SEVEN DEADLY
SINS
&
SEVEN LIVELY
VIRTUES

A LENT COURSE
FOR
CHURCHES TOGETHER
IN
NORTH CAMDEN
2014

by
Michael Loungo
The Revd Stephen Tucker
The Revd Claire Wilson
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MEETING PLACES & TIMES

Please contact the hosts if you intend to join their group

Emmanuel Church, Lyncroft Gardens NW6 1JU is holding a course at the church on Monday evenings at 8pm following a Eucharist at 7.30. (020 7435 1911)

St Andrew’s, Frognal Lane, is holding a course at 3pm on Wednesdays at the church. 020 7435 5725

St John’s is holding courses:

At 8.00pm on Mondays at 35 The Panoramic, 12 Pond Street NW3 2PS (020 7435 9204) Ted and Rachel Nugee

At 8.00pm on Tuesdays at 7 Heathgate NW11 7AR (020 8455 8628) Martin and Jane Bailey

At 8.00pm on Fridays at 21 Southward Lawn Road N6 5SD (020 8340 0836) Peter and Sheena Ginnings
INTRODUCTION

It is often said in Church circles today, that when the generations who were born from the 1980s onwards look at the Church, they are more likely to ask, ‘Does it work?’ than ‘Is it true?’ They seem to be more interested in finding values that are sustainable than truths that can be cogently argued. Of course such truth questions might come later, but initially it seems people want to see a way of life which will speak to their aspirations and help them tackle the greatest challenges of contemporary society. ‘What must we do?’ would seem to come before ‘What should we believe?’

This course seeks to approach these questions under what might be considered a rather old fashioned title. The language of sin and virtue is perhaps not heard so much in churches which occupy the centre ground in modern church life. The new liturgies in the Church of England in the second half of the last century considerably modified the number of references to sin which we find in the Book of Common Prayer, doing away with those prayers which were described as ‘a humble grumble.’ In theological colleges forty years ago those who taught ethics tended to be guided, not only by the Bible but by the moral philosophy which developed after the age of Enlightenment; for example, Kant’s maxim that we should act only on such principles which we can will to become universal laws, or Bentham’s principle that we should choose those actions which will bring about the greatest happiness of the greatest number. The Enlightenment project broadly speaking looked for rule based ethics.

We might think that Christians ought simply to adopt Bible based ethics and yet the Bible is not as simple a guide as that suggests. The moral content of the Bible is much richer and more varied than a simple set of rules. Besides explicit laws (the Old Testament codes of moral and religious practice) we find general guidelines for behaviour (eg Love your neighbour as yourself) paradigms (illustrative stories or parables) and a varied world of perspectives, patterns and priorities. And this huge variety of material, developed over many centuries, doesn’t always speak with one voice. So as the Christians of the first five centuries pondered Scripture in the context of
the philosophies of their day they evolved what might be described as a character based ethics. What that means will be illustrated by this course as we explore the traditional language of sin and virtue.

We have to acknowledge that there is here a lot of material, and wide ranging sets of questions. Whoever leads each group should perhaps find out first what has most interested members of the group to see which questions they should focus on. We do recommend, however, that you try to spend equal amounts of time on each sin or virtue!

COURSE PRAYERS

Eternal God, who art the light of the minds that know thee, the joy of the hearts that love thee, and the strength of the wills that serve thee; Grant us so to know thee that we may truly love thee, and so to love thee that we may fully serve thee, whom to serve is perfect freedom, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

We beseech Thee, O God, who art the very Truth, that what we know not of things we ought to know, Thou wilt teach us. That what we now know of Truth Thou wilt keep us therein. That what we are mistaken in through human weakness, Thou wilt correct in us. That in whatsoever truths we stumble, Thou wilt yet establish us. And from all things that are false or harmful, Thou wilt deliver us. Amen.

We beseech Thee O Lord, to enlighten our minds and to strengthen our wills, that we may know what we ought to do, and be enabled to do it through the grace of thy most Holy Spirit, and for the merits of thy Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Gracious and Holy Father, give us wisdom to perceive thee, diligence to seek thee, patience to wait for thee, eyes to behold thee, a heart to meditate upon thee, and a life to proclaim thee, through the power of the Spirit of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen
SIN AND VIRTUE – DEFINITIONS

SIN: In the Old Testament all the words used for expressing the concept of sin imply a deviation from a prescribed norm – though perhaps the most interesting word used can mean ‘missing the mark’. Sometimes the emphasis is on a kind of irrational rebellion, sometimes on the act itself or the situation which results from the act but all of them suggest something which is fundamentally out of order.

In the New Testament the Greek word used for sin can mean failure or a mistake, intentional wrong doing, or guilty action. In the letters of St Paul we find lists of sins, many of which occur in similar lists made by Greek thinkers. Those same thinkers saw human beings as subject to passions like fear, grief, craving and pleasure. A passion is an agitation of the soul which goes against reason and nature - what we might think of as a compulsion, or an instinct which makes us vulnerable to unwise action. Out of such passions, compulsions or emotional disorders emerge sins which go against our proper nature. It is important to grasp that this puts sin not so much in the category of an offence against a set of rules, but as that which disrupts a quest for that wisdom which enables us to live a good life in a well ordered community. In this way knowledge of self becomes an important remedy against sin.

