

DIOCESE OF Hexham & Newcastle

# THE GOD WHO SPEAKS - THROUGH ART



THE  
GOD  
WHO  
SPEAKS

Using pictures to help us pray with the Word of God.

In this year of **THE GOD WHO SPEAKS** it is good to seek different ways of praying and engaging with Sacred Scripture.

In this booklet, Sr Michael takes us on a journey to some of our local galleries and explores how the paintings there can help us to pray with the Word of God.

Using art for prayer especially Biblical pictures may be of help to people. The Bible, in fact, has always inspired artists and their interpretation of an event in Scripture can shed new light on a familiar event in Scripture and help us in our prayer.

I have chosen some local venues in our diocese that have easy access to religious pictures:

The Bowes Museum, Barnard Castle

Auckland Castle, Bishop Auckland

Ushaw College, Durham

Sunderland Art Gallery

The Shipley Gallery, Gateshead

You can either use this booklet or, even better, visit these places with the booklet prepared for each of them to gaze on and pray with one or more pictures. We acknowledge with thanks their exhibiting and sharing of these beautiful works of art.

## **ICON EXHIBITION – THE LIFE OF CHRIST AS DEPICTED IN THE ROSARY**

**USHAW COLLEGE, APRIL 13 –MAY 31<sup>ST</sup> 2020**

To mark the Year of the Word and the re-dedication of England as the Dowry of Mary (March 2020), there will be an exhibition of Icons on the Life of Christ as depicted in the Rosary. The Rosary is a perfect Scriptural prayer, recalling the birth and childhood of Jesus (Joyful Mysteries); the key events in the life of Jesus (Mysteries of Light) ; the suffering and death of Jesus (Sorrowful Mysteries); the rejoicing of Jesus in Mary in Heaven (Glorious Mysteries). All these icons are written (painted) by amateurs who have attended Icon Painting Workshops so come and read, not look at, the beautiful display in Ushaw College.

# VISIO DIVINA

The method of prayer that I suggest is called *Visio Divina*, an illustrated version of *Lectio Divina*.

We choose a picture, gaze at it or 'read' it and ask ourselves certain questions to help us to respond to its message. The following 5 R's may help us:

**Read (Gaze), Reflect, Respond, Rest, Return to daily life**

**Read (Visio)** Read or gaze at the picture. What incident or person does it refer to? (If we have a Bible, read the biblical account.) What is the artist trying to portray? Look at the characters, colours, gestures – what do they suggest?

**Reflect** or meditate thoughtfully, applying the mystery or message to ourselves, eg is there a message here for me in my life at the present time? Would I have a different understanding of the subject being portrayed? Is it challenging me? In what sense do I identify with it?

**Respond** in prayer. Use your own words to express thanks, praise, love, sorrow etc. or use a well - known prayer.

**Rest or receive.** Just be still and let the picture absorb you. Take your place in the picture and quietly receive the graces God wants to give you as you drink in the power of his presence.

**Return to your daily life.** Keep the memory of this picture in your mind and feel strengthened by your time of prayer.

We could use this method of prayer with any picture, icon or statue. If doing this at home, light a candle before your picture during your time of prayer and make it a sacred space.

In each of the following places I have chosen one or more pictures for your prayerful reflection and have chosen a related icon 'written' by local people to complement the subject.

## **BOWES MUSEUM, BARNARD CASTLE**

There are many works of art in the Religious Gallery, eg several beautiful Madonnas and a remarkable unfolding altar- piece. I have chosen only three:

- **PETER AND PAUL** by Francisco Fracanzano 1612-56.  
These two full length pictures are meant to be seen together).
- **THE TEARS OF PETER** by El Greco 1587-96
- **ICON: PETER AND PAUL EMBRACING** (Icon written by Sr Annette)

## **AUCKLAND CASTLE**

- **JACOB AND HIS TWELVE SONS** by the renowned Zurbaran, 1640s
- **ICON: MOSES AT THE BURNING BUSH** (Icon written by Sr Michael)

## **USHAW COLLEGE – on corridor**

- **JESUS CURING THE BLIND MAN** by Ramsay, 1840, London
- **THE HOLY FAMILY** by von Rhoden, 1843, Rome
- **ICON – THE HOLY FAMILY** (Icon written by Sr Michael)

## **SUNDERLAND ART GALLERY**

- **AFTER THE CRUCIFIXION** by Philip Morris RA
- **ICON – THE LAMENTATION OF CHRIST** (Icon written by Susan Atkinson)

