but it reminds us to be sure what it is we are going to get, of where our dynamism is directed.

Fortitude

Meditations

Need

What right have I to speak of fortitude? Have I been tested as Stephen was tested, as Daniel was tested, as so many martyrs have been tested and triumphed? Yes, I have had sorrows, sickness, bereavements, but no more than others have had, and less than many. How, then can I know whether I have fortitude? Should I beat myself, like the flagellants of the Middle Ages, deliberately causing pain, testing myself to find my limits, pushing those limits back? No – is it not written "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." Should I fake pain, imagine pain, try to imagine how I would respond? No – we are all heroes before imaginary enemies. All I can do is try to exercise fortitude in the little troubles I do suffer, to take these little troubles beyond grumbling endurance to true conquest, to learn to make these little troubles a means of sacrifice and of dedication. It may not be much; but if I can't conquer the little, how should I expect ever to conquer the great?

Example

Do you want to see fortitude? See, there is a big new modern factory over there. Let's go into the boardroom; I'm sure we'll find something for you.

Ah, there's the Chairman – he built this company up from nothing. Fought for it, slaved for it, surely he is an example of fortitude? His commitment to the company is absolute – just a minute: who is he phoning? They specialise in mergers and sellouts, don't they? He's selling up? But where will the

company go without him? He doesn't give a damn as long as he makes his pile. No fortitude there, then.

The directors, just leaving I see. Golf clubs are a real sign of commitment to the company, of fortitude, aren't they! Oh, look. The statement of directors' bonuses and share offers. If they're truly committed, why do they need bribes to stay?

No one here with fortitude, then. Oh, just step over here, out of the cleaner's way. That's Jim Alston, by the way. He has to work in the evenings because he's got a paralysed kid to look after, and he can't get help in the daytime. Wife? She left years ago, with the kid's father. Jim's always looked after Darren better than she did, and he just carried on. He had a good job, too, in those days. Darren? He's ten this April coming. Not likely to see twenty, either, so they say.

There, you see? I told you we'd find an example of fortitude here in the boardroom, didn't I?

Prayers

For Fortitude

Lord, give me strength
Against the sudden storm, and the steady wind
Against the flash flood, and the constant dripping
Against the attacking enemy, and the hateful companion
Against the time of trial, and the lifetime of testing
Amen

For Holding On

When I help, and am robbed, help me to help the next time
When I support, and am exploited, help me to support the next time
When I listen, and am cheated, help me to listen the next time
When I trust, and am betrayed, help me to trust the next time
When I love, and am used, help me to love the next time

Armour

Lord God, I put on your armour
I buckle on the belt of your truth – for you are the way, the truth and the life.
I strap on the breastplate of your righteousness – for my own is but filthy rags
I tie on the shoes of your gospel of peace – for I have no good news of my own
I slip over my arm the shield of your faith – for by your faith I am saved
I put on the helmet of your salvation – for only by your grace am I saved
I pick up the sword of your Spirit – for your words are the words of life
I try to stand

Lord God, it is not enough
I can never defend myself alone
I can never stand alone against the Evil One

Lord God, you put on your armour
You strap on the breastplate of your justice
You put on the helmet of your law
You slip on your arm the shield of your holiness
You pick up the sword of your anger
You stand alongside me
And I stand with you for ever against the Evil One

Amen

A Few More Thoughts on Fortitude

The martyrs are the traditional examples of fortitude, but that does not mean that we have to be executed in order to show fortitude. Fortitude includes courage, certainly, but it is as much the courage of facing the dreary drudgery of day after day as of facing the sudden threat or the hangman's noose.

Fortitude is the ability to say: here I am; here is where I should be; here I will stay; here I will stand whoever or whatever comes against me: an enemy, the State, modern thinking, family, friends, duty, doubt, fear, time, weakness, exhaustion. Even if they finally move me, they shall move me by their force, never by my consent. Here on the solid Rock I stand: I shall choose no other.

Some Final Thoughts

You won't find these four Cardinal Virtues easily in most Bibles – you need to look either in a Roman Catholic version, or an Orthodox version – a lot harder in England – or in the Apocrypha of a Protestant version. You'll find them in a beautiful book called the Wisdom of Solomon.

A word on words.

Virtue is a Latin word, which is often said to come from the Latin word vir – a male adult – and therefore to have something to do with masculinity. It doesn't. The form of the word shows that it can not derive from vir (because vir is in fact viro- in combinations, so virtue would have to be virotue or viriutue) and that in all probability it really derives from the same source as vires – power or strength.

A virtue is therefore literally a means of power or a means of strength – which is why virtue is indeed its own reward; at least in the sense that if you hold the means of power you hold the power.

Cardinal. Cardinal has nothing to do with men in red robes; a cardo is a hinge. The cardinal virtues are the means of power on which our Christian lives turn, as a door turns on its hinges. What use is a door without hinges? What use is a Christian without these means of power?