

32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year A

Herbert Hoover served as President of the United States from 1929 until 1933, and was in office during the Great Depression. His encouragement of big business led to a handful of companies, including Standard Oil, controlling a large proportion of the nation's wealth. The Wall Street crash in October 1929 indicated the failure of this policy, and the subsequent depression revealed Hoover's lack of political foresight. He believed the setback was only temporary, and he declared at the height of the collapse that "the fundamental business of the country..... Is on a sound and prosperous basis". Not surprisingly he was soundly beaten in the 1932 presidential election. Years later, speaking with the voice of experience, Hoover reflected:

Wisdom consists not so much in knowing what to do in the ultimate as in knowing what to do next."

Wisdom is the theme in two of the readings today. In the first reading wisdom is personified as a mysterious woman who is never far from those who look for her. Lady Wisdom is near, she lingers at people's gates and doors, she waits to be consulted on all manner of things, she walks the streets looking for those who are worthy of her. She is portrayed not as a rare and elusive being but as a resource within everyone's reach.

When it comes to wisdom, many people shy away from the subject in the belief that it is the proper concern of philosophers or poets. But if wisdom is about knowing what to do next, it clearly concerns all of us. And the parable of the ten bridesmaids and their oil lamps confirms this view. The Gospel story about a small oil crisis in the Middle East tells us of five bridesmaids who are accounted foolish precisely because they weren't prepared for what happened next.

In the story it would seem that the bride awaits the arrival of the groom at her own home. Her friends, acting as bridesmaids, are to meet the bridegroom when he comes with his friends, then join in escorting the couple back to the bridegroom's house, where the wedding feast will be celebrated. But, as

happens at many weddings, there is a hitch; and, as happened at the most recent wedding I celebrated, it is the bridegroom who is late. All ten bridesmaids have lamps and all the lamps have oil. Five of the bridesmaids, however, have no reserve supply of oil. They are unprepared for any delay. When the bridegroom fails to make his expected appearance, the bridesmaids, weary with waiting, doze off to sleep. At midnight a cry goes up to announce the arrival. We're not told why the groom was so late – perhaps just as well!! The foolish bridesmaids appeal to the wise for oil from their reserve stock. But the wise need the oil they have to make the lighted escort for the couple. So, the wedding procession, minus five bridesmaids, goes into the feast and the door is shut. When the foolish bridesmaids arrive later, they are refused admission. They were not ready when it mattered; they were not prepared with lamps burning brightly when the bridegroom appeared.

The wisdom of the five wise bridesmaids consisted in doing what was expected of them, in being prepared for the arrival of the groom. Their wisdom wasn't extraordinary, but eminently practical. In the language of Herbert Hoover's maxim – their wisdom consisted not so much in knowing what to do in the ultimate as in knowing what to do next.

The message of the Gospel is simple: if we do what we have to do conscientiously, we have no reason to fear the unexpected coming of Christ. There is a blessing in doing the ordinary with sensitivity, in doing the sane and sensible thing, in acting with common sense and prudence. The 14th century mystic Meister Eckhart summed it up perfectly when he said: "Wisdom consists in doing the next thing you have to do, doing it with your whole heart, and finding delight in doing it.:"

All this reflection about wisdom can be seen in one simple well-known story. A holy old monk was sweeping up the fallen leaves in the monastery garden when a visitor asked him: "What would you do, brother, if you knew you were to die in ten minutes?" The old monk replied: "I'd carry on sweeping."