So as this way of thinking was taken up by the early Church, it became important not only to be able to identify different sins but also to understand how and why we commit them. This, what we might call a psychological approach, links into that moment in the gospel where Jesus refers to the ‘evil thoughts’ (dialogismoi) which come from the human heart. (Mark 7:21) We might also remember the verse in the Magnificat which reads ‘He has scattered the proud in the imagination (dianoia) of their hearts.’ In the epistle of James (1:14-15) we find a description of the process which leads to sin and spiritual death. A desire for evil is entertained in the mind, and then made actual.
This ‘psychological’ approach to sin is developed most significantly in the writings that emerge from the ascetic movements of the 4th and 5th centuries when the spiritual Fathers and Mothers of the Desert struggled with the ways in which we can ‘die to sin and live unto righteousness’. In this context a learned monk named Evagrius of Ponticus identified eight ‘thoughts’ (logismoi) (what Andrew Louth has renamed as ‘eight cracks in the heart.’) Evagrius’ eight thoughts are gluttony, lust, avarice, anger, vainglory, pride, sadness and sloth.

When these ideas transferred to the West they eventually became our ‘seven deadly sins’. In the West the emphasis began to be placed on the actions themselves rather than the thoughts which gave rise to them. This list of seven sins retains anger, avarice (covetousness), gluttony and lust, adds envy and conflates pride with vainglory, and sloth with sadness. Representations of these sins can often be found in what survives of medieval church wall paintings. Perhaps the greatest work of western literature describing such sins is the Inferno from Dante’s Divine Comedy.

**VIRTUE:** As has already been noted in our exploration of sin, being is as important as doing. What sort of person we are is the basis on which we do what we do. Human action tends to be consistent and is rooted in our basic character traits. Thus the medieval philosopher, Thomas Aquinas, describes a virtue as ‘a habit’ the development of which enables us to work well and to do good. A habit in this context means learning how to do something by practice. A just man becomes so by practicing to act justly, just as a pianist becomes what he is by practice. Virtue then is a trait of character or a characteristic habit which we learn by practice. This way of thinking originates from the work of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. To act virtuously is to act in accordance with reason, understood as practical wisdom. The Roman thinker, Cicero, identified the four main virtues as prudence, justice, courage and temperance.

The Greek word for virtue (arête) means any kind of excellence, whether of a fork, a dog or a human being. So we have to ask what kind of characteristics can make a fork, a dog or a human being the best they can be? What do they have it in their nature to achieve?
There is no equivalent word to virtue in Hebrew. Nevertheless in the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament we do find distinctive ideals of character and exemplary types of the wise person as opposed to the fool. (cf Wisdom 8:7) The prophetic literature also lays an emphasis on the law becoming written on the heart; interior disposition is vital for outward observance of the law. In the New Testament we do not find much moral theory but we do find exemplary stories of good behaviour (the Good Samaritan) lists of dispositions which are blessed (the Beatitudes) and lists of virtues such as love, joy, patience, peace, generosity, gentleness, self control etc (eg Galatians 5:22ff). Paul, however, also identifies faith, hope and love as the guiding ideals of Christian life. (1 Cor. 13: 13) And these three spiritual virtues were subsequently added to the four cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude. Put together these virtues could enable us to lead the kind of life God intends for us, were it not for the sins by which our natures are so disordered that we cannot lead virtuous lives unless helped by grace within the community of the Church.

CONCLUSION

The overarching theological belief on which this discussion has been based is a vision of what human beings are for, the purpose and end to which their lives are directed. This end or purpose can be described in a variety of ways; for the Greeks the end in view was true happiness; for Christians it might be said to be the happiness of life in the Kingdom of God, whether we think of this in terms of transfigured humanity or our vision of God’s glory. Sin is what impedes the achievement of that goal. This can be seen as misdirected effort, a disorder of the passions, a lack of balance in outlook (eg courage which becomes rashness) or a deliberate opposition to the good. Sin is opposed by the grace of God working in us through the sacraments, by the example of goodness in the life of Jesus and the saints, by self awareness and by the development of the habits of virtuous living. So we are left with the challenge to think out what sort of communities we want to be which will shape and be shaped by the sort of human beings we want to be. And as we work on this so we will be preparing ourselves beforehand to face the moral and social crises which may afflict us.
**The deadly sins:** anger, avarice (covetousness), gluttony, lust, envy, pride, and sloth (this is perhaps the most difficult to define as it goes further than laziness, and includes boredom, lack of attention and a dwelling on slights and failures).

**The lively virtues:** prudence, justice, temperance, fortitude, faith, hope and love.

**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1) Which aspects of what you have read do you find most puzzling or most helpful?
2) Do you find this account of sin and virtue convincing?
3) Do you think the lists of sins and virtues a good starting point for examining one's life?
4) What was the sin of Adam and Eve? Was it gluttony, curiosity, lack of faithfulness or pride?
5) Which sins do you see most often in contemporary society?
6) Which virtue(s) do you think would be particularly needed by: a parent bringing up a child, the owner of a business, a church leader, a teacher, a police officer, a cabinet minister.
7) In the past, Christian teachers have asked which is the fundamental sin or virtue from which all the rest flow. What do you think?
8) Virtue is directed to the kind of life God intends for us – what are the essentials of such a life?
WEEK TWO

FAITH, HOPE AND LOVE

The theological or spiritual virtues don’t sound to us much like virtues. On the surface they don’t quite look like ways of being good. In our final session we shall look at what are called the four moral or cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude. The word ‘cardinal’ is related to a word for hinge. So these four virtues are the virtues on which the door of a virtuous life is hung. The door opens on our relationship with our fellow human beings and with the circumstances of our lives. The three theological or spiritual virtues open on to God and are of course derived from the final sentence of 1 Corinthians 13.

