



# Holy Thursday

## Love one another as I have loved you.

*John 13:34*

I have always wondered why, in describing what occurred on the evening before the crucifixion, the writer of John's Gospel speaks of Jesus washing the feet of those who were at table with him and not of the meal itself, not of the instigation of Eucharist – the breaking of bread and sharing of wine – “the Last Supper”, described in each of the synoptic Gospels. This Gospel differs from the synoptics in other respects, the meal shared is not a Passover meal, and is attended by the disciples of Jesus, his followers, not exclusively by the chosen twelve. (*Matt 26:20, Mark 14:17; Luke 22:3,30*)

And again, I ponder why the washing of the feet is the central action of the events occurring around the meal on that evening. Washing of feet before a meal was common practice at the time with a slave bringing a bowl of water and guests washing their own feet.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus chooses to wash the feet of his disciples “those he had always loved and were his in the world.” (*John 13:1*) Not surprisingly, this action is often understood as an example of servant leadership, where the person with power and authority takes the role of servant to those he or she is leading. Jesus' own words support this understanding to an extent, “If I your Lord and Teacher have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example that you should do what I have done to you.” (*John 13:14-15*)

However, I think there is another meaning which can be given to Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet. That is, that it is a demonstration of the second gift<sup>2</sup> which Jesus gives his disciples that evening, the gift of the New Commandment. Jesus says “I give you

a new commandment, love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another. This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (*John 13: 34-35*) This second gift is not part of the readings for Holy Thursday but falls within Chapter 13 and interestingly comes immediately after Judas leaves the gathering.

This new commandment is the centrepiece of what occurs on Holy Thursday in John's Gospel, with the washing of the feet being a manifestation of it. It is the essence of Jesus' ministry succinctly reduced to a single line “As I have loved you, so you also should love one another”, and further this is how you will be identified as followers of mine.

This requirement to love as Jesus loved is not always easy. We walk with God, we share Eucharist, we learn patience, we listen deeply until understanding of sorts dawns and we cultivate an openness to what the other might be teaching us. It often requires that we hold conflicting ideas in tension as we live into their reality or hold people at arms' length until the light gets in and we begin to see things from their perspective.

May this Holy Thursday remind us of the gift of the commandment to love one another and may the Eucharist we share during this Easter period nourish us on this journey. Pope John Paul II wrote “The service of others is the criterion by which the authenticity of our Eucharist is judged” (*Mane Nobiscum Domine*, 28).<sup>3</sup> Perhaps we could equally say that the love of others is the criterion by which our Eucharist is judged.

**Bernadette Wrafter**  
**Josephite Affiliate**

<sup>1</sup> Coloe, Mary, *Wisdom Commentary John 11-21*, (Minnesota, Liturgical press, 2021), 366.

<sup>2</sup> The first being the washing of the feet.

<sup>3</sup> Taken from an article by Fr Peter Fennessy on Sieger Koder's painting of The Washing of the Feet in *Manresa Matters*, Spring/Summer 2023.