

February 16, 2020: Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Over the last 25 years, I figure I have preached close to 8,000 homilies. This number would include Sundays, weekdays, funerals, weddings, baptisms, and the like. For the most part each of them is unique, as I do not generally write out my homilies; hence, I cannot go back to reuse them, although I do repeat stories. Also, I will admit that I do use a couple of different variants of a homily for baptisms. But, for the most part, each homily is something new.

When I first started preaching, I found it rather nerve-wracking. I was pretty nervous when it was time to preach. For the first few months I wrote out an outline which helped me stay focused and keep the ideas flowing in the right direction. After a few months my nerves settled down and the outline was simply kept in my head. But the idea of preaching still was a time for me to be quite nervous. I would—and at times still do wonder—if I got my point across. Was I clear enough? Was the preaching relevant to what people needed to hear? Was it presented in a way that was engaging enough for the people? Was it really the point God wanted me to make? These and so many questions race through my head.

Even after all these years, when it comes to preaching, in certain ways it has not gotten any easier. There have been times, after sitting down, it seemed to me that my homily was one the best I ever delivered. But then, after Mass people would say to me, “Father, your homily didn’t really seem to make sense.” Or, at other times, I would think that my homily was terrible, and yet, people would say to me, “Father, that was the best thing for me. What you said was exactly what I needed to hear.” And so, I have to simply chalk that up to the power of the Holy Spirit.

To be honest, at many Masses, particularly funerals, there is always a certain amount of dread I feel until the homily is finished. At many funerals I do not always know the families or the deceased, and there is always a concern about creating a moment that can bring some consolation, hope, and a modicum of healing. The biggest concern is that no harm be done as the people in this moment are hurting and usually very vulnerable. It can be very easy to say the wrong thing. But what is true at a funeral is also true when preaching on a Sunday. It is not possible to know where everyone is in their faith journey and how they will interpret what you are trying to say. When people take your words to mean something different than what you want to imply, that is all they will hear no matter what you say after that.

For me, once preaching is over it’s clear sailing; from that point forward it is about what the Church wants me to say, which is much simpler. The reality is that preaching will always be a part of my life and I am honestly okay with that. Even though there is some level of anxiety when preaching, it is still a powerful moment for me. God uses me as his instrument to speak his message. Sometimes I am successful being that instrument but other times I recognize that I get in the way. And even though I might dread the moment, I am at the same time excited to be God’s instrument.

Often in our lives we have these moments when we experience two competing reactions that almost appear to be oxymoronic. And yet, on further analysis they make perfect sense being together. I think of one such moment in my life. When my dad died, I was very sad to lose him as part of my life, but at the same time I was joyful with the knowledge that he was in the hands of our loving Father. I felt both sadness and joy at the same time. We see such a moment as Christ faces the cross. In the Garden Jesus prays that this cup pass from Him, but at the same time He says, “Not my will but your will.”

These moments in our lives when we seem to have feelings that contradict each other are really just an experience of grace. Yes, preaching for me is a difficult experience for many different reasons, and yet, each time I preach there is a sense of contentment when finished. Why? It is because there is little doubt in my mind that if a homily is effective, it is not because of me: I am but an instrument of the Lord. The homily works because of the power of the Holy Spirit working through me. The dread I feel comes from my human weakness; it is a sign of looking *only* to myself. The contentment comes from recognizing Who is actually in charge, and allowing myself to be that instrument He calls me to be.

How we come to be transformed in our lives and to grow into the person we have been created to be can best be found in these kind of moments. They help us to better understand where we continue to see ourselves in charge, and they also help us to more fully appreciate how God works through our weakness to build us up.

We need not fear such contradictions in our life; rather, we should embrace them in order to allow God’s grace to transform our weakness into his strength.

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,

A handwritten signature in purple ink, appearing to read 'Fr. Brian', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Fr. Brian