May 5, 2019: Third Sunday of Easter

When I was preparing to enter kindergarten, they did an assessment of my various academic abilities: did I know my alphabet, how good was my reading comprehension, how well did I know my numbers, and how high could I count? It was the last one that caused everyone some confusion. I knew the numbers 2-13, and 38 and 56, but I did not know number 1 or any of the numbers between 13 and 38 or 38 and 56. It created quite a puzzle for my assessors, and for a few days they struggled to figure out the answer. Then... it dawned on someone—I am not sure who, or how it came about, but here it is the answer to the puzzle: I was the youngest child, and in 1968 there were no remote controls for TVs; so, whenever the channel needed to be changed, I was asked to change it. I was the remote control! The numbers on the TV dial for VHF were 2-13, and for UHF, we only had 38 and 56. To my five-year-old brain, those were the only numbers that existed. I, of course, came to understand that my limited knowledge of numbers needed to be challenged and corrected.

In our relationship with God and Jesus we can come up with some very limited ideas of who God is and who Jesus is. And, at times we truly need to be challenged in order to grow in our understanding and therefore deepen our faith and relationship with God. It can be something as simple as the Eucharist. Many people fall into the trap of seeing the Eucharist simply as a symbol. It represents, points to, or reminds them of Jesus. They lose the true, deeper sense that Jesus is truly giving himself to us in the Eucharist. What we receive is really and substantially the Body and Blood of Christ. It is no longer bread and it is no longer wine. What we receive is Christ himself—the same Jesus who walk this planet, died on the cross, rose from the dead, and is now seated at the right hand of the Father. The only difference is in how He looks. It is a hard concept to understand and, I know, to believe and accept, but it is at the heart of our faith. It is at the heart of being Catholic.

I believe, ultimately, that the limitations we place on God derive out of our limited understanding of four things: God is truly the creator of all; God created all things and especially people, with a purpose; God has a real plan for humanity and each person in particular; and God has a deep and abiding love for all He has created, especially each person in a unique way. There is an important factor that also gets in the way of our growing in understanding of those four points. It is something called concupiscence which is a remnant of the Fall. When Adam and Eve rejected God’s will, they broke our relationship with God, others, ourselves and creation. And, at the same time they damaged the human condition so that we were left with an inherent attraction to sin. That desire for sin is called concupiscence. We can overcome that desire but only through the grace of God.

In his life Jesus showed us both the way to be open to God’s grace and how to grow in our relationship with Him. He gave us the means to encounter and embrace God’s grace in our lives. The most important lesson Jesus taught us is that to truly have a relationship with God we must seek to be wholly and completely obedient to his will. That is the ultimate lesson of his death and resurrection. If we are not willing to be humble and listen to God’s will, we cannot really receive his grace. And without God’s grace we cannot change. The only reason I learned about the rest of the numbers was because I realized that my thinking was wrong and I needed to change my way of thinking. The same must be true in our relationship with God.

The world wants to lead us in directions that are all about self-fulfillment, self-actualization, self-realization. That is the direction of our self-destruction. The way of Christ is the way of the cross. The way of Christ is the way of obedience. The way of Christ is the way of dying to self and rising to new life, in and with the Father. Christ tells us very clearly, “I am the way, the truth and the life.” He also was very clear about the only way to the Father, which is through Him. This is why the disciples proclaimed, “By no other name may one be saved.”

God wants us to grow in relationship with him and as I said we need to embrace those four points through his grace. Hence, Jesus left us with the means of both attaining the necessary grace and the required
understanding—through the scriptures, prayer, and the Sacraments. Each of these gifts from God present a way of encountering both God and his grace. The scriptures teach us our faith and morals. We know that they are the very word of God and have been inspired by God. When it comes to faith—what we are to believe, and morals—how we are called to live out that faith, the scriptures cannot be wrong. Each time we read the scriptures we hear God speaking to us. No matter what is happening in our lives God has it covered; we simply need to be open to hear Him. Prayer is intended to be a conversation between ourselves and God. When we take time to stop and listen, we can have a real dialogue rather than a monologue with the Lord—we encounter God and his grace. We need to learn to be silent in order to hear the Lord. Finally, we have the Sacraments which are, each in their own way, an encounter with Jesus’ death, resurrection and ascension. Baptism puts us in right relationship with all that the Fall broke. Confirmation directs our hearts to embrace the mission of our baptism. The Eucharist gives us food for the journey to strengthen us to be the presence of Christ. Penance heals our wounded heart and spirit when we have fallen, and strengthens us to return to the true path. The Anointing of the Sick gives us strength to unite us more fully to the suffering Christ and reminds us that we are not alone. Jesus understands and is with us. Marriage and Holy Orders direct us to a live a life of service directed to God and others. It is a life directed at helping others to embrace a life of salvation.

If we want to learn the rest of the numbers and grow in our relationship with God, we must embrace the gifts Jesus has given us.

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