March 29, 2020: Fifth Sunday in Lent

The pilgrimage to the Holy Land at the beginning of this month was my second time experiencing such a time of prayer. To be honest, I was not sure what to expect this time around. The reality is that no trip can ever be the same. On my first trip, my Mom was able to attend, and it was with a group of completely different people. On this trip, the group included people who were not from either parish, and even some who were from the other side of the country. I wondered how would this group come together and how would it look.

We went to pray and celebrate Mass at many of the same places that I had attended on my last trip. But the hard part for me was really trying not to anticipate—based on my previous experiences—but to let go and simply participate in the here and now. The last pilgrimage was a truly intense moment in my life, and so, at first it was hard to separate that experience from this one. But, through the grace of God the transition happened—and happened quickly. The pilgrimage truly took on a life of its own, particularly when we had to make some changes ‘on the fly’. When we got news on Wednesday that the West Bank was closed and we would not be able to visit either Bethlehem or Bethany, it was brought home to me that this trip would indeed be different. But, what was awesome to experience was the reaction of the group. Everyone was fine with adjusting to whatever would happen. No one complained; rather, everyone looked back to what they had already experienced and looked forward to whatever would come next. In fact, the tour company offered to get anyone home early who wanted to leave, but everyone said, no.

The Masses were supposed to be celebrated at Bethlehem and Bethany, but instead took place in two very unique and really unexpected, powerful places. The Bethlehem Mass took place in a small chapel at the Church of the Nativity of Saint John the Baptist. When we entered that small Chapel, it felt like it was hewn out of rock and that we were entering into a time in the past. We could almost feel ourselves being transported to another time and being surrounded by our spiritual ancestors. It was a powerful moment both to preside and to preach. And, as we sang, the the sound of true joy filled the room: the connection with Christ and our faith was palpable.

The Mass at Bethany was our Sunday celebration and our guide found a wonderful spot in the Judean Wilderness to celebrate Mass. We were on top of a hill overlooking the Judean Wilderness. It was where Jesus may well have been during his forty days in the desert. Presiding and preaching in this moment was beyond just an emotional response; I truly felt connected both to Christ and to the people gathered with me. Here we were—in Lent—celebrating in the place where Jesus experienced his time alone with God, seeking to understand his own calling. And the whole point of pilgrimage is to deepen our relationship with Christ. Pilgrimage is not a vacation, but a time of intense prayer and reflection on where we are with the Father and Jesus. For me, the connection became even more evident. The Judean Wilderness is not a place of grandeur, but is, in fact, somewhat desolate. But it is in that very desolation that we can recognize both our needs and the very real presence of our God. And that is what happened to me in that moment: in the truest sense, what I encountered was deepest joy. The powerful reality of my God being with me and my deepest need to truly worship, praise, and glorify Him.

This pilgrimage was very different from my last, and it was truly a blessing in a very different way. It was by God’s grace that I was able to simply let go and be in the moment. It brought home to be me what my life in Christ is really supposed to be about. We can too easily get distracted and lose focus on what truly matters. We can allow our own expectations to color how we see the world and our sense of how things should work out. When that happens, we can get caught in the trap of trying to relive or recapture the past. Or, we can get caught in the trap of simply dreaming about what the future holds and should bring to us. Either way, we became passive participants in our own lives. We stop being truly engaged in what life is all about.

The ultimate reality of every life is that it should lead us, in all its moments, to give praise and thanksgiving to God. If we are truly engaged, we will come to recognize that God is present with us and among us at all times. The truth is that we are all on pilgrimage in this life. We are on our personal and corporate journey to the Lord in Heaven. Every moment is a time to be open to an encounter with the living God—and not simply in the wilderness. But to do that we must remain focused and disciplined; that is ultimately the purpose of this holy season. Lent calls us into the wilderness, to renew our desire for our Father and Jesus.
Each day I say the following prayer, and I hope it may help you to bring into focus the true meaning of your life:

   Lord, help me not to live in the past and not to wait for the future,
   but to live this day, to live this moment glorifying and praising you.

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