## **THE SHIPLEY, GATESHEAD**

- **THE WASHING OF THE FEET** by Tintoretto, 1594
- **ICON: JESUS AND JOHN AT THE LAST SUPPER** (Icon written by Sr Michael)

**BOWES MUSEUM, BARNARD CASTLE**

**PETER AND PAUL** by Francisco Fracanzano 1612-56.



**Read:**

Gaze at these pictures. Look at the power and strength exuding from these two pillars of the church. The names Peter and Paul are inseparable: Peter the rock, the outspoken, impulsive, lovable follower of Christ who became the chief Shepherd, the first Pope; Paul, the strong, sturdy, tireless preacher and evangelist who took the Good News of God's love in Christ through the known world. They represent the two aspects of the church – authority, leadership, centralisation (Peter) and the charismatic, evangelising church forever reaching out to others, sharing the Good News of salvation for all (Paul). Both have penetrating looks; both are champions of Christ and the Gospel. Peter holds the keys of authority-binding and loosing; Paul holds the book of the Gospel – Good News for everyone. Look at the colour of their garments: Peter – green for growth and earthy brown, perhaps to represent his lowly beginnings; Paul in the startling red of the martyrs. Both had “fought the good fight and finished the race” (First letter of Paul to Timothy 6:11-12)

**Reflect:**

We need both aspects of the church – the stability, solid teaching, and inspired leadership, now centred in Pope Francis, successor of Peter; and the dynamic, ever-growing church of Paul with a message of hope for all. As herald and apostle, it is estimated that Paul walked 9,000 miles on foot apart from his journeys by sea. Look at his soiled, mis-shapen feet, worn out by his labours!

Today, Pope Francis urges us to be missionary disciples like Peter and Paul, to carry on their work for Christ. But there is a cost. Both were martyred - Peter by being crucified upside down; Paul by being beheaded ( see the sword in his hand) – both in the year 67AD, both in Rome. Their joint feast is June 29<sup>th</sup>. Today there are splendid basilicas over their tombs.

Let these facts challenge us and inspire us to follow in their footsteps.

**Respond in prayer:**

- + Pray for Pope Francis as he continues the work of Peter and Paul, teacher and shepherd of us all, embracing the whole world with a message of mercy and hope. Think of his enormous task, his journeys, his reaching out to the faithful, to the poor and marginalised, to the migrants and to those of other faiths, his protection of the environment, his efforts to reform the church.
- + Pray that the church may weather all storms and difficulties in presenting its message which goes against the prevailing culture.
- + Pray that the church may never lose its missionary zeal, that it may reach out to all, rich and poor, male and female, Christian and non-Christian with a message of inclusion.
- + Pray that we may always have witnesses like Peter and Paul ready to lay down their lives if necessary for the sake of the Gospel.
- + Pray for those who are being persecuted today in various parts of the world and suffering for their faith.

**Rest:**

Be filled with trust and gratitude for those who planted the faith and those who passed it on at such cost. Hold on in peace to the promise of Christ to be with his church until the end of time.

**Return to daily life:**

Strengthened and uplifted by the example of these two great saints, resolve to stand up and be counted as a faithful witness of Christ. Think of small ways to show appreciation of your faith – visit a church, light a candle and pray for a strengthening of faith.

## THE TEARS OF PETER by El Greco 1587-96



### Read:

This is not the confident Peter holding the keys of authority (some say the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven.) This is a man who knows he has done something utterly and unspeakably terrible.

It is a picture of anguish and atonement. Peter raises his tear-filled eyes to heaven, hands clasped in prayer as he repents of his denial of Jesus. Recall the incident in Mark 14. Late at night, Peter approached the charcoal fire in the court of the High Priest while Jesus is being tried, was challenged by a servant girl, and, swearing and cursing insisted that he did not know the man. The same Peter who had boasted “Even if all these betray you, I will never betray you”.



**Reflect:**

Why did Peter let Jesus down? Cowardice? Fear? Arrogance? Weakness?

This picture captures the moment of truth, the awful realisation that he had publicly denied ever knowing his Lord.

What led to his repentance – the look of Jesus penetrating his soul as he was led across the courtyard? The sense of his own stupidity and boastfulness?

Was this genuine sorrow and was Peter the better for it? He went out and wept bitterly but did not despair.

El Greco's Peter is not only saintly, he is profoundly human. That is why we can so easily identify with him.

