

THE POWER OF UNDERSTANDING¹

I Kings III, 9—"Give thy servant an understanding heart."

THE story books of childhood often pictured a fairy godmother, or some magician, appearing before the hero of the story with this offer: "You may have one wish, and whatever you ask it will be granted you." We can still look back to our early years remembering the fascination of facing such a situation. You have thought, as I have, "If I just had that chance, what would I wish?" Even in adult life it's an interesting philosophical question: "One wish—What would it be?"

Especially in moments of strategic importance, when we're facing serious or new responsibilities, the question takes on a special significance. So many, under the spell of an inherited superstition, will pull out a lucky penny, or a rabbit's foot, as they face some great chance or emergency. You and I turn a page in the book of life as a birthday is celebrated, and we make a wish as the cake is cut. We stand before a new venture in the moment when the whole world seems to stretch out before us, calling: "Come, commence, commence!", and we find our dreams and wishes intermixed in painting a vision of the future. So you today at your Commencement face the world as you go forth from this institution which has nourished you for service. Yes, face the world with all of its sickness and lostness, its muddle

¹Baccalaureate sermon of the twenty-second annual commencement of the Rice Institute, delivered by the Right Reverend Henry Wise Hobson, D.D., Bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Church, Diocese of Southern Ohio, in the Court of the Chemistry Laboratories, at nine o'clock Sunday morning, June 6, 1937.

and cross-purposes, its commanding opportunities and adventures. There are many who are wishing for you. All but the most phlegmatic among you are wishing for yourselves.

A great leader of years past, Solomon, was confronted by just such a situation. It's a dramatic story which we read in the third chapter of the first book of Kings. Solomon was called to assume what seemed like staggering responsibilities. Those were critical days in the life of the little Kingdom which David passed on to his son. Complete disintegration threatened. Solomon was stunned by the magnitude of the task, and cried out: "I am but a little child. I know not how to go out or come in." And it was in that moment that God came in a vision and faced Solomon in his confusion with this offer: "Ask one thing. That shall I give thee."

It was Solomon's great chance. One word and he might have had riches, power, fame, pleasure, success at arms, or any of the other things for which man through the years has contended. Instead he answered God's offer: "Give thy servant an understanding heart." And we're told that "the speech pleased the Lord," who said unto Solomon: "Because thou hast asked this thing, and hast not asked for thyself long life; neither hast asked riches for thyself, nor hast asked the life of thine enemies; but hast asked for thyself understanding; behold, I have given thee a wise and an understanding heart." Since then the world has talked about the wisdom of Solomon. His ability to think straight, and to reason with true justice, has become proverbial. He is held up as a unique example of a man whose clear vision saw through to the truth; a man who had the ability to transform confusion, dissension, strife, into order, unity, peace; a man whose power had its source in an understanding heart.

The Power of Understanding 261

It needs no argument, or list of examples, to prove to us that the time of day in which we live is charged with crises. In spite of the deluge of new knowledge which has flooded men's minds during recent decades, we are alarmed by the fact that confusion has permeated the lives of the great mass of people who make up society, and that the world has the jitters because the vast majority of people have no real understanding of the fundamental rules governing human relations. The failure to understand these rules is not only the cause of the grave dangers which threaten international relations, and economic and social life, but also continues to erect barriers which make a solution of our problems more and more difficult.

It is misunderstanding which has bred suspicion, ill will, fear, schism, enmity, war. It is misunderstanding which has arrayed individual against individual, class against class, race against race, and nation against nation. Most tragic of all, it is misunderstanding which has too often shattered the unity of the Church itself, and has produced a collection of competitive and suspicious members of the one Body. Misunderstanding has been, and remains, the devil's deadliest weapon as he seeks to frustrate God's purpose. This is a fact in man's experience, proved by history, before Solomon and since Solomon. It will continue to be such a fact as long as men lack the understanding heart. Where it is absent there are divisions and disintegration. Where it is present there is unity, fellowship, peace, and development.

As we Christians contemplate our responsibility in these strange days, our first word must be one which expresses our sense of inadequacy: "I am but a little child. I know not how to go out or come in." Like Solomon we know we need the power to do a job in the world which of ourselves would be utterly impossible. Without that power we are

like a light bulb cut off from its circuit, or a motor not hooked up with its line. Men have longed, fought, striven, competed, sometimes fairly and again falsely, hungry for power. They have sought all the things which Solomon might have asked for and didn't. They have climbed high in the realms of riches, knowledge, and worldly achievements, only to be dashed again to the depths—"how are the mighty fallen."

The head of one of the largest and most successful department stores in our country was asked, "What one attribute do you find is most essential for a man who is to achieve permanent success in your business?" The answer was immediate: "The ability to understand and get along with those with whom he works." This merchant might just as well have been describing the prerequisite for success for the member of a family, a student graduating from a college, a citizen in society, or a nation in the world. May God help us to realize that there is one primary need upon which any power we may have to meet life successfully depends, and that this need is expressed in the wish of Solomon: "Give thy servant an understanding heart."

