

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel, NYC
March 28, 2021 - Streaming Mass
5th Sunday of Lent Year B John 12:20-33

You may remember the award winning TV series “Mad Men,” a show that looked back to the mores and morals of the “60s” through the lens of the advertising world. The series has been summed up as, “Nothing is as it seems.” The leading character, Don Draper, is not as he seems either. He has re-invented himself, having assumed the identity of a dead soldier. The whole world of advertising is “not as it seems,” built on illusion, on the promise of satisfying every want, every desire. The viewer is drawn in to reflect on how much of our world today is built on illusion. The first episode is ironically entitled “Smoke Gets in your Eyes,” because so much of the world of advertising is simply smoke and mirrors.

Don Draper is deeply conflicted. The theme running throughout the series is will he ever find redemption, will he ever find a sense of wholeness between the two very different world he inhabits—the world of work and the world of home—the world of cold, often cutthroat efficiency and the world of tender feeling, represented by the 50 minute ride he takes every day on the commuter train between Manhattan and Westchester? The sense of his being “lost” is depicted in the opening of every episode—a figure is seen falling through Manhattan skyscrapers, the cathedrals of commerce, falling into an abyss.

“Nothing is as it seems.” Curiously, that is what Jesus is saying also, “Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life.” He is implying that the calculus of true value, of what really matters, is not reflected in much of what the world, of what society prizes. For Jesus, life has this paradoxical quality that what seems to count as gain may in fact be loss, and what appears to be diminishment may indeed be growth. Jesus is not asking us to hate our very selves, who we are, what we are all about. He is not commending any sense of self-loathing. Rather we are to reject any and all of those false, superficial values of society which, to some degree, we may have bought into—those notions of what counts for success and achievement, looking out for Number One, the frenetic striving for the security and solace that material things are supposed to provide, and even the twisted ways that religion can accommodate the injustices of society. What Jesus is opposed to might be called “conventional wisdom,” the beliefs of any society that are simply never questioned, that are accepted uncritically and totally because they feed our fears, or our need to feel safe and secure.

Perhaps one reason why the character of Don Draper is so interesting is that he is a "self-made man" in every sense of the word. He has literally developed a "persona," a face that he presents to the world, but which at bottom is a fake. It is a "face" that may serve his immediate needs, but that can never really satisfy his deepest desires. Just as the advertising slogans he dreams up can never satisfy either, and eventually turn out to be hollow, empty, fake. Maybe that is why his character is so appealing, because so many viewers see a part of themselves in Don Draper?

Jesus says that the person who hates that kind of fake life, this false "created self," is the person who preserves his life his, genuine selfhood, to eternal life. In St. John's Gospel, "eternal life" is not just something that begins when we die. Rather, it is being able to live right now with hope, with courage, with integrity and with joy, because we see our lives as being grounded on God, the source of every good thing in life. This is the kind of full life that can never be taken away from us, even in death. In Jesus' view, the individual who is enthralled by the image he or she has created for himself or herself is doomed. Certainly we live in a world of images. It is the person who recognizes this kind of life for the deception, or self-deception, that is, who is saved from the trap of having to grasp after the tokens of success and security offered by the conventional wisdom of our day, as a measure of their worth.

To make his point even clearer, Jesus uses the image of a seed, of a grain of wheat, that when it dies, produces much fruit. A seed that just sits on a shelf produces nothing; it remains the way it has always been. But when the seed is planted in the ground, it cracks open, it appears to be falling apart, decomposing, even dying. What is really happening is that something new is coming to life, the fruit from that seed, the shaft of wheat, the flower, the tree. Again, "nothing is as it seems." What appears as death is actually birth, indeed, a transformation. What happens to the seed when it cracks open, is that it lets in all the nourishment of the soil. In the same way, when we allow our fake self to be broken, our "persona" to be cracked, the carefully constructed armor we have fashioned for our psyches to be pierced, when life is no longer perceived as a threat, but as a gift, then, like the seed in the soil, we are enriched by everything and everyone around us, because we can appreciate them and enjoy them for what they are—and not just look at them as strategies for our survival.

The title, "Mad Men," was supposedly invented by the advertisers on Madison Ave. in the 60s to refer to themselves. But it also displays a certain irony too. For there is a large measure of insanity in what the world of advertising offers. Let's pray that we not be so caught up in that craziness. In a few minutes we will partake of the Eucharist, of the bread that is broken, and we will welcome into our lives the risen Christ who was broken on the cross and whose death brought life. Let us pray that His

presence in our hearts will give us the courage to allow ourselves to be broken, and in doing so allow ourselves to be enriched by everyone and everything around us, for "nothing is as it seems."