**Respond:**

In the background is the empty tomb with Mary Magdalen and the angel nearby. El Greco uses the bright light and flashing sky to heighten the drama of the moment and to arouse in the viewer a spiritual fervour, a recognition of our own sin, the times when we too have denied Christ. Think of these and in your own words, express your sorrow and pray to Peter for the grace of conversion.

**Rest:**

Quietly identify with Peter in his shame and sorrow and feel Christ looking at you with love and understanding. Surrender yourself to his compassion and merciful forgiveness.

**Return to daily life,**

Strengthened by the knowledge that whatever our weakness and sin, Jesus will not give up on us. After all, Peter was re-instated as the Rock and Founder of the church after his humiliating disgrace. Will Christ be less generous with us?

# ICON OF PETER AND PAUL EMBRACING



## Read:

Gaze on the icon and allow yourself to be in the presence of these two great apostles. They are so different: Peter, a simple fisherman from Galilee. There is a rugged honesty about him, a born leader; Paul, an intellectual, a Pharisee, a Roman citizen from Tarsus, cultured but fanatical in his devotion to Christ – a very complex character.

Peter always recognisable by his full head of hair and rounded face, impulsive and lovable; Paul, balding with a hooked nose, receding forehead, and scraggy beard as well as bandy legs which you cannot see (from a second century description!). Peter, chosen by Jesus as the Rock on which he would build his church, Paul also chosen “to be my instrument to bring faith to the Gentiles”. Peter was with Jesus throughout his ministry and almost to the cross. He met him in the flesh after his resurrection. Paul never met Jesus in the flesh. He was converted on the road to Damascus and received his commission in a vision. They both look beyond. They both invite us to gaze on God through Christ however we know him, whoever we are, whatever our experience.

**Reflect:**

They are so different and yet united. They confronted each other in life and disagreed vehemently and publicly yet during the first Church meeting in Jerusalem it was Peter who defended Paul and his vision of a church for all and not a narrow Jewish sect. They are members of the Body of Christ, both fiercely dedicated, both giving their all, even to death.

Both knew what it was to sin and fail. Peter betrayed Jesus, repented and was forgiven; Paul, full of zeal for the Jewish law, had to be knocked to the ground to hear Jesus, to realise that he was working against him and to allow his life to be turned around. Both were instrumental in the establishment and growth of the early church through their boldness, spiritual strength and wisdom. Both gave their lives for the truth of the Gospel message.

This icon calls us to unity. Unity is strength. We need each other with our differences; we need to accept, understand, and forgive each other – to work for a “harmony of difference”. Think of what Paul taught about the church as a body – all with different gifts and every part doing its job for the good of the whole. (Read 1Corinthians 12)

Ponder on these truths

**Respond:**

Say this prayer slowly:

Almighty God, whose blessed Apostles Peter and Paul, glorified you by their martyrdom; grant that your church, instructed by their teaching and example, and knit together in unity by your Spirit, may ever stand firm upon the one foundation which is Jesus Christ Our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever. Amen.

(Prayer for the feast of Sts Peter and Paul)

Now in your own words:

- + Pray for Pope Francis and all leaders of the church that they may lead us to Christ whatever the difficulties.
- + Pray for the church in its present crisis. Pray for the victims of abuse and also for the perpetrators. We hold our treasure in clay vessels, easily broken. (Paul to Corinthians) There will always be weakness and sin but unity and truth must and will prevail. Dwell on Jesus' promise to be with us always and thank God that we have been chosen to belong to this family of faith.
- + Pray for the unity of all Christians, by saying the Lord's Prayer.

**Rest:**

Think of Paul's words "I live not now I, but Christ lives in me " and "I can do all things in him who strengthens me".

Be aware that Christ is in us, living and working through us, whatever our weakness.

Repeat this short prayer until you are at rest:

*O God, unite all minds in truth, all hearts in charity.*

**Return:**

Renewed in faith, let us resolve to witness to what we believe. We are the church. Let us not be afraid of our identity.

## AUCKLAND CASTLE

# JACOB AND HIS TWELVE SONS by Zurbaran, 1640s



### Read:

Gaze at the portraits of Jacob and his twelve sons. Jacob was the son of Isaac, grandson of Abraham and heir to the promise God made to Abraham. His sons were the founders of the twelve tribes of Israel. Jacob the patriarch, appears in an olive coloured turban and simple red tunic, hunching over his cane. His sons in contrast, fill the 6 ft frames and wear a startling variety of fabrics. On his deathbed, Jacob had bestowed on each a blessing which foretold their destinies (Genesis 49) reflected in their clothing and poses. Sadly, ten of the tribes were wiped out by the Assyrians from the North, leaving only Judah and Joseph in the south.