Life is not a story book. No fairy godmother will stand before us waving a wand that our wish may be granted as an automatic process. In Solomon's case his request was founded upon a character and life which made it possible to describe him as one who "loved the Lord." God granted Solomon's wish, and bestowed the essential gift upon him, because in him God found a man who was following that way which leads to the discovery of the understanding heart. So God would offer and bestow this same gift upon us as we prove that we are traveling that same way.

Your usefulness in the world as you go forth from this Commencement—your ability to face the crisis which this day surely presents—your success in the fulfillment of God's

The Power of Understanding 263

purpose for your lives—all depend upon whether you have within yourselves those qualities which nourish God's gift of the understanding heart. It's all very well to wish, but wishes are not horses, and if we would reach our destination we must be ready step by step to forge along the road. Only thus can we develop characters which will be fit to house the understanding heart when we find it on our way.

There is no quality which we shall need more constantly on our journey than the spirit of humility. The proud man is never the understanding man. The greater the pride in self, the less the understanding of others. Humility frees man from the shackles of prejudice which pride forges, and makes possible the recognition of the rights of others when pride thinks only of self. The proud man tends toward the opinion that the world revolves around himself, and he has no real understanding of others, because his interest is focused on self. The proud man seeks to advance his own welfare and success, and therefore is blind to the welfare and needs of his fellows.

The products of pride are seen in such as Napoleon, Mussolini, and Hitler. Dictatorship based on the perversion of justice, the concealment of truth, and the destruction of freedom. Where pride leaves no room for the understanding heart, then the basis for great leadership is lacking, and the dictator as he struts must maintain his position through the doctrine that might makes right.

We have lived in a proud age. The great advances in science, medicine, discovery—in every realm of knowledge and experience—have developed in many a superiority complex which has blinded our eyes to essential truth. The really great scholar, or expert in any field, is always a humble man. He realizes how fragmentary is his knowledge compared with that which he does not know. He is, therefore,

a searcher after truth who wants to gain and understand the minds of others. Thus he makes progress and gains power for greater usefulness.

But it's the multitude of half-baked know-it-alls, who have thought that they could control and regulate life, who have led the world into the maze where most men wander. They are the product of mass education without individual direction. The president of a large university was asked: "What do you want the graduate of your institution to know above everything else?" To which he replied: "I want him to know first, how little he really knows, and second, how to get along with his fellow men." The two go together, for when a man is conscious of his little knowledge he is humble, and when he is humble he has the ability to understand others, which is the foundation upon which friendships are built.

The power which has been exerted in such a miraculous way through the lives of Christian men and women down through almost two thousand years, flows from the springs of humility. Men when they are selfish are proud. The presence of Christ changes that selfishness. It's a hard lesson to learn. It was hard for the first Disciples, for they wanted the privileged places, and special favors, and the promise of rewards. But as they gave heed to the Master's words: "He who would be first among you shall be servant to all," and watched him, girded with a towel, washing their feet, they slowly learned the lesson that Divine power comes as the understanding heart expresses itself in loving service.

No wonder Christ "resisted the proud" of his day. He still resists them because their understanding is darkened, and they are enemies of God's purpose. He still demands that we be converted and become as little children. If we're humble as Solomon was we'll say with him: "I am but a little child." God has set us an example for He understood

The Power of Understanding 265

the needs of His children so fully that He humbled Himself as He walked on earth in the fashion of a man.

After humility comes honesty among those qualities we must have in order to acquire the understanding heart. Honesty without compromise. Truth enlightens; lies deceive. When you can't discover the real facts about a person or a situation, you can't really understand. The very word means to get down to the bottom. You stand under a situation when you have gone down deep below the surface, which is so often deceptive, and have discovered the real truth. I stopped recently to watch a test hole being driven where a viaduct is being built in Cincinnati. In reply to my question as to why it was necessary to make such a test, the engineer said: "Because the surface tells us very little, and unless we understand the nature of this ground for a hundred feet down, we can't safely plan our structure." The constructor stands under what he builds by knowing the truth about the foundation. In the same way society can be safely built only when it is founded on an understanding which comes from an honest recognition of the truth.

Hypocrisy is possibly the worst form of dishonesty. The moment I pretend to be something that I am not, or allow a person to misinterpret my real feeling or attitude, I set misunderstanding going, and a barrier is at once erected which shuts me off from others. You can't feel close to a person, or count on his friendship, when he is not what he pretends to be. The power to exert influence comes from that honesty of character which we speak of as "ringing true." The power of a sincere and honest Christian is astonishing, and the weakness of the man who calls himself a Christian but is not what he claims to be is pathetic. You know where to find the first man, you can count on him and build on him. You can't understand the second, and therefore mistrust

him, and his influence counts for nothing. Our Lord's violent reaction against hypocrisy is proof that He saw in it an insidious disease which destroys spiritual health.

