January 19, 2020: Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Last month I celebrated Mass at the Atrium, a facility for those with memory-impaired issues. It is always interesting to celebrate Mass at a nursing home, but a place like the Atrium has its own unique set of challenges. As I was celebrating Mass, various conversations were taking place as well as comments directed at me that had nothing to do with the Mass. When that happens you simply need to keep going and ignore the noise. It was clear that many of the people were Catholic but may not have been connected to what was being celebrated. But, as in all things it is important not to make judgments until you get to the end of an experience. And then, something fascinating occurred when we began to pray the Our Father: in that moment everyone stopped and prayed and it was done in perfect unison. It was then that I understood all I needed to know. In the depth of their being—though much had been lost regarding memory—when push came to shove, their connection with God was still there.

It also demonstrated to me the importance of what we learn as children. The reality is that with most forms of dementia the memories you lose are the most recent, and as the disease progresses you lose more and more. But what remains are memories from our earliest years. Clearly these people had learned the Our Father early in their lives. And it remained a potent part of their connection with the world and with their God. It was truly humbling to witness and experience this moment. It was a clear reminder to me of why I was there. It is easy in a situation like that to think, why bother since they don’t even know what’s going on. But the deeper reality is that God knows how to connect with us even if we are not always capable of understanding what is happening around us.

We all can get lost in our relationship with God. Sometimes it arises from something beyond our control, like the people in the Atrium. But many times, we lose our way based on the choices we make. And the further we move away from God, the harder it becomes to see or hear Him in our lives. In a real sense we start to lose our memory of God. We forget what it is to have God in our lives. It doesn’t simply become a distant memory—but no memory at all. The peace and joy that comes from God’s active presence in our lives becomes less real to us and seems not to matter at all. Our faith life slowly diminishes and if we participate at all in the ritual life of faith, it becomes empty of any meaning. Faith no longer has a grounding or foundation to it, and we are set adrift with nothing to moor us to the shore.

Life becomes more and more about activities and discovering ourselves, or rather, inventing ourselves. The meaning of life is discovered in whatever the individual determines. Truth and identity and all that grounds us becomes fluid and self-determinative. There are no such things as objective truth or natural law. Life is not determined by any reference to the Creator’s will or plan, but rather to my truth: if the Creator is real, just and loving, then his plan should match up with mine. No real God would want me to suffer. No loving God would want me to deny how I understand my true self. A benevolent God would want me to express myself as I find meaningful. For God to be God, God must be made in my image and likeness, and agree with the journey I have chosen to take.

The deeper we enter into this morass of thinking, the more life becomes identified from the prospective of the world, and our memory of God fades more and more. But the wonderful thing is that not all is lost. As I saw with the people of the Atrium, it is not about what has been lost but rather what is retained. And we might not always realize just where our connection from God will arise. It may be a childhood memory. It may be some event or crisis that helps us realize the futility of the world and its ways, and in that moment something awakens within us to remind us of the God who truly loves us.

No matter how far we might stray from God, He will never abandon or forsake us. Our loving God will not leave us alone. We can never truly travel in any direction where He will not be with us. Rather, we can turn our back on God and never turn our face towards Him, but He is right there with us at all times. He simply waits for the moment that we remember our need for Him. And then, God reaches out to us and embraces us with his unconditional love.

In that moment we experience the power of the cross. Jesus’ life was determined by one statement “not my will but yours.” His love for the Father and for us creates the moment when sin and death truly lose their power. Through our baptism we are made whole and our lives come to be grounded in the Jesus’ death and resurrection. In the Eucharist we recall this moment and receive the grace that empowers us to follow Christ. In confession we are washed clean by his blood and restored to a life of grace centered in his saving action and will. The cross is what gives meaning to our life. The
cross is what opens us to our true relationship with God. The cross is what allows us to die to ourselves and live the life we were created to live. The cross is what allows us to become the person we were created to be. The cross is what defines the life we are called to express in our words and actions. It is not a life centered in me, but rather, in the unconditional love of God. It no longer becomes about what I remember about God, but rather, what God remembers about me.

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