

The Supreme Good of Knowing Christ

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The joy of Easter reminds me of what is considered one of the most memorable passages from the letters of St. Paul. It is found in the Epistle to the Philippians. In comparison to knowing Jesus, Paul said, "I consider everything else as loss because of the supreme good of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. I consider everything else as so much garbage that I may know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing in his sufferings."

St. Paul did have an extraordinary experience of Jesus Christ, as we know, on the road to Damascus. He claimed to have had the same experience of the risen Jesus as did the other apostles. He became aware of the overwhelming love Jesus has for him and for all humans. In this experience he realized that everything the world has to offer is "garbage" compared to living life in Christ.

One of the essential ways of knowing Christ is to imitate him. The knowledge Paul is talking about is experiential. In the love we create around us, we are receiving a sense of the divine love that is part, even now, of our lives. It is in loving one another that we intensify our relationship with Christ. Living in fellowship with Jesus means that the Holy Spirit, God's love, has entered our souls. Thus, our minds are enlightened on how to sustain our commitment to Christ so that we represent God's presence in the world.

Another aspect of imitating Jesus is taking time to notice and to be grateful for the Father's lavish outpouring for us in nature. Jesus looked at natural phenomena and told us to be aware of the Father's care for us. "Look at the birds in the sky; they do not sow or reap, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not more important than they?" Jesus, as a pious Jew, knew the psalms well. Psalm 136 is recited during Passover. The psalmist looks around at the many marvels of nature and the ways God has delivered his people from harm, and sings over and over, "God's love endures forever." Spring days give us a feeling for the graciousness shown forth in creation. It is cause for confident joy in the ways that our God takes care of us.

We are reminded today that Jesus' humiliation on the cross was followed by his glorious vindication in resurrection and eternal glory. St. Paul felt confident that no matter what happened to him in life, if he remained faithful to Jesus, he would share in his resurrection and glory. At times, following Jesus does cause some kinds of suffering, but in the light of the cross St. Paul felt confident that even in the worst situations God is present bringing eternal joy out of temporary setbacks.

During Easter Season we should reflect on what St. Paul called "the power of Jesus' resurrection." Jesus' exaltation resulted in the sending of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God's love coming upon us brings a radical change in our existence. Because we are free, we always have the temptation to live only for ourselves. It requires the power of God's love for us to resist the selfish destruction of others. In the power of the Spirit we can live for God and for our neighbor.

At the beginning of Matthew's Gospel we read that Jesus is "Emmanuel" which means "God is

with us." The last words of Jesus in Matthew are "I will be with you always until the end of the ages." Jesus is with us especially in the text of the Gospel, in the sacraments of the Church, in Christians who live the message of Jesus. When we follow Jesus, we are surrounded by and immersed in the gracious presence of our God. We are missionaries, all of us, to bring the tenderhearted mercies of God to all creation.