You can't develop the spirit of strife and hatred where a knowledge of the truth gives a basis for growing understanding. This fact results in the greatest sin of war—the lies and dishonesty and deception which are part of organized propaganda. War breeds lies which eat their way into human character until fundamental honesty is destroyed. Men determined to put aside subterfuge, and secret diplomacy, which too often conceals the truth, will eventually lead the nations of the world out of the valley of destruction where war holds sway, up to the heights where the light of honesty makes good will based on understanding a reality.

The moral confusion of our day is not caused so much by those who give themselves over to excessive immorality—for we understand them and can put them where they belong—but by a lot of our so-called leading citizens who compromise their honesty by half-way assent to the low standards of those who have no morals. Such hypocrisy gives birth to misunderstanding, and misunderstanding always breeds confusion.

The corruption in certain areas of society is not due to a few men who have been caught red-handed, and are held up as hideous examples of dishonesty, but results from the fact that too many of us have played their game with them hoping that we'd win with them. In so doing we've shared in their dishonesty, and once again produced a confusion which is rooted in misunderstanding. Confusion, because where so many compromise their ideals, then people's minds become fuzzy in their thinking, clear judgment is lost, and wrong is whitewashed until it is taken for right.

If we are really honest as Christians, we must think

The Power of Understanding 267

through and set up Christ's standards of living, and stand by these against every temptation to follow an easier way. Then men will know just where we stand on these issues. They will understand us, and know they can trust us. We, freed from hypocrisy, will find clear judgment to understand others, and power to help in the creation of a society in which all men will have a truer understanding of God's standards of moral behavior and just dealings in their relationships one with another.

The third quality which we must have as a basis for the understanding heart is the spirit of unselfish love. I know some social service workers who are technically well trained. They understand all about their work, and just how it should be done, and they have minds which are keen. Yet they are not really helping people to solve their problems. The trouble is they don't really care about those people. It was an understanding *heart* that Solomon wanted. There is a vast difference between an understanding mind which is stocked with all kinds of knowledge, and an understanding heart which reaches out in love to all who are in need. The former is valuable when coupled with the latter, and useless for God's purpose without it.

Stanley Jones has pointed out that in all that goes to make up what we call our world, there is a progressive upward trend from the material, through animal life, to man, and that as we follow this trend we discover a growing sensitiveness to the needs of life. This is absent in the stone, shows slight traces in the plant, is more developed in animals, and strong in human beings. The higher the level of development the greater the sensitiveness to need. Christ's supreme position is borne out by His supreme sensitiveness in the presence of any need. Now when we are sensitive to a person's need we are really showing an understanding of what

that person is facing. That understanding comes from the fact that we, being led by the spirit of unselfish love, are eager to help that person in any possible way. We cannot understand the person unless we really care for him, because the sensitiveness which makes it possible to understand is the result of caring.

If I realize that I can enter fully into a person's life only as I help him, then I shall thank God for every call for assistance which presents itself. The man who bemoans the fact that he is called upon by so many people and causes for help, is the man who does not have the spirit of love, and because he lacks that spirit he is not sensitive to, nor can he understand, the needs of those who appeal to him. He thinks of what he's giving up rather than of what the other fellow is receiving. The two remain apart because selfishness is there as a barrier. But where love prompts the act then fellowship is created, and out of that fellowship comes the understanding which makes for goodwill upon earth.

The man with such a spirit of love knows the truth and joy of following the way which the Master called us to take: "He who would come after me let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow me." It means sacrifice, and suffering, and a constant pouring forth. It means bearing, as Christ bore, the burdens, the sins, the failures of the world. But love so expressed has its reward in a heart that understands all men. Yes, understands even those who reject and misunderstand us—our enemies. The spirit of unselfish love gave Christ the understanding heart which made it possible for Him to look down from the Cross on those who had nailed Him there, and prove His understanding by praying: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

This is the way along which the understanding heart is achieved. The way of humility, honesty, and love. But what is the ultimate result? Greater harmony among men; more

The Power of Understanding 269

lasting peace; a fuller fellowship; more widespread justice; a society which offers men a more abundant life. Yes, the power of the understanding heart can so influence the world that it can be turned upside down, and all these conditions can come to pass. But far more the understanding heart gives man the power to become a true son of God. It lifts him up into the presence of God where he finds true life. Studdert-Kennedy, the great English war chaplain, wrote these lines about man's search for power:

Man is no helpless thing,
That, like a bird in spring,
Comes fluttering to the light of life,
And out into the darkness of long death.
The Breath
Of God is in him,
And his agelong strife
With evil has a meaning and an end.

By grace
He can achieve great things,
And, on the wings
Of strong desire,
Mount upward ever,
Higher and higher,
Until, above the clouds of earth,
He stands
And looks God in the Face.

So the understanding heart leads man to the goal of his supreme quest—for he comes to know God, and receives the gift of the power of God's Spirit. Because he understands he learns the truth not only about his fellows, about the world in which he lives, and about the problems of life, but also the truth about God. For his understanding heart reaches out and meets the understanding heart of God, and in that union man discovers the power which gives him victorious life. The power which comes when the soul's eternal search is answered—when man finds God.

HENRY WISE HOBSON.