

Meditations: Monday of the Eleventh Week of Ordinary Time

Some reflections that can assist our prayer during the eleventh week of Ordinary Time.

- The contrast between Ahab and Naboth
- True and false prudence
- Christ's justice

AHAB, KING of Israel, had emerged victorious from a difficult military campaign against the king of Syria. God gave him the victory after

guiding him through a prophet, but once he had won, Ahab decided to act on his own, not relying on God. When he was reproached for this behaviour, *the king of Israel went to his house resentful and sullen* (1 Kings 20:43). He did not understand that his restlessness was due to his distance from God, and he tried to lessen his sadness by satisfying his cravings. After this episode, Sacred Scripture tells us that *Naboth had a vineyard in Jezreel, beside the palace of Ahab's palace. Ahab said to Naboth: 'Give me your vineyard that I may have it for a vegetable garden, because it is near my house; and I will give you a better vineyard for it; or, if it seems good to you, I will give you its value in money'* (1 Kings 21:1-2). Naboth refused to hand over the inheritance of his fathers, as required by the Law of Moses, and, again, *Ahab went into his house vexed and sullen. And he lay down on his bed, and turned away his face, and*

would eat no food (1 Kings 21:4). Ahab still didn't understand. He found the other man's behaviour incomprehensible: Naboth was an upright man with unshakable convictions, deeper than his desire for pleasure or superficial utility.

“Naboth was happy,” says St. Ambrose, “although he was poor and weak, as regards the king's arrogance, because he was very rich in his feelings and in his religiosity he did not accept the king's money in exchange for the vineyard inherited from his parents.”^[1] Sacred Scripture presents Naboth as a free man of integrity; Ahab, on the other hand, with all his power, allows himself to be carried away by circumstance. He has no other north than his whims and moods. “Man's dignity demands that he act according to a knowing and free choice that is personally motivated and prompted from within, not under blind internal

impulse nor by mere external pressure.”^[2] Naboth’s vineyard was valuable, but his soul was even more precious. He had formed his freedom well, seeking wholehearted union with God and producing the rich fruits of virtue, which brings true happiness.

THE VIRTUES of the righteous man, especially prudence, are very different from the determination and cunning of Ahab’s wife, Jezebel. She was ashamed of her husband’s weakness and used her talents to force him to take Naboth’s vineyard. *She wrote the letters in Ahab’s name, sealed them with her seal, and sent them to the elders and notables of the city who lived near Naboth. In the letters he wrote the following: ‘Proclaim a fast and make Naboth sit at the head of the people. Have two*

men, sons of Belial, sit against him and testify, saying, 'You have cursed God and the king. Then bring him out, stone him, and let him die (1 Kings 21:8-10). When they had carried out her orders, Jezebel said to Ahab, 'Arise, seize the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, which he refused to give you for money, for Naboth is no longer alive; he is dead' (1 Kings 21:15).

Jezebel ordered the murder of Israel's prophets, forcing Elijah to flee, and led her husband and all the people to worship Baal. She was calculating and cold-blooded and knew how to navigate the intricacies of the Law: she found a way to commit those crimes without bloodying her hands or her husband's. But the injustice of what she did shows us that cunning is not prudence, determination is not fortitude, and self-control is not temperance. Jezebel closed herself to God's truth and disdained the

demands of justice. She used her talents only to achieve her whims, making herself and others unhappy as she did so.

Prudence without God is often referred to as the “prudence of the flesh.” But “a truly prudent person is ever attentive to God's promptings and, through this vigilant listening, he receives in his soul the promise and reality of salvation. [...] Through prudence, a man learns to be daring without being rash. He will not make excuses (based on hidden motives of indolence) to avoid the effort involved in living wholeheartedly according to God's plans. The temperance of the prudent man is not insensitive or misanthropic; his justice is not harsh nor is his patience servile.”^[3] —

WHEN WE see actions like Ahab and Jezebel's scheming against Naboth, we are naturally indignant; we want justice to be done. Jesus' words in the Gospel might surprise us: *Do not resist one who is evil. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; and if anyone would sue you and take your cloak as well, let him have your cloak as well. Give to him who begs from you, and do not refuse him who would borrow from you (Mt 5:39-40, 42).*

We don't need to soften or moderate Jesus' words. He encourages us to live with the immense freedom of people who recognize that God is their true treasure. When we have God, we possess everything, and we are ready to give anything for others. This is entirely compatible with justice, the virtue of giving others what is good for them. Selfishly protecting what we think belongs to us is a mockery of the virtue of

justice. Its first word is not “mine,” but “yours.” Saint Thomas Aquinas insists that justice is the virtue that makes us open to our neighbours, recognizing their personhood and working actively to give them their good.^[4]—

Naboth was just because he loved God’s law, the source of the highest justice, and his ancestors’ inheritance, which he needed to preserve for his children, even when that meant defending them from the illegitimate whims of the king. Though it may not seem so at first glance, he was the real victor, *for it is better to suffer for doing right, if that should be God’s will, than from doing wrong (1 Pet 3:13-17)*. The apostle Peter reminded the early Christians of this frequently, recalling that Jesus gave his life for us, and He is our model. Naboth’s death and all injustice find their full meaning in Christ’s death. Our Lady, a wise

daughter of the people of Israel, will help us have prudent hearts that delight in being close to God and going out to others in acts of justice and charity.

[1] St. Ambrose, *De officiis*, 2, 5.17.

[2] Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 17.

[3] St. Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 87.

[4] Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, S. Th. II-II, q. 58, a. 2, co.
