**July 21, 2019: Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

Last week’s column got me thinking that people might wonder how we Catholics understand the meaning of suffering? One of the most persistent questions throughout human history has been, “From where does suffering come?” How one answers this question reveals much about a person’s view of the world and God’s role in it. The struggle of coming to terms with the destructive nature of suffering, and trying to find meaning in the midst of its effects, has troubled humanity almost from the beginning.

A Christian must accept one solid truth: that God, in his very nature, is good with no evil attached to Him in any way. Therefore, no evil can ever proceed from God. We must also understand that everything that exists came into existence only through the direct and conscious will of God. God, and God, alone is the true creator. We may help to bring life into the world, but that life only comes to fruition based on God’s will. And we can never force God to act in a way contrary to his will. All creation, therefore, comes into existence as an act of God, and both its nature and existence is good. But we must juxtapose this truth to the fact that human beings suffer on account of evil, which is a certain lack, limitation, or distortion of good. If evil and suffering do not come about through any act of God, then how does suffering occur?

Essentially, suffering and evil came about through human choice; it is ultimately the result of sin. The brokenness of the world is the result of Original Sin, which brought about what we call the human condition. We can differentiate between human nature and the human condition in this way: human nature is created by God and at its essential core is good and always retains that inherent goodness; the human condition comes about through human choice and is a mixture of good and evil. The good is the result of following the divine will, and the evil is a result of choices that contravene the divine will. We must recognize that all choice has ripple effects, and those effects do not just affect the individual but can go far and wide and even impact future generations. When we look to the Fall, it is there that Adam and Eve’s choice “created” the chaos that we currently experience. The Fall brought about the random evil and suffering that plagues humanity to this day. It is why the 2-year old will contract leukemia, or a hurricane may destroy lives and property, or why the natural occurrences of drought and famine occur. All of these tragic experiences are not the result of a particular human choice, but rather, they are the ripple effects of the Fall. But there are also evil realities that come about through concrete and current human decisions that create true suffering. These sinful choices bring about pain in the lives of so many. Ultimately, we must realize that suffering is a world unto itself in which all who suffer share and take on as their own. It matters not whether the suffering is a result of the human condition or some concrete choice that an individual makes. Suffering has consequences that bring the person or persons to define the world and life through that prism of pain. Most people need to find some level of meaning in and through the tragic events that they are experiencing.

How do we find meaning in suffering if God is not the cause? The first thing we must recognize is that the suffering of human beings is not the same as that of the animals. We are able to bring about meaning through the very fact that we, and we alone, are made in the image and likeness of God. We have within ourselves the capacity for transcendence, which helps us see what is possible and how God can and will transform our suffering if we allow Him. God does not cause the suffering, but God can and will transform it. As part of the human condition all people, in some moment, dimension or level, will confront suffering in their lives, and this suffering can obscure the true image of God for them. Therefore, it is important to understand how we can confront suffering and bring meaning out of such events in our lives.

How do we find meaning then, since suffering has no meaning in itself? The meaning of suffering manifests itself through how a person chooses to come to terms with it. And this, at its heart, is part of the subjective reality of suffering. Each person must discover within himself or herself how God is particularly choosing to transform them through the suffering they are experiencing. The meaning of suffering is therefore realized through how a person responds to that call from God. For us, the greatest witness of suffering is Christ and how He responded to God the Father in the midst of his passion.

Next week we will look at Jesus’ response to suffering.
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