

Simplicity

I hope you can remember the Chaplain's assembly before Christmas, when he spoke about the gifts of the spirit and how much better they are than physical gifts. He offered a list of the virtues associated with the gifts of the spirit: Gentleness, Faithfulness, Self-control, Meekness, Peace, Joy, Love, Kindness, Patience, Goodness, Temperance and Faith. These virtues certainly seem very desirable and pretty comprehensive. You would like to know someone who possessed these qualities and could call them a friend with confidence. But I think there is another virtue that I would like to add to the list. I think it is one of the greatest virtues, all the more so because it is one that is largely forgotten nowadays.

It is simplicity.

Simplicity is one of the central Christian virtues, but it has also been recognised and valued by other religions - it is at the heart of Sufi mysticism and Buddhist enlightenment.

But simplicity is such a delicate virtue that it is so easily drowned out in the bustle and confusion; the stress and the fretting; the wanting and the buying that seems to make up so much of our everyday life today. Why is simplicity such an important virtue? Why does nothing work without it? Why should it be considered to be a fundamental virtue? Listen, I hope to explain to you.

Let us start with a definition of a simple person. The simple person accepts himself. He does not glorify or hate himself – he just IS – simply, straight-forwardly, unaffectedly. The simple person lives as effortlessly and unremarkably as he breathes.

Simplicity is the opposite of lies, complexity and pretentiousness. That is one of the reasons it is so difficult to live simply. We second guess ourselves and over-complicate things all the time. Of course, a simple man would not trouble himself with the difficulties of living a simple life. In fact, simple people are often so other-worldly that they can be mistaken for stupid people. Nothing could be further from the truth.

We should never try to say that simplicity is the opposite of intelligence – in fact, they are very close indeed. About 200 years ago, perhaps anticipating something of modern particle physics, the German all-round genius Goethe wrote: "Everything is both simpler than we can imagine... and more entangled than we can conceive." The fact is that simplicity is an intellectual virtue as well as a moral one. When forced to choose between two proofs, theories or hypotheses, Occam's Razor directs scientists to choose the simplest, and they are rarely wrong. True intelligence does not muddle or complicate things – intelligence is the art of making complex things simpler, not the opposite.

If a thought cannot be clearly stated, what good is it? Simplicity, then, is a sign of intellectual strength as well as moral strength.

But there is still a great deal more to say about simplicity. Simplicity is the ability to unlearn our attachments, or rather to become detached from everything, including itself. It is here this Christian virtue most resembles Eastern religion. A philosopher has described simplicity as “Letting go, accepting what comes, without keeping anything for oneself.” The effect of the virtue of simplicity is to add freedom, lightness and transparency to the character.

I have spoken about simplicity as an intellectual virtue and a character-building virtue. However, simplicity is mainly a moral virtue. Openness of gaze, purity of heart, sincerity of speech, honesty of soul and conduct are the hallmarks of simplicity. The key point of simplicity is to avoid pretence.

Simplicity makes other virtues honest – a virtue can only be a virtue if it is followed without any concern for how it looks. A person who is only courageous, generous or virtuous when someone is watching them is not really courageous, generous or virtuous.

What does it mean to live a simple life? Simplicity means forgetting oneself, forgetting one’s pride and fear; peace versus restlessness; joy versus worry; lightness versus seriousness; truth versus pretence. The self remains, but lightened, purified, liberated and, as the Eastern religions would have it, enlightened.

How does a simple man live? He goes his merry way light-heartedly and peacefully. No goal before him, he feels no longing for the past, no impatience about the future. The present moment is enough for him. He has nothing to prove, since he does not seek to impress.

He seeks nothing at all, since everything is there for him. Simplicity is the virtue of wise men and the wisdom of saints. And in this week of the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, I would like to end this assembly with a powerful phrase spoken by a rabbi in the Thought for the Day segment of Radio 4’s Today Programme. In offering his response to the horrors of the holocaust, he came up with a piece of wisdom that was as thoughtful as it was simple. He suggested an eleventh commandment to go along with the other injunctions against jealousy, idolatry, adultery and murder. It was, quite simply, “Do not be a bystander.” In those five simple words is a wealth of understanding about the best and the worst parts of human nature. “Do not be a bystander” is a simple action, that we can all take, which will immediately make our school and world a better place.

This morning, I suggest we all take that new commandment to heart, and add to it the virtue that I commend to you: simplicity.