

## Homily for The Second Sunday of Lent in 2009 (Year B)

I would like to spend the next four Sundays looking at some of the tools which God in his great wisdom has given us to help us live well, and in living well to find fulfillment. One of the functions of Lent is to dust off those tools, to take them up afresh, to rediscover the ways in which they make our lives both easier and better. The four ideas I want to present to you this Lent are the cardinal virtues: prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance, beginning today with prudence.

Prudence doesn't sound very exciting. It conjours up for us images of extreme caution, perhaps even miserliness, timidity, lack of adventure and daring. It sounds like a disposition always to say 'no' to everything. This is a caricature of the real virtue of prudence.

Prudence means: understanding honestly and without self-deception the real situation that I am in – all the facts, and their real significance; understanding what my priorities in life are; acting in such a way that my actual situation is directed towards the things that really matter.

Prudence is not the same as cleverness. You might remember that in his homily at Cardinal Hume's funeral Bishop Crowley said that the late Cardinal's judgement on our age might be that we 'were clever, but not wise'. Prudence is very similar to wisdom, but it is much more precious than cleverness. Let me give you an example. It is clever to come up with a procedure that screens unborn children for certain disabilities so that decisions can be made about whether or not the child should be allowed to live. That requires considerable scientific skill. But it does not tell us whether or not disability is something to be avoided at all costs, nor does it tell us whether or not destroying unborn children is a good thing. Cleverness tells us how to get from A to B, but it does not tell us whether we are really at A in the first place, nor does it tell us whether or not getting to B is actually such a good idea.

Prudence is not the same as having good intentions, either. Meaning well is not, on its own, enough. If I do not really understand what is going on around me, my actions,

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however well intended, are far from prudent. In one of his more memorable sayings C S Lewis once said “many Christians have the idea that, provided you are "good", it does not matter being a fool". (Mere Christianity).

Prudence requires me to know what is the ultimate goal of my life. If I do not know what really matters to me, if I do not know where I am heading, if I do not know what my real priorities are, my decision-making is bound to be impulsive and random. In fact, everyone has some sense of what their ultimate goal is, even if they have never thought about it. As Christians our aim in life is to find perfect fulfilment through union with God. That in itself could be the subject of a whole series of homilies, but basically we know that fulfillment, which is much greater than passing happiness or pleasure, is reached by living a fully human life, and we find out what is a fully human life from God, who created that life. Other people will give a different answer to the question ‘what is your ultimate goal, your guiding principle?’ They might say doing no harm, or having a quiet life, or helping other people; other people might, perhaps without knowing it, be guided by more sinister principles such as personal pleasure, or achievement, or enjoyment, or comfort. The important point to grasp is that everybody has some fundamental motivating principle, whether they acknowledge it or not. Prudence begins by asking us frankly, what motivates your actions?

Knowing what motivates my life is not, however, enough to help me make good decisions. I might decide that I want to go to Arundel today, but I will have no hope of getting there if I do not know where I am at the moment, where I am starting from. Essential to prudence is an ability to see the world as it really is. If I am going to make a prudent decision, I must first of all stop and reflect honestly on my situation. I have to be able to cut through illusion and self-delusion, and reflect on reality. This is sometimes easier said than done. Let me take a fairly mundane example: should I buy myself a new car. I could make an impulsive decision based on its colour, its shape, its speed, or its onboard gadgetry, but prudence does demand that I stop for a while and reflect. Do I need a new car? If I do need a new car, is this the right one to buy? Am I being seduced by the glamour of something that will, in the end, turn out to be unsatisfying? What, honestly, is my motive for buying this car? When I have bought new cars in the past, how have I felt six months later – pleased, or disappointed in my

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own foolish impulsiveness? You will see that within these questions there lies the capacity for self-deception, and so prudence requires an ability to be really honest with myself so that I can see the world as it really is. I may well need a new car, but the decision will be a better one if I honestly acknowledge my own tendency to spend money to make me feel better, or to want to keep up with other people, or whatever. This is always significant, but increase the importance of the decision to 'should I accept this job?' or 'should I marry this person?' or 'should I take the country to war?' and the importance of prudence becomes even more apparent.

So, prudence requires me to be honest with myself. But this is not always easy. Sometimes I am so good at tricking myself that I am unsure of what is right. So prudence also requires me to be willing to seek and listen to advice. A prudent decision always requires an open mind, a willingness to listen to what other people say and the conclusion that, as a result of this, our initial inclination was wrong. A closed mind is an insuperable barrier to prudence. Inevitably we are open to self-deception and self-delusion, that is a part of fallen human nature, but without a commitment to objectivity in all circumstances, we will never be prudent.

If we want to be good people – and that also means if we want to be fulfilled people, we must also try to be prudent. That means, in any situation that requires a decision, honestly and thoroughly assessing the facts, listening to relevant advice, and making a judgement about what to do based on our pursuit of the ultimate good. Imprudence, whether that is a thoughtless plunging into action without proper consideration or irresolute failure to take any action at all after due consideration, in the long run is damaging to us, and to people around us. It always stems from some sort of attachment to sensual things – I will act in accordance with passions and desires rather than proper thought, or I will not act at all for fear of unpopularity, or of damaging my reputation, or whatever.

So it is time to take up prudence once again. She is not a dour and dreary advocate of excessive caution and paralyzing inactivity; she is based on truthfulness, self-knowledge, thoughtfulness, open-mindedness and, once a decision has been reached, courageous and even sacrificial action.

(Based on ideas from Josef Pieper, 'The Four Cardinal Virtues')