

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of St. Thomas More, NYC August 11, 2019
19th Sunday of Year C Wisdom 18:6-9, Lk 12:35-40

Today's first reading invites us to reflect on the lofty theme of "wisdom." I suggest we begin this noble task by focusing on a group of people who were not wise, but with whom most of us are familiar, either from watching them on TV some years ago, or watching them more recently on nightly reruns. The individuals I have in mind are Jerry, Elaine, George, and Kramer—the main characters in the sitcom Seinfeld. Every evening, if you are still watching them on reruns, you can see life in contemporary Manhattan put under a microscope. The glimpses of self awareness, or lack thereof, range from George's self-loathing, as when he says of himself, "People like me should not be allowed to live," to the blissed-out self-satisfaction of Kramer, whose hair-brained schemes and antics make sense only to himself, to the often clueless lack of perception of Elaine, who frequently is unaware of just how obnoxious her behavior is to those around her. One of my favorite scenes is when she is in a nail salon and imagines the manicurists are smiling at her because, as a regular customer, they know her to be such a wonderful person, when, in reality, the subtitles translate their comments about her as, "Princess wants a manicure... mustn't keep princess waiting." And, as for Jerry, there is one classic scene when Kramer, swelling with indignation at some slight Jerry has shown towards him, asks Jerry, "What kind of person are you anyway?" to which Jerry responds in desperation, "I don't know."

One of the attractions of the show is that you can tune in any weeknight and watch a repeat, and it doesn't matter at all if that particular episode is from when the series first began, or whether it is an episode from much later on. It doesn't matter because the characters are always the same. Their self-absorption, their pettiness, their lack of awareness, are always getting them into the same sort of predicaments, no matter what episode you watch. And that is precisely the point—they learn absolutely nothing from their experience—they are always the same. While wisdom, if nothing else, is the ability to learn from experience—from one's own experience, and from that of others.

But maybe that is why we like to watch them. In this "show about nothing," as its producers have described it, we glimpse little pieces of ourselves. We recognize our own narcissism, pettiness, judgmentalism, conniving, but in such a way that this diagnosis of our own character is not accusatory, but enables us to laugh at ourselves, at our own foolishness. Seinfeld was a "show about nothing," because we were watching individuals whose lives were about nothing. And that really is not funny, because our lives should amount to something—perhaps not in some headline-

attracting way. But each of us should make the world just a bit better, for our having passed through it.

Today's Gospel reminds us of that—that someday we will have to render an account of what we have done with our lives. Has my life amounted to something, and not just in some crass, material way? David Brooks, the columnist of the New York Times put it this way. He said, "The first part of our lives is about building our resume, but the latter part of our lives should be about developing our eulogy." Not that we write it ourselves, but how would we like to be remembered as a person, as a human being, as a Christian?

Wisdom is presumed to be possessed most properly by those advanced in years, because wisdom is seen as the fruit of experience, possessed by those who have learned from what they have endured, whether those experiences have been positive or negative. But that presumes one has been attentive to what has been going on in one's life, that one has taken the time to reflect on the meaning and significance of those events, and not simply raced through life on some kind of automatic pilot. So wisdom is not simply absorbed over the course of years. Wisdom has to be learned—learned from those who have gone before us, from those whom we admire and respect, learned from how they managed to deal with the successes and tragedies of life.

The Scriptures invite us to "to walk in the path" of wisdom, i.e, in a path well trod by those who have gone before us. So we don't have to always discover things for ourselves—to reinvent the wheel. To appreciate what it means to "walk in the path of wisdom," reflect for a few moments on how some of the great avenues of our city have come into existence. Broadway began as a deer trail, then an Indian trail, then a road that farmers and merchants took to go to market, and now it's Broadway—the "Great White Way." Third Avenue began also as a deer trail, then an Indian trail, then it became the road used to transport mail and merchandise from New York to Boston. That's why the extension of Third Avenue in the Bronx is called the Boston Post Road. So, just as a road or an avenue develops over the course of time, so wisdom is accumulated from the insights, the awareness, the perceptions, of so many of those good, decent people who have gone before us. They have asked the same questions, and have come up with some pretty good answers. We can learn valuable lessons from the experience of others—that's one reason why people read biographies. But, even here, I would have to offer this warning. I read somewhere that Justin Bieber plans to write his autobiography. I really don't know how much one can learn from the life experience of a 22-year-old, but one never knows.

And, of course, the one from whom we can learn the most is Jesus. In fact, in St. John's Gospel, Jesus is presented as the incarnate Word of God, as the Wisdom of God in the flesh. All that Jesus says and does gives clarity and insight into what life is about. Jesus is presented in the Gospel as a teacher of wisdom. He uses parables, simple stories from everyday life, to enable his listeners to discover the truth about themselves, about ourselves—about their, about our ability, or the failure thereof, to accept one another, to forgive, to show compassion, about the goals worth pursuing in life, about the things that really matter.

Let us pray that we can grow in wisdom, that we can come to possess an “understanding heart;” that we can learn to fit together all the pieces of our lives in a balance, in a harmony, that makes sense; that we can walk in the path that Jesus walked before us.