It is thought that the indigenous people of the New World were the descendants of the lost tribes and that Zurbaran painted these portraits for a wealthy client in Latin America. In 1756, they were bought (except for Benjamin) by the then Bishop of Durham, Bishop Trevor, a supporter of Jewish rights in England, and he hung them in the dining room of Auckland Castle where they have remained.

Judah, Joseph and Benjamin are the most captivating



Judah, ancestor of the Kings David and Solomon wears regal attire and is shown with a lion and sceptre (Lion and ruler of the House of Judah)



Joseph, who had been sold into slavery in Egypt by his jealous brothers, only to rise to a position of great prominence, is shown holding a document that shows his importance as adviser to the Pharaoh and wears richly ornamented clothes, as befits his status.



Benjamin, accompanied by a wolf on a leash, looks back over his shoulder with a teenager's swagger, his lips pursed, his elbow thrust jauntily to the right. Look at this confident, unbothered youngster and then return to his father.

Jacob, a trickster in his youth, wears the same reds and greens as his last child but now he is old and bent towards earth. Surely this is a portrait of the human condition.



**Reflect:**

Jacob was scoundrel, a liar and a cheat who robbed his elder brother Esau of his birthright and then had to flee to his kinsman Laban for his protection. He worked 7 years to marry Rachel whom he loved, only to be tricked into marrying Leah, and then had to work another 7 years for Rachel. Rough justice! But God blessed him because he was heir to the Promise made to Abraham and Isaac and eventually brought him with his sons back to the Promised Land.

Am I aware of God's control and purpose for my life despite my failings and inadequacies?

Joseph, vizier of Egypt, was able to save his father and brothers when famine broke out and they came to Egypt for help. God's ways are not our ways and he writes straight on crooked lines. Can I see this in my life?

Jesus was born of the house of Judah so our supreme good came from a crooked and shifty family. What does this say to me?

**Response:**

Look prayerfully at your family history and thank God that some good has come from difficult and uncertain times and questionable ancestors. Pray this prayer of acceptance – and mean it:

***Whatever has been: Yes***

***Whatever is to come: Yes***

Pray for your children and grandchildren that God will always be with them especially in rocky times.

**Rest:**

In the knowledge that God holds us in the palm of his hand and will enable some good to come from all our mistakes and bad decisions.

**Return:**

With a thoughtful heart to our daily life and resolve to see God's hand in everything.



## ICON: MOSES BEFORE THE BURNING BUSH



### Read:

Moses has had to flee from Egypt for murdering an Egyptian. He fled to Midian, a pagan land, where he married Zipporah, a daughter of Jethro. Moses worked as a shepherd, tending the sheep of his father-in-law. One day, he was alerted to a bush that was burning but not consumed. When he explored the bush, a voice (God) called him by name- Moses, Moses- and told him to take off his shoes for he was standing on holy ground. He then revealed himself as the God of his ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Here, we see Moses removing his sandals – Here I am Lord. In this intimate meeting, God touched Moses to the depths of his heart. There followed the conversation where God called him to go back to Egypt and lead his suffering people to freedom.

Read the account in Exodus Ch. 3 -4 and note all the excuses Moses gave for avoiding this commission: who was he to go to Pharaoh and demand the freedom of the Israelites? After all, he was a murderer on the run and did not even know the name of this God. Even when God worked miracles for him to show that he, God, would be with him, he still argued that he was a poor speaker and his brother Aaron would be far better. But God wanted Moses.

**Reflect:**

Moses was 40 years old when God called him to undertake his life's great work. Do I know what God wants of me? Sometimes I too am invited into the wilderness. In those moments away from everyday chatter, God calls me by name and waits for my response. As Cardinal Newman wrote, "God has created me to do some definite service. He has committed some work to me that he has not committed to another. I have my mission that no one else can do..." Moses was content with a quiet life. To go to Pharaoh and demand the freedom of the Hebrews was too big for him, hence all the excuses which God dismissed one by one. This marks the beginning of Moses' greatness; he became the leader and liberator of his people and the friend of **God** who spoke with him "face to face", the one to whom God gave the Law and 10 Commandments

Do I avoid what God is asking of me with excuses? Too old? Too busy? Beyond my capabilities?

What do you think God meant by asking Moses to remove his shoes? Am I aware of 'holy ground' in my life, the encounters God is waiting to have with me?

God needs our co-operation in working out his plan. Do I ever ask what has God in mind for me? Do I let God work through me?

