St. Peter’s Church on Capitol Hill
2005 Lenten Series
The Cardinal Virtues: Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, Temperance
February 12-13, February 19-20, February 26-27, March 5-6

“Fortitude”
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3rd Sunday of Lent, February 26-27, 2005: Exodus 17.3-7; Romans 5.1-2, 5-8; John 4.5-42

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The Mass is organized as it is for good reasons. For example, every Sunday we recite the Creed after the readings and the homily. Thus, no matter how bad a job we preachers do presenting the truths of the Christian faith on the basis of the readings, the liturgy of the Word ends with this full authoritative statement of the fundamental truths we share as Christians. In this same spirit, though doing it in reverse, I want to begin this Lenten homily about the cardinal virtue of fortitude, also called courage or bravery, with the description of it given in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, § 1808:

Fortitude is the moral virtue that ensures firmness in difficulties and constancy in the pursuit of the good. It strengthens the resolve to resist temptations and to overcome obstacles in the moral life. The virtue of fortitude enables one to conquer fear, even fear of death, and to face trials and persecutions. It disposes one even to renounce and sacrifice his life in defense of a just cause.

Our opening prayer today (in either version) talks about discouragement, the lack of courage:

“When we are discouraged by our weakness, give us confidence in your love.”/
“. . . when our weakness causes discouragement, let your compassion fill us with hope.” (alternate)

We certainly get discouraged by our weakness, but the fact of the matter is that we also get discouraged by the difficulties out there in life. And we get annoyed by them, and angry about them. The Israelites are grumbling because they are in the desert without any water and their children and livestock may die, as the first reading tells us. When Jesus tells the woman at the well in today’s gospel that he will give her living water that makes people never thirsty again, the woman says: “Sir, give me this water, so that I may not be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.” The woman takes Jesus literally, and why not? Wouldn’t life be easier if we didn’t have to struggle so much all the time with the chores of life?

There are always difficulties in life—out there, impinging on us, whether we are weak or strong—and sometimes major ones. Making a living, or getting along have their rough spells. Sickness comes to us or those we love. Why life is difficult, extremely difficult at times, is a question hard to answer. The fact is that it is, and anyone who thinks that life should always be easy and gets resentful when it is not, will never be happy in life. The normal, natural virtue of courage is the good and noble way to face the difficulties of life without being undone by them.

Even harder to understand is why life can seem even harder for those who try to do the right thing, who try to live according to the law of Christ’s love. It is the simple truth that if you give money away you won’t have that money for yourself. If you don’t join in with the gossip or the racist jokes in the group, your peers will turn on you. If you try to live a chaste life you may lose out on some dates. And so on. Lent does make us think about the fact that trying to live God’s way can seem to make our lives even more difficult, since we are preparing for the following event:

• a totally innocent man is condemned, humiliated, tortured, and killed by crucifixion because he went around curing people, doing good, and preaching forgiveness, love, and the kingdom of God.

That this can happen says something about the state of our fallen world, the world we all live in. It also, as St. Paul points out, tells us something about God’s infinite love for us: “For Christ, while we were still helpless, died at the appointed time for the ungodly. Indeed, only with difficulty does one die for a just person, though perhaps for a good person one might even find courage to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.” Courageous people may “only with difficulty” (hence the need for courage) possibly die for a just person or cause. Christ overcame the difficulties of the passion and died for us all, while we all were still sinners (in his movie “The Passion of the Christ” Mel Gibson films his own hand pounding in the first nail). Christ brings courage to a new, supernatural level, in response to the
evil forces that confront anyone who tries to live a fully righteous and holy life, and he asks us to take up our crosses each day and follow him in and through that courage.

Saint Theresa of Avila, the great mystic and church reformer, wrote: “I assert that an imperfect human being needs more fortitude to pursue the way of perfection than suddenly to become a martyr.”

Given the difficulties and the obstacles to living a Christian life—not being a martyr but just living the Christian life each day—we do need fortitude, courage, bravery.

