

“Blessed are the merciful....”

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Once upon a time, in April 1986, two gray-haired men warmly greeted each other in Tokyo’s International Airport. Both men had tears in their eyes. One man was an American, named Ponich; the other was Japanese, named Ishibashi.

The last time the two men met was 40 years before, as enemies... in a cave in Okinawa. At that time, the American, then Sgt. Ponich, was holding a 5-year-old Japanese boy in his arms. The child had been shot through both legs. Ishibashi was one of 2 snipers hidden in a dark corner of the same cave.

Suddenly, Ishibashi and his comrade leaped from their hiding place, aimed their rifles at Ponich, and prepared to fire point-blank.

There wasn’t a thing Ponich could do. He simply put the 5-year-old on the ground, took out his canteen, and began to wash the child’s wounds. —If he had to die, what better way to die than performing an act of mercy. After all, Jesus said:

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.”

The two snipers watched in amazement. Then, slowly, they lowered their rifles. Minutes later, Ponich did something Ishibashi never forgot. He took the child in his arms, stood up, bowed in gratitude to the two Japanese, and proceeded to take the child to an American field hospital.

“How did the two men meet again after all those years,” you ask.

Well I’m glad you asked that question.

In 1985, Ponich wrote a letter to a Tokyo newspaper, thanking the Japanese people for the two Japanese soldiers, who had spared his life 40 years earlier in that cave in Okinawa. Ishibashi saw the letter and contacted the editor of the paper, who set up the meeting. The meeting was long and affectionate. Each man filled the other in on the details of his life since the war.

*Ponich has one last bit of unfinished business. He is now searching for the child he held in his arms in the cave. **“He was incredible,”** said Ponich. **“He had those bullet holes in his legs and was in awful pain, yet he never cried, never complained. If I could find out what happened to him, it would be the perfect end of the story.”***

The dictionary defines mercy as “compassionate treatment towards those in distress.” It’s the kind of compassionate treatment Ponich showed to the wounded child. It’s the kind of compassionate treatment the Japanese snipers showed to Ponich. The word compassion comes from the Latin and means “to suffer with” or “to feel with.”

The movie, “To Kill a Mockingbird,” contains an especially moving scene, when Atticus Finch says to his children:

“If you want to understand another person, you must crawl inside skin and walk around with them.”

That's an excellent description of compassion. Compassion means being able to get inside other people—to see through their eyes, to feel with their feelings, and to think with their thoughts...from their experience.

It means to get inside the skin of a wounded Japanese boy and see with his eyes, feel with his feelings, and think with his thoughts.

It means to get into the skin of a trapped American sergeant, caring for a wounded child, and see with his eyes, feel with his feelings, and think with his thoughts.

It means to do what God himself did in the person of Jesus Christ. In the most literal sense, God, in the person of Jesus, came down to earth, climbed into our skin, and walked around in our shoes. He became a human being, like us. He looked through our eyes, loved with our hearts, thought with our minds, and felt with our emotions and experiences.

*Today's Gospel is an invitation to us to show mercy to others... **in the way Jesus shows mercy to us.** It's an invitation to us to show mercy to others the way... we would like them to show mercy to us.*

If we accept this invitation, we have the promise of Jesus himself that his heavenly Father will show mercy to us.

He will show us the same compassion Jesus showed the adulterous woman, the Good Thief, and his own executioners—the same compassion that the Japanese snipers showed Sgt. Ponich.

I now close with these words about mercy from a beautiful prayer written by the English poet, Alexander Pope:

***“Teach me to feel another's woe,
To hide the fault I see;
That mercy I show to others,
That mercy show to me.”***

May Almighty God, our Abba, bless you...

the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.