July 7, 2019: Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Believe it or not, on July 7, 1928, commercially sliced bread was sold for the first time in history by the Chillicothe Bakery Company in Chillicothe, MO. This day coincided with the 48th birthday of Otto Fredrick Rohwedder, the inventor of the first automatic bread-slicing machine. Something that we take for granted really has only been around for the last 91 years. When we look at our lives there is so much that we take for granted. We simply assume that things have always been that way.

Think about some of the simple things that are now part of our lives that seem so natural. When I started working on computers in high school over 40 years ago, it was on a machine that Radio Shack made. It saved the program on a cassette tape, and if you adjusted the volume, you could not get the program back unless you could get the volume to an exact level. The computers I used in college are now dwarfed in power, memory, and storage by my cell phone. For most children today, the idea of not having a computer would be as foreign as my going to the store 50 years ago and not being able to buy sliced bread. Computers are part of our lives, and yet this has just happened over the last 25 years. But, for anyone born in the last 10 years, it is all they really know. Like so many of us, in their minds it has always been this way.

It is so easy to look at the world around us and think, well, we have always had these amenities. But, I think about some of today’s medicines, like penicillin, which was not discovered until 1928, and not put into use for patients until the 1940s. Prior to this discovery many people died after getting scratched and contracting blood poisoning because there was nothing a doctor could do for them. The discovery of penicillin was purely accidental and yet it has had profound implications. And much of the medical care that we consider normal today is really quite recent.

It is so easy in our lives to get wrapped up in the way we now view the world—the idea that this is the way it always was. And yet, the truth of the matter is that as human beings we are constantly being confronted with change and transformation, and we generally can find a way to adapt to those changes. But those adaptations are not always easy; many times they come with a lot of pain and disruption. We simply need to look to England during the first industrial revolution in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. A group called the Luddites revolted against being displaced by machinery. They had developed their particular skills and were replaced by lower paid, less skilled workers who could simply manage the machines. In the following years, as machinery took over more and more of skilled labor positions, there was greater unrest. It was a difficult time of transition.

In many ways this can mirror our relationship with God. Just as we can lose the historical perspective of what is happening around us, the same can be true in how we relate to God. Most of us can move into those “comfortable” phases with God when we think we are where we need to be. How often people will say to me, “Well, I am basically a good person.” What they are really saying is: I am good with God the way I am, and I do not really need to change or be challenged in my life. But the reality is that this kind of thinking is about as far from the truth as we can get.

Jesus described our relationship with God in this way, “Jesus answered them, ‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there also will my servant be.’”

Essentially Christ is calling us to follow his path, which is the path of self-emptying and dying to self. What does self-emptying mean? It means no longer seeking what I believe will fulfill me, or make me happy or whole. Rather it is realizing that ultimately our lives are about striving for eternal life and not the momentary pleasures of this world. It is looking to the long-term gain, not the short-term gain. Self-emptying and dying to self are about asking the only question that should matter to any Christian in any situation: What is God’s will for me in this moment?

But the problem with this question is that God usually does not leave us where we’re at. It is not about the familiar and the comfortable. It is about discovering our true selves and recognizing that only God knows who that true
self really is. It is about accepting the truth that things can never stay the same if we desire to grow in our relationship with God. If we are to truly grow, we must die to ourselves.

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