



The Parish Churches of S Philip and S Augustine and S Matthew with S Mary the Virgin Newcastle

Homily for the Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (26th July) 2026

As I am sure that you know there is a figure of rhetoric called *synecdoche*, - and I know that there are other ways of pronouncing the word, so, as Judge Judy would say, please do not write in. *Synecdoche* uses a part to refer to the whole: so I might observe that there were a couple of new faces at Mass last week. If that were literally true, it would have been a fairly gruesome sight; but, in fact, those faces would have been attached to the rest of the bodies to which they belonged. *Synecdoche* can, however, also refer to the opposite situation where a term is used to describe a range of constituent parts. The concept of wisdom is an instance of this latter *synecdoche*, because it is not a single phenomenon, but the interaction of a number of qualities; and quite often, when we employ the concept of wisdom, we only have one of its parts in mind.

In some instances, the imputation of wisdom refers to a capacity for insight: the ability to see beyond the masks and veneers of life to the reality behind them. On other occasions, it is the ability to make sound judgements. These two aspects of the phenomenon, which is wisdom, are often - probably usually, interwoven: certainly you cannot make a sound judgement without properly understanding the relevant factors: otherwise what seems to have been a wise decision was, in fact, just a lucky guess.

There is, as well, a third strand to wisdom and that is the experience of life. Of course, not everyone turns the encounters of their life's journey into wisdom, but the more you have seen, the more the raw material you have to which apply insight and sound judgement.

In our day, there is something of a disparagement of this aspect of wisdom. So the argument goes, the speed and extent of technological and societal change has rendered past experience irrelevant to the circumstances of the present and the future. However, in the first place, this frequently seems a somewhat tendentious claim by which impatient people seek to invalidate the restraint of caution or alternative opinions. Secondly, it is just wrong. The contingent details might change, but very often underlying principles, which have been learnt over the years, have an enduring relevance. So, for example, every crisis is different; but the handling of most crises involves the resort to a familiar set of responses in terms of how if not what.

Wisdom, furthermore, can inhere in a community: in many ways; and what we might term institutional wisdom might be more consistent than its cousin in individuals. The multiplication of capacities for insight and sources of sound judgement along with the diversity of life experiences provides more extensive foundations of wisdom. Of course, a community must develop techniques and routines, which enable it to make best use of the resources of potential wisdom at its disposal. The Benedictine Rule alludes to this when it specifies that the abbot must ensure that even the newest novice must be heard in debate. Equally importantly, there must be an efficient path along which these different perspectives are synthesised into a conclusion.

Along with the individual experiences of members of a community, there is also the corporate experience of the community: its successes and failures. These memories are important if we are not to make the same mistakes or miss opportunities again and again. Unlike individual memory, which develops within us simply by being there, institutional memory requires a conscious intention to maintain it in a way that makes it more than simply the recollection of an individual.

These considerations become particularly significant at times of generational change. At such moments, there is always a risk that much accumulated wisdom will be lost in the process of the hand-over to the next cohort of leadership, who will then waste a lot of time and energy re-learning lessons, the knowledge from which could have been available to them; and which a wise community would have preserved..