Thirty-Second Sunday

The parable of the wise virgins is most illuminating. Indeed, all divine parables are, for it is God's way of teaching us the essential truths of salvation. This one concerns the bridesmaids or virgins (before marriage it is presumed that one is a virgin) a wedding, processions, feasts and so on. Ultimately it is a story about how we attain heaven, a wedding feast with the Lamb of God.

Note that half of the bridesmaids are called wise and the other half are foolish. Sometimes the Bible translation changes the adjectives to prudent and sensible. Although the original Greek term could be rendered prudent or wise, I think that wise should be employed because it may refer to the Gift of Wisdom, the highest of God's gifts. The first reading tells us much about how to attain such wisdom. The term sensible also is fairly meaningless, whereas foolishness truly depicts the state of these five people. By the way, I think it's best if we regard this parable as having universal application to all people, given that the Bridegroom is Christ, the Bride the Church and we are called to service.

As the story goes the bridesmaids only duty was to provide a bridal escort late in the night, no street lights back then, along the way to their home, lest someone stumble and fall. Apart from OHS issues, it is somewhat fitting that the bridal couple be ushered along their way. Being fully aware of their task at hand, five of them run out of oil and hence cannot fulfil their task and so they ask the others present to give them their extra supply of oil, when that fails, they go to the local supplier, who being in bed is coerced to open the shop to procure the oil required. After which they arrive late and disturb the bridal festivities by demanding access, but are told that they are unknown and the door is locked.

At the outset, we feel somewhat sorry for these five foolish assistants. After all, they may have had dodgy oil or perhaps the oil lamps may have leaked, whatever the case, the outcome seems a trifle severe, for a simply mistake. Yet, not all is as it appears. First, ask yourself if this was really a mistake. I would argue that they knew what their duty was and choose not to do it. One may retort, but we all make mistakes, don't we? Forgive and forget, and move on… Yes, that's fine regarding some matters but this story is about the big matter – salvation.

Let's re-frame the story in our own setting. Imagine that you are friends of the prime minister, someone of importance, and he asks you to drive the bridal car at his wedding. If you really cared about the bridal couple and the task entrusted to you, you would check out the car and make sure that there was enough fuel for the journey. If you were careless and lazy, however, and didn't check the tank and the car ran out of fuel, what an ordeal!

Going back to the original story of Jesus, I would claim that these five foolish bridesmaids were careless. What is the cause of being careless? I would claim that in this case it is narcissism. What is narcissism? The word is derived from Greek mythology about Narcissus who was a hunter, son of the river god. He was beautiful and fell in love with himself and would often gaze at the reflection of himself in the water. Eventually being unable to love others he fell into despair and committed suicide.

Anyone who is narcissistic is unable to see the needs of others – they are too fixated on themselves. Remember the eyes are for looking outward not inward – to see others not self. Anyway these five were narcissistic for these four reasons. 1. They only cared about themselves and not about the bridal couple; that is why they did not bother to ensure that they had enough oil. 2. When the bridal couple appeared, to save face, they demanded from the wise virgins their extra oil. Selfish people often are demanding. 3. Rather than going home, knowing that they had failed, they impose themselves on others – they wake up the vendor and demand that he serves them. 4. Lastly, fearful that they might miss out on the wedding feast, because they think its all about them, they go and disturb the bridal couple whom they failed to assist, and insist that they be granted access – how utterly narcissistic.

I am sure the message went home in the Lord's time, and even today it reminds us to give rather than get, to become selfless rather than selfish. One person who excelled in generosity yet was beaten to death in 1623 was Saint Josaphat a Ukrainian bishop and martyr whose feast is this week. Each week we view horrific footage in the media of this war torn country that has suffered so much over many centuries. Anyway, Josaphat grew up in Belarus in the Orthodox church but became a Basilian monk and Catholic, transferring his loyalty to Christ from Russia to Rome where his remains are buried in Saint Peter's Basilica. As a Catholic bishop he gave of himself to the poor, instructing others in the faith, and visiting the needy of the towns. He gave of himself in spite of warnings and threats and inspired many to return to Mother Church for which he was termed the 'soul snatcher'. May his selfless heart then inspire other hearts today to end the hatred and violence in his country.