Moses was a reluctant leader but God used him nevertheless. Am I more generous than Moses?

**Respond:** *with St Ignatius' prayer. Say slowly and sincerely:*

*Dearest Lord,  
teach me to be generous;  
to serve You as You deserve;  
to give and not to count the cost,  
to fight and not to heed the wounds,  
to toil and not to seek for rest,  
to labour and not to ask for reward  
save that of knowing that I do your holy will.*

**Rest:**

Be still and let the things of God touch your heart. Wait for God to whisper your name, to light a flame in your spirit, to speak of how beloved you are. It is humbling to know God needs us to fulfill his plan. In the knowledge that God will work through us, surrender our wills and repeat several times:

*Trust, Surrender, Believe, Receive.*

until we reach a place of quiet abandonment.

**Return:**

Resolve to see everything that happens today as God's will for you. Be alert to hear the voice of God calling you. Watch out for the burning bushes in your life. Do we know what they might be?

## USHAW COLLEGE

There are many portraits of note but I have chosen only two.

### JESUS CURING THE BLIND MAN by Ramsay, 1840, London



#### Read:

Gaze at this picture. See the crowds pressing round Jesus, eager to see him work a miracle, his Apostles watching on the right, the curious onlookers on the left. Jesus and the blind man dominate the scene: Jesus, his hand raised in authority and power, the blind, nameless man, arms outstretched in pleading and anguish. For Jesus, only **this** man mattered; **this** man needed him; **this** man wanted to see. Who is the woman supporting the blind man - his mother? his wife? There are several incidents in the Bible of Jesus healing a blind man. Does this suggest more than physical blindness?

**Reflect:**

Blindness! Imagine life without sight . What could be the worst aspect for you? Insecurity? Dependence on others? Inability to enjoy nature, to read, to have any visual imagination?

What would it be like to see for the first time? Imagine the vivid colours, the beauty, the little things, like a child's smile, the expression on someone's face, the face of a loved one.

Besides physical blindness, there are other kinds, eg prejudice of any kind, jealousy, envy, hatred. And there is spiritual or moral blindness – not seeing good in others, not appreciating God's gifts, selfishness, not seeing others' needs, being unaware of the beggar at our gate, not heeding God's will and action in our lives.

There is **sight** and there is **insight**. We need both.

**Respond:**

Repeat slowly the prayer of the blind man ***Lord that I may see*** and specify what you *want to see or understand*.

*Lord, that I may see your hand at work in my life;*

*Lord that I may see and appreciate the beauty of your creation;*

*Lord give me insight to understand your ways.*

*Pray for those who are physically blind, emotionally blind and spiritually blind.*

**Rest:**

In tranquillity, in the gaze of Christ loving you. Exchange this gaze of love without words, without physical sight, in perfect trust.

**Return:**

With fresh eyes and fresh appreciation of the little things of life.

## THE HOLY FAMILY by von Rhoden, 1843, Rome



### Read:

Gaze at this unusual scene of the Holy Family. It shows us the visit of the three magi bringing their gifts to the infant Christ. The old wise man in the foreground has laid his crown as well as his gift of gold at the feet of the holy child; the second 'king' is wearing a crown of light and bearing his gift of frankincense and the third is standing with his gift of myrrh. We know these gifts are symbolic: gold for a king, frankincense for deity and myrrh for suffering. These strange visitors from the East symbolise the coming of all people to the feet of Christ. Mary is serene in witnessing this remarkable visit and Jesus is raising his right hand in blessing. Joseph is standing apart on Mary's left, his arm resting on a ledge, probably lost in thought and wonder.

Look at the other people in the picture – ordinary people: women with a simple gift of fruit, travellers and children. Notice the lamb in the foreground. Does this suggest these poor people are shepherds or is it symbolic of Jesus the lamb of God who would give his life for all – rich and poor? The shaft of light resting on Mary may be the star, or may denote the blessing of God and the presence of the Spirit.

**Reflect:**

Where do I belong in this picture? The magi were great scholars searching for the truth which had brought them to the feet of this child. How earnest is my search for the things of God? What gifts have I to bring?

This scene illustrates the mystery we call the Epiphany, which means Revelation – God revealing himself through this child to the gentile nations. How strong is my faith to recognise Christ under many guises? How serious am I in sharing the Good News of God’s love with those who have no faith but are searching? Would I take my place beside Mary or hide in the shadows with Joseph and the others? What do you think was going through Joseph’s mind?

