July 28, 2019: Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

We know that Jesus underwent true suffering in many ways. He knew homelessness: as a child his family went into exile, and during his ministry He spoke about not having anywhere to lay down his head. He felt the hostility of the religious powers as they sought to bring an end to his ministry, and eventually, his death. And in the last twenty-four hours of his life, He was subjected to betrayal by one of his closest friends, He was denied by his best friend, and in his greatest time of need He was abandoned by those who said they would die for Him. These very people who betrayed, denied, and abandoned Him had walked with Him for three years. But it was clear that they did not understand Him or his ministry, nor did those He preached to day after day. The very people He healed, fed, and proclaimed the good news to rejected Him shortly after they were ready to declare Him king. He was left alone with those most hostile to Him—isolated from those who should have cared for Him the most. He knew what they had in mind for Him; in fact, when He turned his face towards Jerusalem, He knew that death awaited Him. He was physically, emotionally, and psychologically brutalized. He was beaten within an inch of his life. He was forced to carry a heavy cross through the narrow streets of Jerusalem as the people jeered Him and laughed at his predicament. They yelled at Him: “Where is your God now?” He knew fatigue to the depth of his being as He faced his impending brutal death. All the evil we face Christ has experienced, and yet, even in that He found meaning in his suffering. He taught us by example how to follow in his steps, to redeem our own suffering and infuse it with meaning.

As Jesus confronted his impending death He went to the garden of Gethsemane and knelt in prayer. He struggled with what awaited Him and his own desire to not endure this tremendous burden. But ultimately He accepted the Father’s will. Christ understood our need for Him to take up the cross. He spoke those powerful words: “…not my will but yours be done.” As Jesus began the journey of the cross, it was a moment of tremendous power; for the burden He accepted was not simply about the events, but about how those events would create the context for how humanity would define suffering in the world.

Jesus chose not to be defined by his passion and death, but rather, He created for us through his own actions the pathway towards how we are called to confront the brokenness of this world. The instinctual response for most people as the pain of one’s passion is inflicted is to turn inward. They become overwhelmed and at some level begin to disconnect from the world around them, and many will even begin to distance themselves from God. Christ did the exact opposite. His response was not to delve inwardly, but instead, to turn more fully towards the Father. His choices were not about himself, but for others. He recognized that there was an answer beyond the immediacy of what He was experiencing. He understood his suffering and death was not the final answer. He placed his faith in the promise of the Father to transform his death and give it meaning through the resurrection. God can also transform our pain, our suffering, and our death. And that transformation is the resurrection.

The full reality of the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ is God’s answer to suffering: it is his objective lesson to us about how we are called to face suffering in our lives. We are either going to be defined by our suffering or we are going to define the meaning of what we suffer. God calls us to unite ourselves with Christ and to allow his great act of love to give meaning to our experience. Like Christ, we must recognize that the immediacy of our pain and brokenness is not the final answer. Rather, God will transform our suffering and we will experience the joy and hope of the resurrection. This does not mean that we will necessarily experience physical healing or any cessation of what is tormenting us. What it means is that Christ will be with us as He promised: “Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves. For my yoke is easy, and my burden, light.” (Matt 11:28-30) It is the recognition that we are not alone in our suffering; rather, Christ carries us and understands our experience fully.

We then must unite our suffering to Christ’s suffering and through it recognize that God is leading us to a moment of transforming love. Again, we must state that God does not cause our suffering, but He will make use of it to draw us ever closer to Him. Our suffering helps us to recognize the fragility of this life—that this life is not the final tale—and that we are totally dependent on God. It can bring forth from us a true sense of humility that will lead us to die to ourselves, and entrust ourselves wholly and completely to the mercy of God. It can help us to look
beyond our immediate situation and recognize that we are made to be in eternal union with God. The ultimate goal and reality of human life is eternal life. When Christ becomes our focus in our suffering, we can then say with Him, “Into your hands, Lord, I commend my spirit.” As we seek to hand everything over to God, we are more open to recognize and experience his perfect love for us. This is the love that Christ expressed through his passion and death, and the love the Father expressed through the resurrection. This love of God then becomes the meaning of our suffering, and when we open ourselves to this love, suffering takes on the meaning that leads to salvation. It will help us to die to ourselves and to know God’s unconditional and unmerited love for us.

Ultimately we must recognize that suffering is real, but it need not define who we are. The love of God is greater than any experience we could ever have. As Saint John Paul II wrote, “Those who share in Christ’s suffering have before their eyes the Paschal Mystery of the cross and resurrection, in which Christ descends, in the first phase, to the ultimate limits of human weakness and impotence: indeed He dies nailed to the cross. But if, at the same time, in this weakness there is accomplished his lifting up, confirmed by the power of the resurrection, then the weaknesses of all human sufferings are capable of being infused with the same power of God manifested in Christ’s cross.” (Salvific Doloris, Art. 23)

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