

Homily for The Fifth Sunday of Lent Year B (2009)

Today we are going to consider the fourth and last of the cardinal virtues, the virtue of temperance. Frankly, it doesn't at first sound like a lot of fun. We probably have images in our minds of people loudly declaiming the evils of the demon drink, and insisting that alcohol must be rejected at all costs. The so-called temperance movement, which G K Chesterton dismissed as "an intemperate denunciation of temperate drinking" has not helped us, because it has misled us into thinking that temperance means total abstinence. This is emphatically not the classic meaning of the word, and it is most certainly not how the Church understands it. The Catechism defines it in this way:

"Temperance is the moral virtue that moderates the attraction of pleasures and provides balance in the use of created goods." [1809]

Temperance, then, is not about outright rejection. It is all about getting the balance right. There is only one object to which we may abandon ourselves totally, hopelessly and without reserve, and that is God; everything else is to be enjoyed, but with caution. Although classically it was used in particular with reference to abstinence, which deals with balance in what we eat and drink, and modesty and chastity, which are directed at balance in how we use our bodies and those of others, in fact it applies to every aspect of human life. If I drink heavily and without regard for my own wellbeing or that of those around me, that is clearly unbalanced and destructive; but if I become so obsessed with stamp collecting that it takes over my every waking moment, or if I become obsessed with my appearance so that I must spend every penny I have on dresses or suits or handbags or golf bags or whatever, that has the potential to be pretty destructive too.

Temperance begins from the principle that everything God has made is good [Aquinas]. So to reject all alcohol, or all dancing, or all singing is in fact intemperate. Having said that, there may be very good reasons for me abstaining from drink, or even dancing, on occasion, so long as I don't try and impose this on others. C S Lewis put it like this:

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"An individual Christian may see fit to give up all sorts of things for special reasons-marriage, or meat, or beer, or the cinema; but the moment he starts saying the things are bad in themselves, or looking down his nose at other people who do use them, he has taken the wrong turning." [Mere Christianity]

So, temperance is about balance. It tells us that eating food simply for the pleasure that it gives is destructive, in the same way that not eating out of an obsessive concern for appearance and looks is destructive. But it is more complex than that. If it were just a matter of balance it would be possible to imagine a person who never did anything to excess, but still lived a life that was hollow and sterile. This is because temperance is concerned with leading a balanced life with a particular purpose: we lead a balanced life so that we will be free agents, in control of our own lives. We lead balanced lives because we love ourselves - not an obsessive love of self that dominates my life, but I love myself so that I can be at my best to love and serve God. If I am to offer myself to God, I want to give him the very best offering there is, and that means I need to be balanced and free.

Perhaps I should talk a little more about freedom. There is one view of freedom that says the more choices there are open to a person, the more free they are. So I am free to eat as much as I want, whenever I want; I am free to drink as much as I want, whenever I want; I am free to take up and drop as many women as I want, whenever I want. I am free to seek pleasure wherever I can find it. On the surface this is appealing, and people who never look below the surface of life will probably settle for a life lived on this principle. But this is a pernicious and destructive caricature of freedom. If I never see a glass of wine without drinking it, or a chocolate cake without eating it, or a pretty woman without chatting her up, am I really free? I have not gained true freedom, but lost it. A free person looks at every choice that he is offered, and weighs up all the different possibilities before he acts. If my own pleasure has become my guiding principle, I am no longer a free man. If I am ever faced with a choice where the outcome is, in effect, inevitable: I always have a drink at 6pm; I always have a doughnut at 11am; I always buy a new pair of shoes each month; I always spend Friday night in the pub; I always eat more than I need to; I always stay up too late watching television; I always sleep in on a Sunday morning' if ever a choice ceases to be a choice but becomes inevitable, I have surrendered my freedom. I have lost that balance which temperance brings. I need to ask myself again, 'who is in charge of my life?' The virtuous person is one who is sufficiently in control of their

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life that they do not allow passions and pleasures to make their decisions for them, but is able to stop a moment and weigh up the options; it is someone who is sufficiently tranquil inside, confident in themselves and detached enough to look at the situation to see it as an outsider may, that they make a decision based on reality.

Temperance, like all the virtues, is about becoming more truly human, more fully alive, more perfectly myself. It is a powerful tool that protects us from our apparently instinctive urge to self-destruction. It is aimed at producing a kind of inner order, where no part of me has come to dominate the rest, but everything inside my soul is in its proper place so that I can achieve a kind of serenity and detachment. That should not make me entirely cold and dispassionate, so well-defended that nothing ever seems to matter to me. There is nothing wrong with passion, so long as it is properly directed, and does not come to dominate me so much that I cease to be free.

Sometimes, for example, it is good to be angry. If I see a grave injustice that is crying out to be remedied, that should make me angry just as Jesus was angry with the people who turned the Temple in Jerusalem into a trading place. My anger only begins to damage me if I cease to be in control of it, and cease to be able to judge when it is appropriate and when it is not.

Of course, in this season of Lent, we use one of the great tools at our disposal to develop temperance, we fast. Fasting helps us see what areas of our life are out of control. When we look at our lives and say "I could never give up that" we know that this is something that has deprived us of our freedom, and we can make a choice about what we will do about this. This last two weeks of Lent gives us a particular opportunity here, an opportunity to start again. If our Lent discipline has rather gone to pot, don't let's give up, let us say 'right, these next two weeks will see a new me'. Who will gain the most from the Easter feast, who will be most able to enter into the wonderful mystery of Christ's death and resurrection: someone who has taken control of their own life, is the master of their own actions, or someone who has surrendered control to forces outside themselves, someone for whom pleasure, and ease, and habit are in charge? Who will better understand the man walking to the cross? Who will find most joy beside the empty tomb?