**Respond:**

Pray the first verse of this hymn for the Epiphany:

*As with gladness men of old*

*Did the guiding star behold*

*As with joy they hailed its light*

*Leading onward beaming bright*

***So, most gracious God may we***

***Evermore be led to thee.***

*Repeat the last two lines several times.*

**Rest:**

Mary pondered all these things in her heart. She didn’t understand but she remained in peace because of her faith. Remain in peace with Mary, accepting all that God sends. The Word was made flesh for us. We are eternally grateful.

**Return:**

Resolve to give one gift today to the infant Christ. What will it be – your heart?

Look for an opportunity today to share your faith with others

## ICON – THE HOLY FAMILY



### Read:

This is an unusual icon of the Holy Family showing Christ as a teenager (adapted from one by Aidan Hart). They are seated at a table reminiscent of the Last Supper or maybe just an ordinary Passover meal that every Jewish family would have. However, on the table, are not the usual foods of the Passover feast but just the cup or chalice containing wine. The symbolism is clear: this is a foretaste of the sacrifice of Jesus' body and blood, of the Eucharist.

Notice the colours: Jesus in white, symbolising priesthood or divinity; Mary in tunic of blue for spirituality, and a cloak of blood red for humanity or compassion, as if she were wrapping humanity in her arms; Joseph in a blue tunic for spirituality and a green cloak a sign of fertility and new growth.

Mary and Joseph point to Jesus as if to acknowledge the Son of God though Joseph keeps one protective arm round his shoulder.

The three stars on Mary's veil and cloak (one hidden) are symbolic of her virginity, before, during, and after the birth of her son.



**Reflect:**

Ponder on the mystery here. The role of Mary and Joseph as parents of Jesus is ending; he is about to take up his destiny as Saviour of the World, which means sacrifice. Mary and Joseph are sacrificing their son and Jesus is offering himself in sacrifice to his Father for all mankind. All three have a sad, far-away expression which confirms this.

Think of our own lives: children leave home and forge their own paths and parents must learn to give way, though inevitably there is sadness in this. Their main work is done but no-one knows the future. Mary had to face the death of Joseph and eventually would follow her son to the cross. She would stand there as he died and hold the dead body of her son in her arms – the ultimate sorrow for any mother.

**Respond:**

In your own words:

- Pray to Mary and Joseph for all parents as they bring up their children.
- Pray for wisdom to know when to step back and when and how to support adolescents as they search for their identity.
- Pray for healthy family life which is so much under attack today.

**Rest:**

Trust in God who chose Mary and Joseph for the care and upbringing of his son Jesus. Entrust our children and grandchildren to his love, trusting that he knows best and leave our families in his care. Remain in peace.

**Return:**

We all belong to a family; resolve to be a good, caring family member.

## SUNDERLAND ART GALLERY

There is only one picture here – an unusual one

### WHERE THEY CRUCIFIED HIM by Philip Morris, RA



#### **Read:**

This is a remarkable picture of the scene after the greatest event in human history. Jesus' body has been taken away for burial. The thieves too have been removed and probably thrown into a common grave. The crosses are being dismantled in time for the Passover feast. No trace of the momentous sacrifice of the Son of God will remain.

The little group of children playing have obviously no notion of what the crucifixion was and even the man folding the title of Christ King of the Jews is probably oblivious of the import of his actions. He is just doing another job. Life is going on around him. It is a scene of heedlessness.

**Reflect:**

How often we miss the significance of an event. There are some things too great for us to take in. If we had been present at the Crucifixion, would we have lingered to ponder and savour the meaning, to share it with others, or would we have gone away quickly, eager to forget the horror and leave the aftermath to those who had no conception of the importance of the event?

Life is short and can be callous. Why dwell on the distasteful? This scene is so typical of human nature: people gather when there is a tragedy or accident to stare and perhaps take pictures, and then disperse and get on with their lives. Am I any better?

**Respond:**

Repeat the poignant words of the negro spiritual: it is a plea for understanding

*Were you there when they crucified my Lord?*

*Were you there when they nailed him to a tree? .*

*Were you there when they pierced him in the side?*

*Were you there when the sun refused to shine?*

*Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?*

*Were you there when he rose from out the tomb?*

If we missed the suffering, will we miss the glory too?

**Rest:** Let your eyes dwell on a crucifix. Stay there and enter as far as possible into the love and self-giving of Jesus. Make yourself stay there.

