

PARISHES OF
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SACRED HEART & ST TERESA'S WILMSLOW
WEEKLY REFLECTION

Sunday 14th September 2025: Exaltation of the Holy Cross

**Mere Christianity: Christian Behaviour
(2) The Cardinal Virtues**

This is the second article in which I try to summarise C.S. Lewis' section on Christian behaviour in his book "Mere Christianity", written over 70 years ago. The first article dealt with how Lewis suggested that there are three parts to human morality and that the metaphor of ships in convoy may be useful to transmit this concept. His next chapter is based on an exposition of the four cardinal virtues of Prudence, Temperance, Justice and Fortitude.

Prudence means practical common sense; taking the trouble to think out what you are doing and what is likely to come of it. When Christ said that we should be like little children he did not mean that we were to remain like children in intelligence. He told us to be as "*innocent as doves*", but also "*as wise as serpents*" when he sends us, his disciples, into the world like "*sheep in the midst of wolves*" (Matthew 10:16). He wants us to have a child's heart but a grown-up head. He wants us all to use to the full, in His service, the good sense, the intelligence, we have been given.

The cardinal virtue of temperance is little to do with teetotalism. It does not mean abstaining from pleasures, but enjoying them to the right extent, and no further. A person who makes their hobby, their pet, or even their work, the centre of their life, in place of God, is being just as intemperate as the drunkard. If we cannot do something pleasurable (e.g drinking alcohol or shopping) in moderation then we should abstain fully or, if impracticable, to the greatest extent possible. But, in so doing, we should not condemn those who can properly enjoy these pleasures.

Justice is not restricted to what goes on court. It includes fairness, honesty, give and take, truthfulness and keeping promises.

Fortitude encompasses both kinds of courage: bravery in the face of danger and resilience in suffering. It is not infrequently brought into play when trying to practise the other three cardinal virtues.

There is an important point to note about these cardinal virtues. There is a difference between doing a particular just or temperate action and being a just or temperate

person. Someone who is not a good tennis player may now and then play a great shot. But a good tennis player is one who has reached a level where they can be relied on to make innumerable good shots. A person who perseveres in doing just actions achieves a certain level, a certain quality of character. It is that quality, rather than particular actions, which is meant by a cardinal virtue. If this distinction is not made clear three wrong ideas might be encouraged:

- (i) We might think that, provided we did the right thing, it did not matter how or why we did it - whether with good or bad grace, or through fear or for its own sake. However, the truth is that right actions done for the wrong reason do not build the internal quality or character which can accurately be described as a "virtue". It is this quality or character that really matters. By analogy, a bad tennis player may hit the ball very hard through anger and the shot may, by chance, help him win the game. Yet it will not help him become a good, reliable player.
- (ii) We might think that God simply wanted obedience to a set of rules. In fact, what God really wants are people of good character striving to do His will.
- (iii) Finally, we might think that the virtues were only necessary for the present life. Now it is quite true that in the next world there will probably be no occasion for just or courageous acts. Nevertheless, there will be every occasion for being the sort of people we can only become as a result of doing such acts on earth. If people have at least the beginnings of the qualities of these virtues inside them on earth then, through God's grace, this is preparation for the deep, strong, unshakeable kind of happiness that God intends for us in the next world.

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