For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

FAITH

Faith is a word we find hard to pin down. It works two ways. We can talk of ‘the faith’ as in ‘keeping the faith’, which refers to the totality of what Christians believe, as in the Creeds. Or we can talk about ‘having faith in’ which means trusting in someone or something. The former is more akin to knowledge, the latter to courageous commitment. In Christianity the two meanings can be yoked together as in phrases like ‘faith seeking understanding’. Faith can also be described as ‘the conviction of things not seen’ (Hebrews 11.1) – a difficult phrase in a world which looks for proof as defined scientifically – something which can be tested by sense and reason. And yet of course we live by faith most of the time – in that we don’t individually test all the things we take to be true on the authority of others. And some of the most important experiences of our lives feel diminished by talking about them purely scientifically as for example loving relationships or our reaction to music, art or literature.

A religious faith maintains that there is more to the world than our senses can tell us. We look for a bigger picture. And this engagement with what is ultimately beyond our knowing enables us to live humbly in a way that
is faithful to the deep meaning of things – we see only through a glass darkly. In this way faith sets out with the intention of being taught rather than trying to prove. Faith is an acknowledgement that we are already always a part of things and that it can be misguided, even dangerous, to try to construct a life in which we stand apart, testing, proving, assessing, controlling things. Christian faith starts from a position which takes the world as a gift, that it is created, that there is a reason why there is anything rather than nothing. Then faith guides us to take our places together in this world as called to be explorers, guardians, sub-creators, as those who seek to discover and articulate meaning, purpose, and value, and who care for one another and for our world. As we come to understand our history in this world faith also forces us to acknowledge the failure, wrong doing and tragedy which always seems to accompany our engagement with the world. And so faith adds a need for salvation to this picture of ourselves in our world. And whatever else we mean by salvation, we start from the point of acknowledging that something needs to be shown to us and done for us which we cannot discover or do for ourselves.

Now I could not have written this last paragraph without having the revelatory history and story of Scripture to guide me. Faith then is what we need if we are to understand our place in the world, who we are and what we are for. Without faith we have nothing on which to base a reason for being virtuous.

QUESTIONS

1) Do you agree that without faith in a bigger picture we have nothing on which to base a reason for being virtuous?
2) Do we live with an expectation of being taught by God?
3) How might the ineffability of God make us humble in our approach to the world?
4) How might we try to ensure that our faith is not misguided?
HOPE

In my account of faith I suggested that it taught us who we are and what we are for, but my account left out a description of the latter. Hope like faith is an essential condition of human life. Just as we accept that things are as we have been told without first proving them, so we act in the hope that our intentions will be fulfilled. Hope we might almost say is a forward looking faith. And just as we saw that faith can refer both to content and attitude so also hope can be hope for certain specific outcomes as well as being a more general outlook on life. Christians talk about the latter as a hope for things that are not seen; this may often be a kind of hope against hope as when we say, ‘It was only hope which kept me going.’ But Christians also talk about hope in terms of a goal towards which human beings are directed, a way of life for which we are made.

Whereas in the past the Church has talked more of the hope of heaven – a fulfilment elsewhere - more recently New Testament critics have directed us to Jesus’ understanding of the Kingdom as a transformation by God of our worldly circumstances – a redemption rather than an ultimate destruction of creation, in which God’s will is to be done on earth as in heaven. Jesus’ teaching pointed both to actions which prepare for the coming of the kingdom and to images of the kingdom. When hope is understood in this way Christians will dedicate themselves to political and social action for justice, reconciliation and the relief of poverty, as a way of preparing for and making known the kingdom as the goal of human life. Such action, however, cannot be divorced from a spirituality which is based on a longing for a closer relationship with God – a hope for something more than the present circumstances of this world seem to provide. As St Augustine put it; ‘You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.’ We long for union with God, which will be our eternal happiness. One of the key Biblical images of the heavenly life is musical. And pondering that image we might find as good an understanding of what we might hope for as any. It is an image of an assembly of individuals each with their own part to play but dependent on and listening to every other part performing what God has written for God to listen to!
QUESTIONS

1) What do we hope for?
2) How are our hopes affected by our faith?
3) What is the difference between hope and optimism?
4) How does Christian hope differ from the hopes of those with no faith?

LOVE

Love, says Aquinas, is the mother and the root of all the virtues. Of these three spiritual virtues, love is the one that has the greatest power to get under our skins, to disturb, puzzle, frustrate, fulfil or disappoint us. We are probably familiar with the analysis derived from the classical Greek vocabulary which acknowledges different types of love: erotic love, friendship love, family affection, and disinterested or unconditional loving kindness. This last, *agape*, is the word used by Paul in 1 Corinthians 13. There, as throughout the New Testament, the virtue of love means that we should will the good of our neighbour whoever he or she may be and truly seek what is best for them. Our understanding of such love is, however, often confused by feeling and emotion; does *agape* mean that we can love people without liking them or while actually disliking them? Or in relation to the words of Jesus, how can we love our enemies? At a very different level we are also inclined to wonder how we can be said to love God. We cannot will what is best for God, so loving God must involve a different kind of love (unless willing the best for our neighbour is also an expression of love for the God who created our neighbour). The use of the Song of Songs in the Middle Ages points to the possibility of erotic love being used as an image of the mystical love of God. But writers like Aquinas could also use the idea of friendship love in talking about God.

Such authors also believed that all the other virtues depend in some way on love to find their proper expression. Courage, prudence, temperance and justice are only properly directed if they are shaped by love. Courage can be displayed by cruel men, justice can be applied harshly, temperance can seem to be a denial of all pleasure, prudence can seem calculating, unless each of them is quickened by love.
QUESTIONS

1) How might our relationship with God be described as friendship and in what way might that be like human friendship?

