

THE SHIPLEY ART GALLERY

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For more information about other booklets
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THE
GOD
WHO
SPEAKS

DIOCESE OF Hexham & Newcastle

THE SHIPLEY GALLERY, GATESHEAD



THE
GOD
WHO
SPEAKS

THROUGH
ART

Using pictures to help us pray with the Word of God

THE WASHING OF THE FEET by TINTORETTO, 1594



This painting fills the back wall of this small gallery and is one of two large pictures of the Last Supper that flanked either side of the altar in St Marcuola's Church, Venice. The right hand picture of the Last Supper meal is still in place there. This one, the Washing of the Feet, was bought and brought to the North East of England. Visualise this as one half of the whole scene of the Last Supper which is why the main action – Jesus washing the feet of Peter – is in the bottom right hand corner.

Read:

This is a startling portrayal of the Washing of the Feet set not in the Upper Room in Jerusalem but in the loggias of Venice.

The Apostles are all in various stages of undress ready for their feet to be washed, and their activity dominates the centre of the picture around the table or in various poses around the room.

We cannot tell for certain who is who, but Andrew and Philip are thought to be among those seated at table. James the Great, remembered for being a pilgrim, is possibly the figure leaning against a column in the background. For us, the human interest is in Jesus kneeling to wash the feet of Peter (bottom right) and John holding the jug.

But by far the most interesting aspect is the figure of Judas seated on the floor (centre) having his boots pulled off and with his back to Jesus – the picture of apathy, indifference and even contempt.

In contrast, the little white dog (front centre) looks at Christ with devotion and stays beside him. The loyalty of the dog is in stark contrast to the betrayal of Christ by Judas. The intensity of the dog's gaze suggests understanding of what is going on while all the Apostles appear to miss the significance.

Reflect:

This scene captures the supreme act of love and service of Jesus and the incomprehension of the Apostles. Are we any better? Every time we go to Mass we experience the outpouring of the sacrificial love of Jesus for us and his total self-giving in Holy Communion, and yet we can be distracted and unheeding.

John, in his Gospel actually omits the actual words of Jesus over the bread and wine and seems to suggest that Jesus' menial service of bending low and washing the feet of the Apostles like a servant is saying the same thing: service is love. "Do this in memory of me." Serve and love. Do we?

Has this aspect of the Eucharist passed me by? Why is the washing of the feet an important part of the Liturgy of Holy Thursday? Why is it a poignant moment in the unfolding of the Passion story? Why does Pope Francis make a point each year of washing the feet of prisoners, migrants, the poor and disadvantaged? What is he trying to teach us by his actions? How can I live the Eucharist?

Respond:

"Do you know what I have done? Then go and do the same."

When we feed the hungry, directly or indirectly, we are living the Eucharist.

When we reach out to those in need, we are living the Eucharist.

When we visit the sick, imprisoned, housebound, we are living the Eucharist.

When we give of ourselves in different ways, we are living the Eucharist.

When we give of our time, we are living the Eucharist.

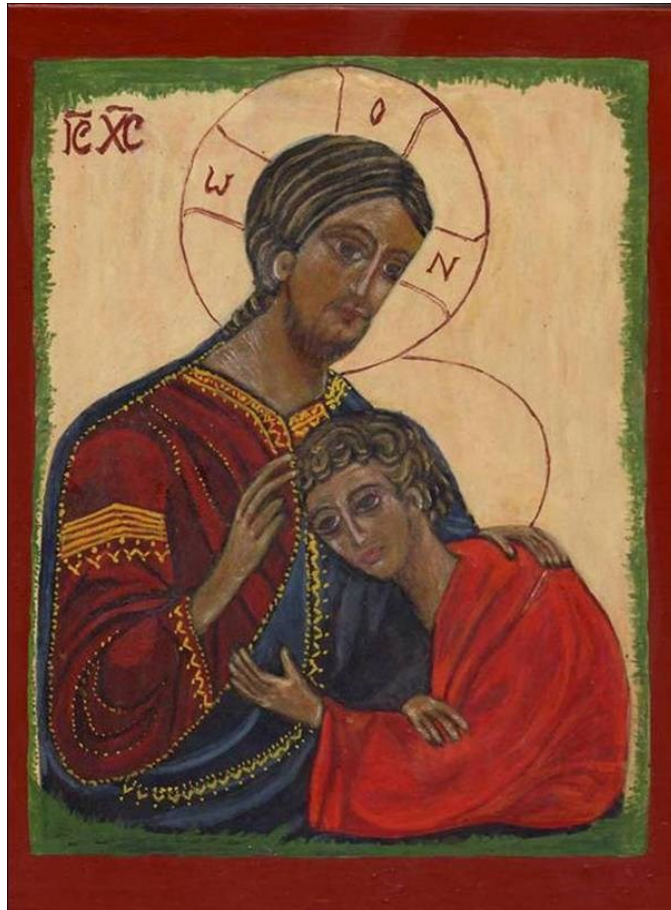
When we give and give and give some more, we are living the Eucharist.

Rest: Be enfolded in Christ's love and embrace. Let him wash your feet, your hands, your heart. Rest your head on his breast as John did at the Last Supper and feel his heart beat. Be as one.

Return:

Be a Eucharistic person – aware, loyal, devoted, practical, self-giving, self-emptying. Choose something small that you can do to embody the Eucharist today.

ICON OF JESUS AND JOHN



Read:

“The disciple whom Jesus loved, was reclining next to Jesus” John 13: 23

This is an image of gentleness and security: the young John safe in the embrace of Jesus his friend, his model, his Lord. The Last Supper had all the poignancy of a last meal before an imminent departure. There is sadness and knowingness in the gaze of Jesus as if to say ‘Do not cling to me. I know best. I am going to my Father . You will not understand but trust me , I will look after you and not abandon you. ‘ There is a vulnerability in the gaze of John – a need simply to rest his head on Jesus and stay there , his ear on Jesus’ heart . Both Jesus and John look out into the distance, out into the world. What do they know? What do they see?

Reflect:

This is a Eucharistic image. The Eucharist has been described as “God’s physical embrace.” (Rolheiser) . When words are exhausted, a gesture is often sufficient . There comes a point, even with God,, when words are not enough. God has to pick us up like a mother her child. Physical embrace is what is needed.. Skin need s to be touched. God knows that. It’s why Jesus gave us the Eucharist. The consuming of bread and wine into his Body and Blood convey the physical oneness, the intimate embrace of Jesus. *Think of all the Masses you have attended, all the Communions you have received . These are all signs of God’s utter love and tenderness .*

This is also an image of how each of us should be focused in prayer, with our head resting on his breast, an ear listening to his heart-beat . No need for words, only a peace rooted and centred in love that can look out to the world without bitterness, anger or despair and remain at peace.

Response:

Let our response be a wordless one as we rest in utter confidence in the love and protection of Jesus. If you need words, repeat slowly and silently:

Trust, Surrender, Believe. Receive.

Return:

Strengthened in the knowledge of Jesus’ love for us, we can face the difficulties of the day in serenity, accepting the things we cannot change, changing the things we can, and being wise enough to know the difference.