March 22, 2020: Fourth Sunday in Lent

We are experiencing a moment in life that truly feels surreal. The rhythm and flow of life that we simply take for granted has been deeply disrupted. In certain ways we see the bizarre, such as people inexplicably buying an overabundance of toilet paper. Honestly, I cannot understand where that is coming from. We also have had taken from us what we probably need more than ever right now—our gathering for Sunday Eucharist. The Cardinal made the right decision in order to protect the people of God. Yet, there is a comfort and a sense of strength that comes from our gathering as the Body of Christ. We are truly in uncharted territory as we confront a very serious threat to peoples’ lives. How we move forward will take a lot of wisdom, prudence and patience.

Our biggest challenge is not to create panic, but rather, to make decisions that will help people navigate this very serious issue. And, we are not helped by some of the overreaction that is occurring, or by those who underplay this situation by not taking it seriously enough. How many times I have already heard people blaming the media for creating a false narrative. It is a “liberal” conspiracy! I have also heard people say that the Church has been playing into the hands of the devil (by acting prudently in the face of a very serious threat to life??). Fr. Corey told me that he spoke with a priest in Padua, Italy who, over the last week, did six funerals for people who died from the virus. This virus is not a conspiracy and not a hoax. Italy is living the nightmare of not getting ahead of it.

It is true that most likely a majority of the population will not be seriously threatened by this virus. However, a sizable part of our population is extremely vulnerable to the effects of this highly communicable illness. And, the reality is that many may already be sick and not know it because they are asymptomatic: the illness may still be in its incubation period in them, or the virus affects them more along the lines of the common cold. As such, they can easily pass this illness on to those who may have devastating effects.

On March 5th while on pilgrimage, we got the news that the West Bank was closed down to visitors because the coronavirus had been detected in Bethlehem. We were supposed to celebrate Mass the next day at the Church of the Nativity. It was not to be. We never made it to Bethlehem—to protect ourselves and others. The Israel government was doing what it could to prevent, or at least slow down, the progression of the spread of the virus. As we continued on the pilgrimage it was clear what was going to happen to the local population. This time of year is the high period for people visiting the Holy Land. When we left on March 10th, our tour guide told us that our hotel which holds about 500 people would be empty by Thursday. At this time of year, it would be completely full for weeks to come. He also told me that all the pilgrimages that had been planned through his company had been cancelled.

What we are experiencing is truly a worldwide phenomenon, and how we come to terms with it, as a society and a community of faith, are truly important. On a local level it is important that we remain committed to supporting each other. And the most powerful way we can do that is through prayer. As such we will continue to celebrate daily Mass (Monday-Friday) at 9 AM on our live stream. We will celebrate weekend liturgy at 4 PM on Saturdays and 11 AM on Sundays. We also will pray together at 3 PM each day the Chaplet of Divine Mercy, and at 7 PM we will pray the Rosary, except on Fridays when we will pray the Stations of the Cross (again, shown via our live stream). It is important that we gather whenever we can as a community of faith. And, we can work together by joining in prayer and trusting in the presence of our loving God in our time of need.

It is easy to get overwhelmed in times like this, or not to take what is happening seriously enough. However, as people of faith, we are called to trust in the Lord, realize the reality of what we are confronting, and recognize that God is greater than anything we encounter. If we stay focused on the Rock, our firm foundation, we eventually will be fine with all we are enduring. Christ is the true physician who will bring us healing and consolation. We are not alone in this moment because our God will never forsake or abandon us in our time of need.

We simply must trust in the Lord and know that the more we turn to Him and place our trust in Him, the more strength we will have for whatever happens. We are called—like Peter—to come out of the boat and to walk on the water towards Christ. We must keep our focus on the Lord and we will be fine. And, if we should look away and start to focus on what is happening around us, we simply need to call on the Lord to save us, and Jesus will lift us up.
We can do this! We can work together as a community of faith centered in Christ. We can and must be his presence to others in their time of need. We must be that community that cries out to the Lord in trust, and hope in his saving love.

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