2) What are the differences between the love shown by Christians and by people without faith?

3) If we are trying to love Jesus in our neighbour (see Matthew 25:31-46) are we in some way not ‘seeing’ or really caring for our neighbour?

4) Should victims of abuse or violence have charity for their victimisers and if so how might that be achieved?

5) Can a God of love also be a God of judgement?

6) Why is love greater than faith and hope?
WEEK THREE

PRIDE, ENVY, ANGER

PRIDE

In his book, ‘Seven to flee, Seven to follow’, Richard Holloway describes pride as the root sin, the basic disposition behind every wrong or misdirected action.

‘There is in all of us…a powerful need to give ourselves totally to some person, cause or enterprise. Pride is the vain effort to make ourselves the goal and destination of our lives’ longing, so all this energy…gets turned in on ourselves and we become the object of our own adoration, Pride is to see ourselves as the centre of all significance and value.’

In other words Pride induces us ‘to deny that God is (our) helper and to consider that we are the cause of all our virtuous actions.’ (Evagrius) Many early Christian thinkers saw Pride as the root of all other sin, seeing it also as the cause of the Fall. The self replaces God at the heart of our lives, whereas ‘the human soul is destined to be the mirror in which God shines.’ (Gregory of Nyssa) Pride therefore denies the true nature of the soul.

‘Pride also lies at the root of all human conflict. It is pride that fuels all those interminable hostilities which disfigure human history, and it is pride that inhibits reconciliation…long after the events that occasioned the conflict have receded into the past.’ (Holloway)

Rebellion against God, which can be seen as the consequence of pride, is a key theme in the Old Testament – the people of Israel are often described as ‘stiff necked’. Pride is linked to arrogance and haughtiness – a rejection of relationship with other people as well as with God. In the Psalms the proud are said to believe that God does not see their actions or even that there is no God. (Ps 10:4) Nevertheless, it is pride which eventually brings about the downfall of the wicked. In the Magnificat it is the proud whom God scatters in the imagination of their hearts.

And yet by contrast Pride was seen as a virtue in the Hellenistic world. The great and powerful were expected to be proud. The ideal of a humble leader was to them a contradiction in terms.
For the Desert Fathers the remedy to Pride was seen as compunction - a pricking of the heart’s inflated self conceit, which resulted in tears and a greater humility, a turning away from self towards God and neighbour. Humour can also play its part in the desert in defeating pride. It was said that the demons tempting you to rely on your own abilities, hated to be laughed at.

The Rule of St Benedict also sought to root out attitudes of self sufficiency and to create a sense of mutual dependency within the community. It taught the monks to resist a desire to climb upwards and instead to step downward in humility. Stepping down is the way up, or as Jesus put it, ‘The first shall be last and the last first.’

For Aquinas, Pride is an overstepping of boundaries, a desire to be more than we really are. This Pride can vary according to what kind of person I am. But in all of us pride is, ‘A craving for superiority which is immoderate because it is not in accord with right reason.’

**QUESTIONS**

1) To what extent is it important and legitimate for us to have a sense of our own worth and significance?

2) Is there such a thing as a proper pride in our achievements or in who we are (eg Black Pride or Gay Pride)

3) Or do we agree that ‘all the forms of pride: private, racial, group and national, are vain efforts to place the part above the whole’?

4) Where do we see Pride most at work in contemporary Britain?

5) Is Holloway right when he says that ‘a sense of humour about ourselves is the main antidote to personal pride’?

6) Which are the virtues whose practice is most likely to overcome pride?

**ENVY**

We should begin by distinguishing between envy and jealousy. The jealous person wants something she does not have, or guards against something that is perceived as threatened eg a jealous love. The envious person does not want something but simply delights in the misfortune of another and is depressed by their good fortune. If you have good grades you
do not want someone else to have them. You want whatever is good in your life to elevate you above others.

Holloway sees envy as an entirely negative sin. ‘The envious woman regrets her neighbour’s good: she grieves secretly over her neighbour’s luck.’ Envy, he argues, is a ‘sin among equals.’ Those who are not scientists are unlikely to feel envious of someone who has won the Nobel prize for science; a priest, however, may well envy a clerical colleague who is promoted on the grounds of his preaching skills, pastoral effectiveness or organisational abilities. We are tempted to chip away at the reputation of people we envy because their success makes us feel dejected.

Envy can be the cause of both public and private strife, generating hatred and gossip, and scorn. How can we protect ourselves from all this? ‘At the bottom of both covetousness and envy is the same driving force: an overwhelming sense of inadequacy and a deep longing to be accepted and valued.’ Holloway tells us:

‘In addition to learning to relax in the knowledge that we are loved and accepted by God, we must capture something of the generosity of God by rejoicing in the gifts of others. And that implies that one way of dealing with an envious person is to praise him or her and not draw attention to whatever it is that stirs their envy.’

QUESTIONS

1) If envy is entirely unproductive, what about ambition: should this also be discouraged?
2) Are any of us willing to give examples from our own lives of the effects envy may have had on us?
3) How do we set about acquiring the recommended confidence which springs from believing that God loves and accepts us unconditionally?
4) What is our response when an atheist tells us that he or she envies the security our faith appears to give us?
5) What is it about our society which nourishes people’s craving for admiration?
6) How much envy might one encounter at the school gate?
ANGER

Anger, Holloway suggests, is essentially part of a built-in self-protective response to danger, the roots of which lie back in our primitive past. Today we still guard ourselves as carefully as cavemen. Outside events disturb or threaten us, resulting in three main manifestations of anger:

IMPATIENCE  Something happens, or fails to happen, which interferes with our private arrangements. This can accelerate into

RETAILATION  We lash out verbally or physically. By this point we are on our way to

TOTAL ATTACK  We rant and rave, and the anger-instinct moves beyond our control.