**Return:** Practise being mindful of everything we do today. An experience not reflected on is wasted.

## ICON – THE LAMENTATION OF CHRIST



### Read:

Gaze on this utterly sad and loving scene and contrast it with the previous picture. Here, Christ's death is being lamented by those closest to him – his mother Mary who cradles his head on her knee, St John who had stood at the foot of the cross, faithful to the end. He was the beloved disciple who had laid his head on the breast of Jesus just the night before at the Last Supper. It would be nice to think that the figure in blue is Peter who had denied Jesus and fled, and now returns to prepare him for burial, but it is more likely to be Joseph of Arimathea who gave his own tomb for Jesus' burial. All the women behind, from Mary Magdalen on the left, are grieving and sorrowful. They had followed Jesus courageously to the end and now wanted to anoint his body for burial. This is a portrayal of love and fidelity. The cross stands as a sign of victory and salvation with the inscription in Greek IC XC ( Jesus Christ ) and the crown of thorns and spear and sponge – all symbols of suffering. Even the workman is interested in this unusual death.

**Reflect:**

Am I here among his nearest and dearest, or have I walked away to get on with my life? When a loved person dies, we need time to grieve and lament and do the best we can. Jesus' death happened so quickly – they were all in shock but they wanted to be there and stay there. Think of our own bereavements. We all cope in different ways and some wounds never heal. Try to come to terms with the sorrows you have experienced. Mary, John and the others buried Jesus with reverence and dignity and then withdrew, only to be rewarded with the joy and glory of the Resurrection when all their tears were wiped away.

**Respond:**

Pray to Mary Mother of Sorrows for all those who have lost loved ones and are grieving. Renew our faith in the Resurrection. Our loved ones are now with God where we will join them some day. Thank God for this hope and assurance.

**Rest:**

Repeat quietly and several times until all your anxieties cease:

*Jesus remember me, when you come into your kingdom.*

**Return:**

There is great healing in routine. Thank God for the graces of everyday, and the ways in which he meets you in the ordinary events of each day, and the people we take for granted. Try to be mindful of God's presence today.

## THE SHIPLEY, GATESHEAD

### THE WASHING OF THE FEET by Tintoretto, 1594



There is only one picture of note in this small gallery – The Washing of the Feet by Tintoretto 1594. It fills the back wall and is one of two large pictures of the Last Supper that flanked either side of the altar in St Marcuola's Church, Venice. They were never meant to be separated. The right hand picture of the Last Supper meal is still in place in the church in Venice. This one, the Washing of the Feet, passed through a succession of owners before it found its way 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. Tintoretto has transported this Biblical scene from the Upper Room in Jerusalem into an open, light-filled loggia in Venice.

The Apostles are deep in conversation and removing their sandals and stockings ready for Christ to wash their feet. Their activity dominates the centre of the picture around the table or in various poses around the room. The sketchy grouping in the top right hand corner reminds us of the imminent last Supper as does the large table which dominates the centre of the picture. 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 weary, hat-wearing 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.

*Will you let me be your servant, let me be as Christ to you,  
pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant too.*

**Rest:**

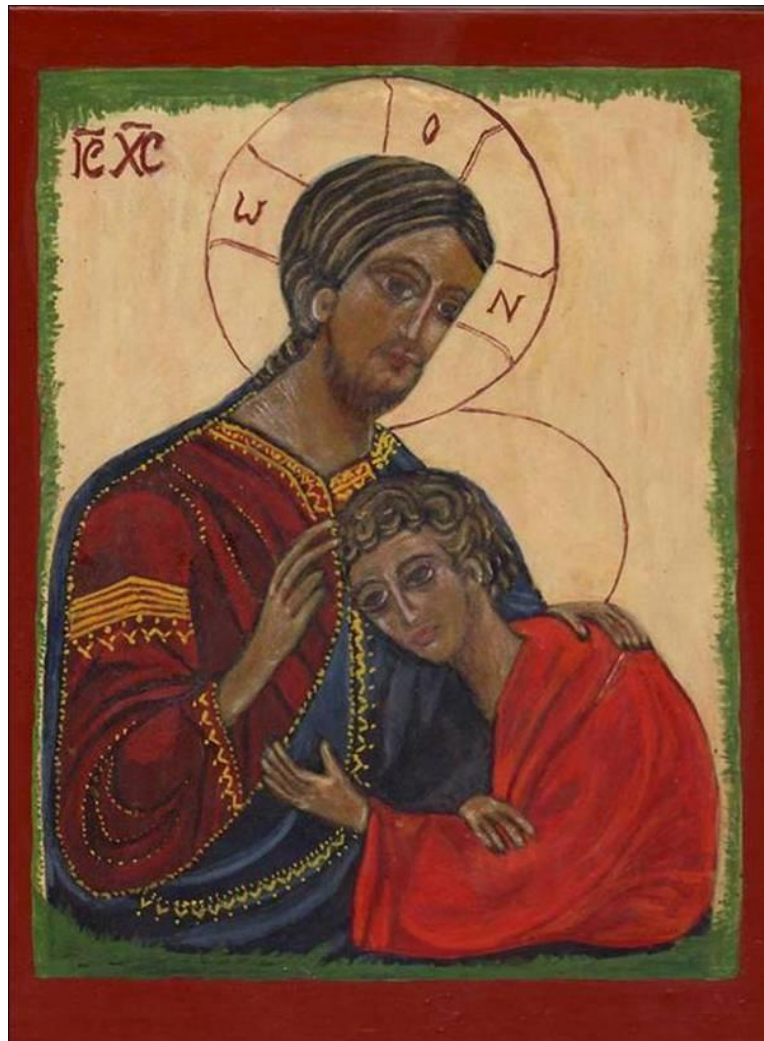
Be enfolded in Christ’s love and embrace. Let him wash your feet, your hands, your heart. Rest your head on his breast as John did at the Last Supper and feel his heart beat. Be as one.