There is a lot of courage on display in our world. Lots of sick or infirm people are living courageous lives in dealing with their physical limitations, as are the people caring for them. Fortitude or courage is first defined in terms of the battlefield. It is preeminently the soldier’s virtue. In response to September 11th, several of my students from Catholic University entered military service and have served in combat. We can see their courage on our television screens and read about it in the papers. A courageous Notre Dame de Namur sister, Sister Dorothy Stang, was murdered last week for her work on behalf of the native peasants in the Amazon rainforest and the laws meant to protect them and this precious natural treasure.

We also see a lot that looks like fortitude or courage but is not. When a bank robber overcomes lots of difficulties and pulls off a dangerous heist, sometimes people talk about the robber’s fortitude and courage. Whatever else this is—daring or determination—it is not fortitude or courage. Fortitude is a virtue and virtues are good things. We act well and rightly by virtue, not for evil or misguided ends. Timothy McVeigh may have made personal sacrifices and shown military determination when he planned and blew up the Federal Building in Oklahoma City, but he didn’t have courage. Whatever it was that enabled terrorists to highjack planes and sacrifice their own lives to fly into buildings, killing thousands of innocent people, it was not courage.

Fortitude or courage is a virtue precisely because it is endurance, patience, the overcoming of difficulties and obstacles FOR AN OBJECTIVELY GOOD AND NOBLE END. If we are Christians, it is overcoming obstacles, persevering in times of difficulties, for the sake of ends and activities that are genuinely loving of God and our neighbor (even if our neighbor hates us).

It is not endurance for endurance’s sake. It is not patience and determination against obstacles for their own sake. It is not suffering for suffering’s sake. God does not want that from us. And we do not admire people who persevere through struggles and overcome difficulties, just for that reason, whatever end they are seeking and serving.

Fortitude is a virtue because and when it is linked with prudence and justice, and it is a virtue for us Christians when it is linked with God’s prudence and God’s justice. When we know the right, noble, and loving thing to do (prudence) and we are able to overcome our innate drive just to care about ourselves rather than to be balanced, fair and just (justice), then our perseverance and endurance in acting for the good, despite difficulties, and our patience in the face of obstacles, opposition, and setbacks constitute genuine fortitude.

When we realize the link, tie, bond of courage to what is right and just, growing in courage becomes easier—we are willing to act more and more courageously, to hang in there more often in the face of difficulties and resist the inevitable tendency to despondency about the struggles we face, precisely because the effort is on behalf of what is good and right. We are not just suffering or struggling for no reason or for their own sakes, as if that would make us better persons or make our world a better place. We are actually making ourselves and our world a better place, by persisting in the right and good and loving, despite the difficulties. Towards the end of today’s gospel, Jesus talks about the harvest being ready and that some sow and others reap. What we do in our lives as Christians over time, whether we actually see the results or not right away, is to help with the harvest of salvation.

Furthermore, we do it with a power and a strength that comes from God. Annie Dillard somewhere in Teaching a Stone to Talk writes that Christians go to church each Sunday without realizing that they are playing with dynamite. We can miss the radical call of the scriptures to live a certain way (actually forgiving, actually giving things away to the poor, etc.). We can miss the radical act of the eucharist—not a mere remembering but the actual presencing of the once-for-all death and resurrection of Christ, sacrifice of salvation then offered to the Father. We can miss the power Christ wants to give us when we commune with him, eating his body and drinking his blood, the grace and strength to live serious Christian lives and find joy, lasting joy, in those lives. Lent is the time to appreciate the reality of this power and strength in fresh and new
ways. As St. Paul says in the second reading, through our faith we stand in grace and the love of Christ, who had the
courage to die for all, whether they want him or not, has been poured into our hearts. Let us take some of this power in our
hands, and as St. Theresa of Avila says, use that fortitude to live daily lives, not of martyrdom, but of ordinary Christian
love and goodness to all, whatever the circumstances.

1 Quoted in Josef Pieper, The Four Cardinal Virtues: Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, Temperance (Notre Dame,