The old image of ‘boiling’ with anger is appropriate. Our inner world bubbles over with uncontrolled thoughts and emotions. One consequence of our anger can be the sounding off against government, or the church, or management – such generalisations prevent us from looking at the real cause of our feelings.

What can be done about this? A piece of Biblical advice is found in Psalm 4: 4 ‘When you are angry (this word is variously translated) do not sin: ponder it on your beds and be silent.’ In other words the sense of boiling over can only be countered by silence and reflection. Holloway believes we must try to move outside our little fortress and start living towards other people. The name for this kind of behaviour, he says, is love: the systematic willing of the other person’s good, allied to a refusal to enter the malign realm of brooding resentment.

QUESTIONS

1) Is there a place for righteous or prophetic anger?
2) Can we “will” ourselves to move outside our self-protective fortress?
3) What do we make of the widely-held view that depression is ‘anger directed inwards’?
4) Should we accept that feeling angry with God is an inevitable human response to misfortune?

5) What sort of connection might there be between the three sins we are considering this week?
WEEK 4
COVETOUSNESS, LUST, GLUTTONY, SLOTH

COVETOUSNESS (also know as avarice)

Avarice is the sin described in the New Testament as love of money and the accumulation of possessions. ‘Love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.’ (1 Tim. 6:9-10) Avarice reflects an anxious desire for comfort and security. Covetousness is the extension of that love to a greedy desire for what rightly belongs to someone else as in the tenth commandment. ‘You shall not covet your neighbour’s house…wife…slave… ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.’ (Exodus 20:17) In some ways therefore it is related to jealousy.

In the Old Testament riches are not condemned as such, in fact they are seen as a reward from God, the legitimate outcome of remaining true to God (eg Solomon and Job). It is not inappropriate to pray for prosperity even though it is recognised that it can bring moral danger and its acquisition can be achieved unjustly. The same emotions are involved both in covetousness and avarice – a greedy brooding on what one does not have.

The New Testament is much more explicit in its recognition of the sins of avarice and covetousness. Money is seen as a positive hindrance to salvation. ‘It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter the kingdom of God.’ (Matthew 19:23-24) See also the parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:13-21). The idea that you can serve God and the acquisition of wealth at the same time is deemed impossible. (See the fate of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1-5) The only treasure worth storing is in heaven. Both the Sermon on the Mount and the first epistle of Timothy emphasise making do with what is enough to live on – because we can take nothing out of the world. Money, if you have it, should be used as much for the benefit of your neighbour as yourself. Storing it up is the equivalent of burying it, which treats it as a dead thing, rather than something to be used for the welfare of all. (See the puzzling parable in Luke 19:11-24)
For the early Church the major consequence of avarice was seen to be social, hence for example the banning of usury or charging interest on a loan. Avarice could lead to covetousness, strife, hatred, gossip and envy.

Aquinas as usual gives a balanced perspective. The desire for material goods is not in itself sinful; the problem arises when the desire becomes excessive, which is both a sign of spiritual disturbance and a sin against justice. ‘It is impossible for one man to enjoy extreme wealth without someone else suffering extreme want, since the resources of the world cannot be possessed by many at one time.’ Amassing great wealth is simply a sin against one’s neighbour and especially against the poor.

Temptations to avarice arise in part from anxiety and insecurity due to our social conditions and our fear of the future, and partly from competitive greed. They also arise out of the fact that we live in a society where advertising, magazines, and television make us more aware than ever before of products we didn’t know we wanted and life styles we are encouraged to aspire to. Ironically even parts of the church now preach a prosperity gospel where wealth is seen as a sign of God’s approval. And it is not unknown even for Mayors of London to justify greed as a stimulus to economic growth.

QUESTIONS

1) How would we differentiate avarice from prudent planning and investment for the future?
2) What do we want money for?
3) Is the achievement of great wealth a sin as Aquinas maintains?
4) How would we justify usury when the Bible seems so against it – (especially as there are other moral laws much less often referred to in Scripture which the Church does retain)?
5) How might we spiritually guard ourselves against avarice?

LUST

Of all the seven deadly sins lust is the one which most excites modern interest and often ridicule because many parts of the modern world have undergone a revolution in sexual mores and the representation of sexuality. It
is perhaps in this area that Islam is most critical of the modern secular age – and what they would see as in many places a Christian compromise with that age. It could be easy to portray modernity as a return to the worst excesses of the Roman Empire as portrayed in films like the Satyricon (Fellini 1969) and Caligula (Tinto Brass 1979).

The main reason why the Old Testament condemns lust is because it distracts us from the real purpose of sex which is the continuation of the family. Sexual behaviour is intended to produce children, any other expression of it is sinful or wasteful. Of course in the Old Testament men and women are treated differently. Loose women are regarded more strictly than loose men. Women’s lives are prescribed by their fathers and husbands. Women are seen as a source of temptation for men. Israel is seen as God’s bride who frequently behaves unfaithfully. In the New Testament the main theme in this regard is abstinence; celibacy is encouraged by Paul as a way of preparing for the coming of the kingdom. Fornication, adultery and licentiousness are seen by Jesus as evil thoughts in the human heart (Mark 7:21-22). He also sees the adulterous thought as being equal to the deed (Mat. 5:28). Lust is a fantasy before it leads to action.

