October 20, 2019: Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

On Columbus Day, we went on our yearly hiking trip as a collaborative. We hiked up Mt. Chocorua and the views were simply stunning. The top of the mountain is above the tree line and you have a complete and unobstructed 360-degree view. The trees have started changing their colors and so the woods below were vibrant with color. On the way up as we were looking at the vista below, Courtney said to me, “How could people not believe in God when they look at this?” I had no really good answer since I have the same question. When we got to the top it was somewhat windy and so we decided not to celebrate Mass there, but I had noticed a spot below that was a little more sheltered and had a tremendous view.

As we started down the mountain, I went ahead of the group to set everything up for Mass so it would be ready when the rest of the group arrived. The space we had chosen had a perfect place to set up for Mass, and so I got everything out and ready and then put on the Mass vestments. Shortly after donning my vestments the first members of the group arrived and sat down and waited for the rest of the group. It was at that moment that a gentleman climbed up behind me and, showing his surprise, then turned and said to the people he was climbing with, “Hey, there’s a priest up here!” You could tell he did not know what to make of the situation and was completely caught off guard. It sort of reminded me of the old puzzles where you had to find whatever it was that did not belong in the picture.

We all have had those “Aha situations!” We get baffled by what is happening because something seems completely out of place. And we are not entirely sure how to respond. When climbing a mountain, we do not anticipate seeing a priest celebrating Mass. As human beings we tend to get flummoxed when we are placed in these types of circumstances, and we are at a loss as to how we should react. The gentleman in our story, as he finally walked by, asked if we were celebrating a wedding. Considering the number of kids there, it seemed an odd question, but I replied, “No, we are simply celebrating Mass.” He clearly was trying to create some context in which this situation would make sense to him. Again, that is a very human response. Most people need to have things fit into some logical pattern in order to process what’s taking place around them.

In our relationship with God we can, many times, find ourselves surprised by how God is acting in our life. He acts in a way that does not fit into the narrative we have created for ourselves. But, we simply need to look to the Incarnation itself, Jesus being conceived by Holy Spirit in the womb of the Ever Virgin Mary—Jesus who has two natures in the one person. He has a nature that is 100% divine as the second person of the Blessed Trinity and a nature that is fully human, like us in all things but sin. The people of the time were not anticipating that God would unite Himself with us in this way. Yet, in hindsight we can see this truth revealed in the Old Testament, but the people were caught off guard and did not know how to respond. The idea that God loved us so deeply that He would condescend to become one with us seemed preposterous.

It is also one of the reasons we have difficulties noticing how God is acting in our lives. But God is always acting in our lives, and it is about our being willing to recognize what He is doing. It is about our being willing to look at the world around us and acknowledge that his power is at work. It is as Saint Paul tells us through his letter to the Romans, “Ever since the creation of the world, his invisible attributes of eternal power and divinity have been able to be understood and perceived in what He has made. As a result, they have no excuse; for although they knew God, they did not accord Him glory as God, or give Him thanks.” In other words, God can be seen through his creation, but the problem is that we choose not to recognize Him. Why is that?

It is very simple: when we recognize that God is working in our lives, we need to accept the fact that He has a plan for us. We have to recognize that He truly cares for us. We have to recognize that He expects a response from us. And usually what God is calling us to do is out-of-our-comfort zone. It does not fit into our pattern of life as we see it. It is easier then to ignore God, rather than to have to respond and change our ways.

The reality is that throughout all of salvation history people have constantly found reasons to ignore and reject God and his presence in their life; this has been the normal response of human beings to God. And it is not simply the people who have no faith, but even his faithful followers rejected Him. Look simply to the Apostles’ response
to Jesus during his passion; they abandoned Him. The wonderful thing is that God never abandons us; rather, He will keep popping up in ways that are truly surprising. He is simply waiting for us to respond to Him.

If you have any questions about anything, please do not hesitate to ask me directly, or send your questions to me at fr.brian@chelmsfordcatholic.org.

Please keep me in your prayers.

In Christ,

Fr. Brian