

## Homily for The Third Sunday of Lent (Year B) March 15<sup>th</sup> 2009

I would like to spend a few minutes today looking at the second of the cardinal virtues, justice. As I explained last week prudence is sometimes misunderstood to mean timidity or inaction, and so people sometimes react to it quite negatively. There is much more unanimity about justice. Pretty well everybody agrees that justice is a good thing – we would all like to think of ourselves as just people, and there are not many who would want to be proclaimed champions of injustice. This is hardly surprising: if I were to accept that injustice was a good thing, I would not be able to complain if people treated me in a way that was unjust, and nobody wants to be treated like that.

Having said that people are broadly in favour of the idea of justice, we have to try and tie down the meaning of the concept, and that is not so easy. Here is what The Catechism says:

*“Justice is the moral virtue that consists in the constant and firm will to give their due to God and neighbor... The just man, often mentioned in the Sacred Scriptures, is distinguished by habitual right thinking and the uprightness of his conduct toward his neighbor” CCC 1807*

Justice is the idea that everybody must be given what is due to them, and the just person is someone who sets about living life in such a way that in all circumstances he gives to everybody exactly what is due to them. That is quite a simple idea, and it is not peculiar to Christianity, you could find a very similar definition on the Greek philosopher Plato.

In a sense what I have talked about so far is the easy bit. The more difficult part is deciding exactly what is due to each person; what does justice demand that I give them, and what may, or perhaps in some circumstances should, I withhold? This is relatively easy when it comes to the relations between individuals, questions about how you and I coexist. If I employ you to come and spend a day digging my garden, and at the end of the day you give me a bill for £100, justice demands that I pay it. You have done something for me that has shifted the relationship between us. We are no longer equals, but I now owe you something. If, however, I look at the garden and see you have done nothing, but spent all day watching the birds or sleeping in the sun, that is different; you have provided me with nothing, so justice demands nothing of me. Similarly if, instead of your bill for £100 you gave me one for £1000, I might well say that I certainly owe you something, but not that much. Justice doesn't require me to pay that – in fact it may demand that I should not pay it, because by giving so much to you I may deprive myself of the ability to feed my family, say.

Similarly, there is a relatively simple question over what the state has a right to ask of me. The state cares for me: it educates me, cares for my health, protects me, ensures that I will have at least the minimum to survive. In return it can justly ask me to contribute to this in the way of reasonable taxes, that is to say taxes that are proportionate to my ability to pay and to its reasonable expenditure. The issue of justice becomes much more complex when we ask what we have the right to expect from the state, and indeed when the state is unable or unwilling to help us, as for example in the case of poorer countries, what we have the right to expect from the world.

Perhaps the easiest place to start is with the familiar idea that every single human being is made in the image and likeness of God. God is free and God is perfect, and so every human being must, by definition, be free to pursue the perfection which comes from a totally fulfilled life. There are some things which are widely regarded in most cultures as necessary to this pursuit of human fulfillment: life, which would include food, water, shelter and procreation; education, the quest for knowledge and understanding; relaxation and friendship with others; the cultivation of beauty; the practice of religious faith and so on. The precise list might be a bit fuzzy around the edges, open to discussion in some respects, but the principle is sound. These are aspects of human life that are essential if we are to live life in all its fullness. So, there are some things that every human being has the right to enjoy, simply by virtue of being human. These rights can never justly be taken away from people. The state may choose to add extra rights – the right to universal free healthcare, perhaps. What it can never do is to invent some new right for one person that attacks the fundamental human rights of another.

Everyone has the right to life; not only should the state refrain from killing them, but it should act to ensure they have what is needed to live: food, shelter, water, healthcare. Of course, you might reasonably say that we must work to provide these; I have to work to earn the money to pay for them. But the world is not so simple everywhere. Some people simply have no access to the kind of life where you work to provide for yourself and your family. We might well argue about the best way to overcome that. That is the field of politics. What we cannot do is to sit back and wash our hands of the whole issue, saying it is nothing to do with us. If there are children in our country who do not have access to decent education, or have no-one to care for them, to nurture them and to love them, that is not a matter of indifference. It is a grave injustice. If there are people in the world who have no food, and no chance of growing it; or who have to move from place to place to stay safe; or have to travel hundreds of miles for basic healthcare, that is not misfortune – they were unlucky and we were lucky over our place of birth, it is injustice.

You might well choose to say, why should we be the ones to help people far away who we have never met and have no obvious link to us. What do we owe them? Well, common humanity raises an obligation to ensure that all people have the basic necessities of life. Could I look a poor African woman in the eye and explain why I will not help her feed her child? If I could not do that face to face, why should the fact that we are hundreds of miles apart make any difference? Furthermore, justice is necessary to living well, but it is not sufficient. It would be a poor sort of Christian who insisted on the strictest demands of justice without any room for charity. “Justice without mercy is cruelty” (Thomas Aquinas).

In summary, justice requires me to give to each person what is their due (and, indeed, to give God his due as well, but that is another homily). Furthermore, the more I do to enable another human being to achieve fulfillment, or at least the chance to reach out for it, the more fulfilled my own life becomes, the more truly human I am, and therefore the more clearly I display the likeness of Christ.