In the Hellenistic world lust was a painful reminder that reason and contemplation were always vulnerable to passion. Such passions fragmented the self and compromised its integrity. Though the language of early monasticism can seem to us over preoccupied with sex, the monks were on the whole straightforward in their acknowledgement of the dangers of shame and prurience. If a brother seemed overcome with sexual guilt his spiritual father would remind him that such thoughts were not uncommon, that he too suffered from them. And brothers who showed too much interest in the supposed failings of their neighbours were severely reprimanded.

In the Western tradition of Cassian, Augustine and Gregory we find a much stronger sense that human beings are helpless in the face of sexual temptation; sexual enjoyment is always sinful and we are always vulnerable to desire. The Latin word sometimes used for lust is luxuria implying something out of place, unbalanced or debauched. So lust can be seen as
giving rise to other sins: lack of consideration, inconstancy and rashness, obsession with the present and despair of the future.

Of course what seems to be missing from all this is a proper sense of the joys of marriage, mental, spiritual, and physical. Aquinas moves in this direction to some extent in that he sees sex in marriage as good because it brings about the continuance of the human race, and he does not see sex as deflecting the soul from virtue. ‘The abundance of pleasure in a well ordered sex act is not inimical to right reason,’ (!) Of course he still judges the sexual act by its purpose and cannot see it as having any value other than procreation, not for example as building up affection, mutual trust and self giving.

QUESTIONS

1) Has the aftermath of Romanticism led us to expect too much of sexual relations?
2) Is our society over sexualised in what we are shown on television, film and advertising; is the popular press excessively prurient?
3) Is there a contradiction in our concern to protect children from adult sexuality while surrounding them with the images referred to above?
4) Are Christians more likely to tell troubled young people to ‘befriend their desires’ rather than help them with their fears that such desires may ruin their lives?
5) How might modern Christians develop a balanced sexual ethic recognizing the dangers of lust but affirming physical love?

GLUTTONY

Whereas lust is a perversion of the human need to procreate, gluttony is a perversion of our need to keep ourselves alive. Nowadays large numbers of people still suffer from malnutrition, while others increasingly consume excessive amounts of food for social and psychological reasons which we are still seeking to explain and control. Ironically a Greek word for gluttony can mean ‘madness of the stomach’.
In the ancient societies of the Bible, anxiety about food was more prevalent than over indulgence. The promises of God often involves imagery of food: the manna in the wilderness, the land of milk and honey, Isaiah’s vision of the divine invitation to feast (ch.55). And then there is the frequency and significance of meals in the ministry and parables of Jesus, as well as the miraculous feedings. The Lord’s prayer prays for daily bread while at the same time Jesus teaches us not to be anxious about what we shall eat or drink. (Matt. 6:25) A meal lies at the heart of Christian worship. And yet fasting played its part in Jesus’ life and in the life that his disciples were taught to lead, though not while Jesus was with them. (Mark 2:18-20)

Paul is the first to lay any emphasis on the sin of gluttony, writing of those ‘whose God is their belly’ (Phil.3:19) Temperance was to be a virtue for Christians as it was elsewhere in the Ancient world. Faithfulness involves controlling the compulsions, drives and appetites of the human condition. Such things gain control over us unless we can become aware of what gives them their power.

In the case of gluttony it could be seen by early Christian teachers as a form of hypochondria, an anxiety about not having enough – nowadays we might think that food becomes a substitute for anxieties about other forms of lack in our lives.

On the one hand eating and drinking together builds community. On the other hand overeating was seen as the cause of many faults – slobbsishness, lust, vulgarity, talking too much, the pursuit of pleasure for its own sake, and the dulling of the moral senses. Aquinas quotes a well know verse to the effect that you are a glutton if you eat ‘Hastily, sumptuously, daintily, too much or greedily.’ So we should avoid eating when we are not hungry, spending too much on food, and eating greedily, fussily or more than we need. Gluttony is perhaps both a sin against the self (as a disorder of appetite) and others – in that it makes a mock of those who have nothing.
QUESTIONS

1) What evidence is there for gluttony in our society and even in our own lives?
2) In what way might we defend the pleasure we can derive from food and drink?
3) How may we explain the proliferation of TV programmes about food, alongside programmes about dieting and exercise, the cult of the fit body, and the prevalence of obesity?
4) Does the need to eat unnecessarily almost always reflect an inner sense of emotional or spiritual emptiness and how might this be cured?

SLOTH

Sloth is now a word which is more likely to remind us of an animal than a deadly sin. Sloth in the Bible is usually associated with laziness. Paul is especially critical of ‘those living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. He thought those unwilling to work should not be fed. (2 Thessalonians 3: 7-11)

A deeper understanding of this condition is found in the Desert Fathers who used the word *acedia* which came into English as *accidie* which the OED describes as a form of mental prostration. Sloth implies extreme laziness but a better idea of this sin is a form of boredom or listlessness which attacks the energy, purpose and interest we take in our work, surroundings or relationships. It might therefore be seen as a form of depression except that today we would never see such a state as sinful. The monks also experienced it as a longing for distraction, a need to change their circumstances, an inclination to criticise their fellow monks. They called it ‘the noonday demon’ because they felt it most heavily at that time of day. The demon attacked their whole way of life, and their commitment to it. It made them frustrated, restless, open to other sins, and careless of self.