**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: JESUS AND JOHN AT THE LAST SUPPER



### 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 needs to be touched. God knows that. It’s why Jesus gave us the Eucharist. The consuming of bread and wine, now changed into his Body and Blood, convey the physical oneness, the intimate embrace of Jesus. Think of all the Masses you have attended, all the Communion 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.

**Respond:** Pray slowly:

O Jesus, grant us hearts like yours, hearts that go out in genuine concern and service to others, in sincere greeting and warm welcome, till, in the fellowship of sharing and the building of community we hasten the coming of your kingdom.

**Rest:**

Repeat slowly and silently:

*Jesus, I love you, Jesus, I need you, Jesus, I trust you, Jesus, stay with me.*

Then, without words, rest in utter confidence in the love and embrace of Jesus.

**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.

## MARY - FROM LA GRANDE CRÈCHE BY LES SOEURS DE BETHLEEM

Since Mary is the one who received the Word of God and allowed it to take flesh within her, I thought it appropriate in this Year of the Word ( God Speaks to Us) to end this booklet with a Visio Divina exercise on Our Lady of the Annunciation. Below, is an image of a statue not in any of our Art Galleries. It is part of a large “peasant Crib” created by the Sisters of Bethlehem in the south of France. It may help those who have pictures, statues, and icons to pray at home.



### Read:

Gaze for some time on this statue. See Mary’s pose of acceptance and surrender to the Word of God as announced to her at the Annunciation. The Angel Gabriel spoke of God’s choice of her to be the Mother of his Son and she, a young girl of perhaps 14 or 15 years of age, was puzzled and afraid. When the Angel said that the power of God would overshadow her and the Spirit would come upon her and that the child to be born of her would be the Son of God, she humbly bowed her head and extended her hands in total acceptance. “I am the handmaid (servant) of the Lord. let it be done to me as you have said.” Read the account in Luke’s Gospel Ch 1:26-38

**Reflect:**

When Mary assented to the Angel's request to be the Mother of God, she did not know what the future might hold. As we know, she had to repeat that 'Yes' daily even to standing beneath the cross of Calvary. The same is true for us when we commit ourselves to marriage or to any state in life. None of us can see into the future, so we need the guidance and strength of the Holy Spirit. Mary's strength and humility can be ours if we listen to the will of God and follow it as she did. She heard the Word of God and observed it. In this way she became not only the Mother of God but the first disciple of Christ. We are all called to be disciples, to love and serve the Lord as she did, so Mary can help us in this.

**Respond.** Say prayerfully:

Holy Mother of God, blessed are you among women.

You listened and followed what was asked of you  
and so you became the womb that carried Jesus.

This is your distinction that no earthly being can ever repeat.

Pray for us, that we may become worthy to follow your Son.

Pray for us now and at the hour of our death. Amen

**Rest:**

Place yourself interiorly in the same position as Mary in this statue – at peace and totally at the disposal of God. Open your hands to receive the graces God wishes to give to you.

Repeat as long as necessary:

*Surrender – receive; surrender – receive; surrender – receive.*

**Return:**

Straight after the Annunciation, Mary went in haste to visit her cousin Elisabeth and help with her confinement. She was also with child – John the Baptist. We can only wonder at the meeting of the two, which Mary expresses in the Magnificat, Let us try, like Mary, to do some act of practical charity today.