

May 8, 2016

Feast of the Ascension of Christ

After Jesus had left them, the disciples returned to Jerusalem filled with great joy

The joy they found in Christ wasn't just for themselves, it was also for the other disciples

The Ascension then

The disciples returned to Jerusalem with great joy. You wouldn't think so, after all Jesus had just left them. Their joy wasn't that Jesus had just left them, it was that Christ had just come to them, which immediately drove them back to Jerusalem where they shared their joy with the other disciples.

The Ascension now

The joy we find in Christ isn't just for ourselves, it is for others. I recently read an account of Fr. Maximilian Kolby, a Polish Franciscan priest who died at Auschwitz on August 14, 1941. When a prisoner escaped from the camp, ten others were selected to be killed by starvation in reprisal for the escape. One of the ten selected began to cry, "*My wife! My children! I will never see them again!*" At this time Kolby stepped forward and asked to die in his place. His request was granted and was sent to the starvation chamber.

In the harshness of that camp, Fr. Kolbe maintained the gentleness of Christ. Survivors said at night, he seldom would lie down to rest. He moved from bunk to bunk saying, "*I am a Catholic priest. Can I do anything for you?*" He pleaded with his fellow prisoners to forgive their persecutors and to overcome evil with good. A survivor later said he was like a powerful shaft of light in the darkness of the camp.

The joy that Fr. Kolbe felt didn't come from his being in that camp, it came from Christ being in him in that camp, which joy flowed through him into the others there. The joy we find in Christ isn't just for ourselves, it is for others. **Franciszek**, the man Fr. Kolbe saved, spent the last five decades of his life going back to Auschwitz to pay homage to the man who died on his behalf. What an incredible experience he had of the ascended Christ in Fr. Kolbe.

The Feast of the Ascension is the feast of Christ in our midst. It is not about protecting us from suffering as it is about our finding Christ in each other's suffering. Jesus is still dying today in the lives of our sisters and brothers around our world who must feel Jesus has left them.

The Ascension is for everyone

What we are celebrating today is meant for people everywhere. But how can we share the joy of Christ with them when they are half way around the world?

Certainly by praying for them, and not only for them, but “with” them. Like with Peter, this puts a belt around our waist and takes us where we would rather not go - to be in faith with this family and with so many millions more in their dislocation. We go in faith to be with them, to be in solidarity with them, to walk with them, to cry with them, to pray with them. We are taken there where the deep demands of God and love call us to be.

We also share the joy of Christ with those who are distant when we, in the words of Isaiah, “*act justly, love tenderly and walk humbly with our God*” with those in our midst. Whenever we “*act justly, love tenderly and walk humbly with our God,*” we are helping everyone celebrate the love of Christ.

Sharing in the love of Christ is who we are. It is not just nice to do so, it’s our true nature and condition. We have no choice; we don’t make it when we don’t. Look at the faces of that baby and his father. That’s what it looks like to be afraid, to know despair, to feel alienated. That’s what it looks like when we don’t share in Christ’s love. We will recognize how much we have opened ourselves to this love by how much we share it with others, wherever they are, whatever their color, whatever their nationality, whatever their religion, whatever their language, whatever their race.

This is the Feast of the Ascension of Christ. It moves us to pray for everyone in need of it, and to act justly, love tenderly and walk with humbly with our God with everyone we meet. What a wonderful way to celebrate the Feast of the Ascension of Christ.

So, go out and happy feast the Ascension with everyone, wherever they are