The remedies provided by the spiritual guides in the desert involved laughing at one self or at the demon; perseverance in a daily routine, keeping to rhythm and structure. Discomfort and inner conflict are inevitable for those
who have set themselves a spiritual goal. It is all too easy to expect too much too soon, and to be disappointed when it doesn’t happen. The monk is to imagine a second self, offering support and encouragement. (cf Psalm 42:11) This second self is the part of you which still wants to serve God and which has a grip on real life and doesn’t seek perfection prematurely.

Aquinas connects sloth to a kind of sadness arising from a failure to rest in God or trust God’s goodness. It is a lack of joy in God and a loss of charity – love either for God or neighbour.

Today we need to distinguish all this from depression as an illness, even though much of what the ancients say reminds us of many of the symptoms of depression, while much of what they see as a remedy also makes sense in relation to depressive illness.

From a contemporary perspective the sinful elements of accedie relate to the common assumption that the spiritual life ought to be easy and that results are to be expected quickly. They might also be seen in frantic approaches to free time, the quest for ever new experiences and distractions, and an unwillingness to live within limits. Other symptoms might include taking on too much, flitting from task to task, not finishing things, frustration with the daily routine, inability to meet deadlines, micro managing the work of others, unnecessary shopping.

In all these cases most of the remedies provided by the Desert Fathers and Mothers still apply.

QUESTIONS

1) How would you distinguish between depression as an illness and sloth as a sin?
2) How would you help someone who complained of the symptoms described in the penultimate paragraph?
WEEK 5

PRUDENCE, JUSTICE, TEMPERANCE AND FORTITUDE

If we take the ancient Greek notion that virtue means excellence of any kind and wrap it together with the contemplation of the purpose and end to which our lives are directed, we might end up with a practical definition of virtue as the act of living up to one’s full potential. But we are still left with the question of what this means in our day-to-day lives and how we go about developing the habits of virtuous living.

In our final week we will explore the cardinal (hinge) virtues and how they might relate to fulfilling our potential.

PRUDENCE

Following Aristotle, St. Thomas Aquinas wrote that Prudence is ‘right reason in action.’ The Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us that Prudence is not to be confused with timidity or fear; rather, it helps us better to discern the right action by looking where we are going and where we have come from.

Perhaps we can all draw on an experience of ‘buyer’s remorse’. When in our lives have our passionate desires caused us to overlook the critical implications of a decision? We see the perfect house, but ignore the realities of increased upkeep and maintenance, or the impact of the longer commute. Prior to the decision, we see everything that is right, we see what we want to see, and imagine we can make all of the rest work. Afterwards, we live with the realities of the decision and often wonder why we had been so blind to the comprehensive impact of our choices. How often do we look back on our sinful or mistaken actions and find they are rooted in our failure to consider what were the full implications of our actions?

St. Thomas Aquinas tells us, ‘The prudent man considers things afar off, insofar as they tend to be a help or a hindrance to that which has to be done at the present time. Hence it is clear that those things which prudence considers stand in relation to the end.’
A prudent person sees the totality of the situation with clarity, establishes what are the objectives, considers the consequences, and takes action. So how do we, here and now, become more prudent? How do we avoid the ‘buyer’s remorse’ in our spiritual lives?

We might first look at our own past experiences. Job 12:12 tells us, “In the ancient is wisdom, and in length of days prudence.” A prudent person draws on the wisdom inherent in a life lived. Reflection on what we have done or have avoided in the past will help alert us to the causes of our sinfulness and help prevent us from making the same mistakes twice.

St. Thomas Aquinas, again citing Aristotle, notes “a prudent man takes good counsel”. And so in our pursuit of prudence, we might also seek to be open-minded and receptive to the counsel of others. Indeed, older and more experienced individuals often possess knowledge and lessons we can draw on to avoid sinfulness in our own lives.

Aquinas also reminds us that prudence is not achieved simply through a cognitive exercise, but rather through action. He tells us, “The worth of prudence consists not in thought merely, but in its application to action, which is the end of the practical reason.” In other words, the value of prudence achieved is manifested most in our actions, by acting in a timely manner after due and thorough reflection.

QUESTIONS

1) Where in our lives do we find prudence or the lack of it?
2) How might we approach decisions with the proper balance between rushing in and hesitating too much?
3) How might we improve our ability to learn from the past as individuals and as a society?
4) How would we describe a prudent person of our acquaintance – who is the most prudent public figure we know of?
JUSTICE

Prudence is a virtue that largely concerns us as individuals. Justice governs our relationships with others.

So what does justice look like? We might all agree that justice is a good thing, something everyone should want, particularly for ourselves as individuals. To each person their due, to each person what he or she has earned and deserves. We might also agree that injustice is a bad thing, and that we detest being treated unfairly. But perhaps those universal views of justice and injustice are only part of what makes a just individual.

Perhaps because of self-interest we think less about what we owe others. This too is a component of justice as a virtue. What do I owe my customer beyond the specific terms of the contract? What do I owe my family, friends and colleagues? These and other such questions take us to the heart of the idea that justice is about our relationships with others, both them to us and us to them.

We are also faced with the question of who are the ‘others’ with whom we are to have just relationships? (cf the Good Samaritan in Luke 10: 25-37) Certainly we can all explore our responsibilities in life, to our family, employer, friends, community, church and school. Justice also is relevant in our relationship with God.

Just over two years ago, changes were made to the liturgical text used in Catholic Mass in the English-speaking world. To align more closely with the original Latin text, the congregation’s response to the celebrant’s prayer to give thanks to the Lord our God was changed from ‘It is right to give him thanks and praise,’ to ‘It is right and just’. This significant change serves the practical purpose of reconciling previously divergent translations, but also focuses us on the importance of justice toward God, the most important ‘other’ in the universe. And so the will to give neighbor AND God their due is the substance of justice as a virtue.
QUESTIONS

1) How do we go about giving God his due?
2) What impairs our ability to treat others with justice?
3) What examples of justice does our society need us to concentrate on?
4) How is the personal virtue of justice related to the broader concept of social justice?

