September 8, 2019: Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

My first assignment in the Air Force was at Lowry Air Force Base in 1991. This particular base had a large hospital, and three prisons for minimum, medium and maximum security. It was also where the airmen went right after basic training for training in their particular fields. The base offered a tremendous opportunity to be engaged in many different forms of ministry. Over the two months that I was stationed there, I was encouraged to be involved in all possible aspects of base life. The various opportunities for serving the people really helped in many ways to challenge and stretch me in my own identity, and gave me a better appreciation of what I could expect in my calling as a priest.

One of the main activities I was involved in was a bible study class for the prisoners in the medium security prison. Each week when I joined them, we discussed the gospel of the week and then had a general discussion about its meaning in each person’s life. The bible study class went on each week for some two months. On my last day, at the end of class, one of the prisoners asked me a question, “Why did you do this for us?” The gist of the question was why would I give my time to a bunch of prisoners. My response was simply, “The only difference between you and me is that society doesn’t care about the sins I’ve committed.”

I am not trying to imply that all sins are the same, but rather, that each and every one of us is a sinner and, therefore, in the same boat. How often I hear people tell me, “I’m basically a good person.” And yet Christ refused to be called good. He left that adjective to God alone. And so, it is interesting that what Christ would not allow himself to be called, we are all too ready to claim for our own. The point I am trying to make is that each and every one of us is a sinner, and because of our sins we are personally responsible for placing Christ on the cross. We too easily put what happened to Christ in the past as the responsibility of those who physically crucified Christ. The truth and the reality is that if we do not see ourselves as sinners, we cannot recognize our real need for Christ. Christ came for one reason—and one reason only—to save us from our sins. And, only when we are ready to accept the fact that we are sinners can we truly accept our need for Christ.

Jesus did not come to make the world a better place in the way that many people expected. He did not come to make the lives of Christians free from pain or suffering. Jesus never promised us a perfect life if we became his followers. In fact, Jesus made it clear that being his followers would most likely make things more difficult for us, at least in the way the world perceives it. The real challenge in following Christ is the willingness to be open, honest and critical about how we need to change. What is it in our life that takes our focus off Christ? What is it that becomes more important to us than God? What is it that makes it become more about me than Jesus?

Each and every one of us has the need to grow and change. No person alive today has come to embody fully the person God created him or her to be. Each of us struggles with being the presence of Christ in the world. Each of us struggles with truly being the image and likeness of God in the unique way we are called. And part of the problem is the ‘Siren Song’ of the world, which tells us that life is about how we can make ourselves happy; we must reject anything that challenges our perception of who we think we are. In the way of the world there is no objective truth—no real objective right and wrong. You are who you think you are—who you think you should be. This kind of thinking leaves no room for who God determines you really are.

It is only when we recognize that God is in charge, that He has created the world and all that is in it, and that He created each and every human life with a unique and distinct way of showing forth his glory and majesty. The major responsibility we all have is not to become who we want to be, but who God has created us to be. But the problem we run into is ourselves: it is our propensity to sin.

Only when we acknowledge this truth is there any hope for change. Mother Theresa went to confession every week. Pope John Paul II went every two weeks. Not because they were the worst sinners, but because they recognized that even sinning in small ways prevented them from truly hearing the Lord and growing into the person they were called to be. They used the sacrament as it is intended—to move closer to Christ.
Let us *not* try to look to how good we are and be satisfied, but rather, let us open our eyes through the grace of God to see ourselves as God does. Let us seek to become the person God created us to be. The first step is to accept the truth that we are sinners, and then claim Christ for our own.

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