



Notes from a Preceptor's Handbook

A Preceptor:

(OED) 1440 A.D. from Latin *praeceptor*

one who instructs, a teacher, a tutor, a mentor

THE FOUR CARDINAL VIRTUES....

The Four Cardinal Virtues

The quite splendid 'Charge after Initiation' offers a new Mason the first hint of the human qualities his brethren prize most highly... *'let Prudence direct you, Temperance chasten you, Fortitude support you and Justice be the guide of all your actions...and maintain those truly Masonic ornaments – Benevolence and Charity'*.

Those fortunate enough these days to listen regularly to a well-delivered 'First Degree Tracing Board' will recall as the ritualist draws towards its end he leaves with us the thought that: *'Pendant to the corners of the lodge are four tassels, meant to remind us of the four cardinal virtues Temperance, Fortitude, Precedence and Justice... He then adds: 'the characteristics of a good mason are Virtue, Honour and Mercy. May they ever be found in a Freemason's breast.'*

As Speculative Freemasonry is, first and foremost, a system of morality it perhaps should come as no surprise that virtue, a particular quality of moral excellence, should be prized so highly. It perhaps begs the question though of why just four virtues are considered pre-eminent or 'cardinal' and, from the galaxy of admirable traits available for selection, why those four particular qualities have been chosen. This short paper attempts to address these two questions.

History

The search for the elements of moral excellence has had a long history, commencing well before our Leaders compiled their joint ritual over 1813-17. Indeed, we can discover tangible evidence of that quest in our centres of worship even today.

As one example the archway to the C13 Chapter House of Salisbury Cathedral (its seat of mediaeval governance) is decorated with fourteen pairs of figurers. Each niche contains a figure of a 'virtue' with one foot resting firmly on the chest of a prostrate and conquered 'vice'. They were carved as reminders to the entering Canons of the balance they should seek when forming judgement.

On the north side the seven virtues are graphically depicted as Joy, Mercy, Trust, Truth, Purity, Bounty and Humility. On the south we find Justice, Hope, Patience, Knowledge, Charity, Temperance and Fortitude. (With wry good humour we can see that the masons carved all of the virtues as female, all of the vices male – suggesting perhaps that the roots of the 'Me-too' moment have been spread deeply over the past seven hundred years!)

From that generous display of virtue we can turn to our Parish churches where so often we are able to discover a tomb of the local squire or other dignitary. Here custom restricts the virtues to four.

Over the tomb's canopy we may find four figures: one with sword in hand, scales and a crown; one with bridle and rein, or water and wine in two jugs; one with armour, a club, a lion or a broken column; and a fourth with book or scroll and mirror. They represent in turn Justice, Temperance, Fortitude and Prudence. (The coincidence of their location at the tomb's four corners with the four tassels on a lodge carpet is noteworthy)

To seek to discover the reasons for choosing this quartet of virtues it may be helpful to turn to ancient classical history. In Greece, Plato, a 4th century BC philosopher, in his work *'The Republic'* wrote: *'Clearly then it will be [led by] the wise, brave, temperate [healthy-minded] and just'*. In his *'Rhetoric'* Aristotle identifies nine forms of virtue including *'justice, courage, temperance and prudence'*. The Romans tended to agree. However Cicero (1st century BC) in his *'De Inventione'* considered only four were paramount: *'wisdom, justice, courage and temperance.'*

Our Parish church would have been heavily guided by the Old Testament from its Jewish roots in the 2nd millennium BC. The Wisdom of Solomon (chapter 8, verse 7) identified the same four qualities as important: *'She {Wisdom} teaches temperance and prudence and justice and fortitude which are such things as men can have nothing more profitable in life'*.

Early Christian tradition had followed this lead. However Ambrose (4th century AD) was the very first to use the expression **cardinal virtues** noting: '*And we know that there are four cardinal virtues of temperance, justice, prudence, fortitude*'

The writings of St Paul introduced another dimension to Christian understanding. In his 1st Corinthians (chapter 13) he had identified three **theological values** – '*faith, hope and charity (love) but the greatest of these is charity (love)*'. The mediaeval Christian Church later decided to add these three to Ambrose's four cardinal virtues to assemble seven virtues mirroring the 'seven deadly sins'.

[It is of interest that on the First Degree Tracing Board the Hermetic development of Freemasonry identified the seven rungs of Jacob's Ladder with all seven virtues. Most earlier C18 explanations had named only three – F, H and C (Faith, Hope and Charity)]

Meaning: Having established that four cardinal virtues had been generally accepted by diverse societies, faiths and philosophies across the Western World when seeking to live moral lives it is perhaps time to reflect on their meaning or relevance today. These might be summarised as:

Prudence: This is an ability to discern the most appropriate course of action to be taken in a given situation at a given time. It can also mean being discreet and worldly-wise

Courage: This may be taken to embrace fortitude, strength, endurance and the ability to overcome fear, uncertainty and intimidation.

Temperance: Temperance might be best described as self control, discretion and moderation – a sound mind controlling a sound body.

Justice: This is generally understood today as a sense of fairness.

{A fuller and more philosophical exploration of modern day Masonic virtues is contained in that magisterial book on Freemasonry – 'A Celebration of the Craft' – by Robert Gilbert and John Hamill (published by Mackenzie 1992). Interestingly they select five virtues: Tolerance, Achievement, Charity, Integrity and Fidelity.}

Afterthoughts: Diverse Western societies across the Near East and Europe, for over three thousand years, have united in identifying the importance of the 'The Four Cardinal Virtues' as aims for Mankind's moral improvement.

When coupled with those '*truly Masonic ornaments...of Benevolence and Charity*' these four cardinal virtues may be considered as the essential signposts for Masonic contemplation in order to live a happy, meaningful and truly balanced life.

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