TEMPERANCE

In his notable work on the virtues, Josef Pieper begins a discussion on temperance with an important question: ‘What have the word ‘temperance’ and ‘moderation’ come to mean in today’s parlance?’ This question is as relevant to our reflections on temperance today as it was to Pieper nearly fifty years ago. Moderation often conjures up negative connotations of curtailment, limitation, or suppression. While moderation is a part of temperance, we risk taking too superficial a view by seeing only the restrictive nature of the virtue.

Certainly the moderation of our desires is necessary to avoid inordinate indulgences. Mark’s gospel reminds us that, ‘the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.’ We see daily examples of gluttony, lust, and drunkenness, which highlight how natural desires, when not moderated, can spiral into excess. Abstinence is often cited as a way to combat the risk of excessive indulgences, even total abstinence in the case of alcohol, drug and sexual addictions. So is abstinence the key to temperance?

In his writings, Thomas Merton revealed many of the excesses that characterized his early life before he began his life as a Trappist Monk, including his time as a university student in New York City. ‘Three or four nights a week my fraternity brothers and I would go flying down in the black and roaring subway to 52nd street, where we would crawl around the tiny, noisy and expensive nightclubs that had flowered on the sites of the old speakeasies in the cellars of those dirty brownstone houses.’ Recalling the ‘hangovers’ from such nights he writes, ‘The thing that depressed me the
most of all was the shame and despair that invaded my whole nature when the sun came up...."

But who would describe Merton as a constrained or restricted individual? Quite the contrary, as a monk, Merton became extraordinarily prolific, producing over sixty volumes in his lifetime, including his autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain*, often cited as one of the most important pieces of 20th century non-fiction writing.

In Merton’s life story we find a lesson on the nature of temperance as a virtue: moderation is needed in bodily desires and pleasures, but abundance of spiritual pleasures can lead to greater harmony. Merton’s life before and after entering Gethsemani Abbey might be described as excessive, but the nature of those early excesses resulted in his early life being out of balance. He writes that, "...we must learn our own weakness in order to awaken a new order of action and of being – and experience God Himself accomplishing in us the things we find impossible."

So temperance as a virtue may be described as moderation and perhaps even abstinence in relation to those desires and pleasures that make us weak and sinful, thereby opening our lives to the excesses of God working within us. We can ‘go overboard’ in our lives and still practice temperance as a virtue.

**QUESTIONS**

1) What excess desires and pleasures in our life prevent us from ‘going overboard’ in our lives with God?
2) What sins can be overcome with moderation?
3) What excesses can help us practice greater temperance?
4) When in our lives has moderation of one bodily desire resulted in excess of another?

**FORTITUDE**

A search in Wikipedia for the word ‘Fortitude’ results in a redirection to the page for ‘Courage’. The website defines Courage as ‘The ability and
willingness to confront fear, pain, danger, uncertainty or intimidation.’ It goes on to distinguish physical courage from moral courage, describing the later as ‘the ability to act rightly in the face of popular opposition, shame, scandal, or discouragement.’ Here we find the important point of discernment between Wikipedia’s definition of Courage, and the reality of Fortitude as a virtue: the action.

We hear throughout this course of the important relationship between virtues and habits; the idea that we can lead more virtuous lives by practicing certain behaviours to the point that our actions become habitual. But confronting fear, pain, danger, uncertain or intimidation is to a degree passive. There is certainly merit to possessing the ability and willingness to confront difficulties, but in the absence of such difficulties, what actions can we take to be people of greater fortitude?

Suffering is a condition of life. Even if we ourselves are not suffering at any given moment, we can easily accept that at all times someone, somewhere is suffering. And so is it possible to practice fortitude through our actions and service to others? The definition of fortitude in the Catechism of the Catholic Church sheds light on that possibility: ‘Fortitude is the moral virtue that ensures firmness in difficulties and constancy in the pursuit of the good.’ So even in the absence of difficulty, our efforts in the pursuit of good help us in developing the habit of fortitude.

But can we do even more? Can we perhaps both stand firm and persist in the face of our own difficulties AND pursue good for the benefit of others? Viktor Frankl in his book, Man’s Search for Meaning, described concentration camp prisoners who comforted others and shared their already meagre rations as evidence that ‘everything can be taken from man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.’ Here we see both the ‘firmness in difficulties’ and ‘constancy in the pursuit of the good’ that characterize fortitude in its totality, and we see those
actions amidst the profound depths of human suffering and misery experienced by victims in concentration camps.

As we prepare this Lent to commemorate the passion, suffering and death of our Lord, we can look to the greatest example of fortitude: fortitude in the charity of Christ. Through his incarnation, Christ was made vulnerable to the same ‘fear, pain, danger, uncertainty or intimidation’ that we all face. And in the face of those difficulties, Christ not only stood firm, he also made the ultimate sacrifice in giving himself up for us that we may have eternal life.

QUESTIONS

1) As most of us don’t face tangible danger on a daily basis, what moral and social dangers do we experience more regularly?
2) How do we ‘stand up’ to these moral and social dangers?
3) Where might fortitude be lacking in private and public life today?
4) What charitable acts might help us persist through difficulties in our own lives?
5) Spend the last 10 minutes of this session reviewing the ways in which you may have been helped by this whole course.
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