

# *Journey through Triduum*

Reflecting on the Lectionary Readings • by Art Zannoni • *Holy Thursday*

*Exodus 12:1-8, 11-14 • 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 • John 13:1-15*

## *Introduction to the Triduum*

The word “*Triduum*” comes from two Latin words (*tres* and *dies*) which mean “a space of three days.” This can be confusing since we have four days with very special names—Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday. The confusion is cleared up if we realize that the Church, on high festival days, counts a day in the same way as Jewish people count days and festivals; that is, from sundown to sundown. The *Triduum* begins at dusk on Holy Thursday and continues through dusk on Easter Sunday. Thus the *Triduum* consists of three, 24 hour periods that stretch over four calendar days.

## *Insights on the Readings*

First Reading (Exodus 12:1-8, 11-14)

- ◆ The reading sets forth the ritual prescriptions for the annual celebration for the Feast of Passover.
- ◆ The reading emphasizes God, who passes over, saving the Israelites from the plagues in Egypt.
- ◆ God passes over both the original Israelites and all of us, preserving us from harm, leading us out of bondage and into freedom.

Second Reading (1 Corinthians 11:23-26)

- ◆ What Paul received he now hands on, “that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread and wine and after he had given thanks, broke it and said, ‘This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’”

Gospel (John 13:1-15)

- ◆ The text describes Jesus washing the feet of his disciples.

## *Jesus Washes the Feet of His Disciples*

In the Gospel of John, there is no specific ritual of breaking the bread and sharing the wine cup at a Last Supper. Instead, there is the ritual of Jesus washing the feet of the disciples. The text says Jesus did this during supper.

The story is both simple and at the same time profound. Jesus intends to show his disciples how much he has loved them before he leaves them. The first Holy Thursday night was the night before Jesus' death. Rather than plot how to escape or prepare an iron clad defense, Jesus is not focused on himself, but on his disciples. Rather than thinking about himself, he is thinking about teaching love to his disciples by his profound action of self-giving. He gives himself in humble service to

teach how disciples should love one another. So Jesus stoops, bending before the disciples, reversing the relationships. He, the master, becomes the servant who washes their feet.

## ***Background***

To better understand the meaning of this passage, some background is needed. Washing the feet of guests before a meal was an ancient custom of hospitality, as evidenced in Genesis 18:3–5, where Abraham provides such hospitality to guests. Foot washing was also a standard custom at banquets in the Greco-Roman world. Since guests were reclining at very low tables, it made sense to have their feet washed of the “junk” in the streets (the streets were the latrines). In the Greco-Roman world, it was generally the duty of a slave to do this.

Jewish tradition and rabbinic law at the time of Jesus, prescribed that a Jewish slave or servant could not be required to wash the master’s feet or the feet of his guests. Why? Because it was considered to be too ignominious a task, even for a slave or servant. People wore sandals through streets that were latrines. Peoples’ feet were crusted, smelly, and repulsive, and even worse, they may have been diseased or covered in sores. In light of this, according to Jewish law and custom, each guest invited to a meal would wash his own feet. Thus, the disciples, and especially Peter, were shocked when Jesus does something to them not even required of a slave, and then asks his disciples to do likewise.

## ***Jesus' Self Revelation***

The foot-washing, like all of Jesus’ actions in the Gospel of John, needs to be understood as an act of self-revelation on the part of Jesus. The reader, then, is cued in to look for a revelation of Jesus’ relationship with God, and his love for his “own.” The foot-washing reveals Jesus’ unfettered love for his disciples, and it is this love that holds the promise of new life for the disciples. For Jesus “...loved his own in the world and loved them to the end.” By washing his disciples’ feet, Jesus enters into an intimate relationship with the disciples that mirrors the intimacy of his relationship with God. It is an intimacy that discomforts Peter, because it overturns all of Peter’s and our conventional assumptions of roles and propriety. Yet, it is only by accepting Jesus in the surprising roles of loving host and intimate servant, that one has a “share” with him, that one receives the love of God. Our daily lives are all about letting Jesus wash us with his love, so we can wash others with our love.

## ***The Challenges and the Towel***

John 13 challenges every generation of disciples to allow themselves to be placed in the hands of Jesus. Jesus asks disciples to enter into relationship with him, on his terms, and that they allow their relationship with him to be defined by God’s love, and God’s love alone.

The towel that has been around Jesus’ waist during the foot-washing has become quite dirty. That towel is the insignia of all the baptized followers of Jesus. It reminds us that if we are going to witness to our faith, we have to get down into the dirt of peoples’ lives and wash them free of it, as Jesus did. When we do this, we live up to Jesus’ image of being a foot-washing Messiah. Disciples take Jesus’ challenge seriously when we wash each others’ feet. We take to heart Jesus’ teaching: “*I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do.*” Jesus gave himself completely to those present, and charged them to give themselves completely as well. The call and challenge is to embody the love and service of Jesus for one another.

There is a story told by an eyewitness that appeared in the *New York Times* many years ago, about a little boy on a cold, December day in New York City:

*A little boy about ten years old was standing before a shoe store on the sidewalk barefooted, peering through the window and shivering from the cold. A lady approached the boy and said, "My, but you're in such deep thought staring in that window!"*

*"I was asking God to give me a pair of shoes" was the boy's reply. The lady took him by the hand and went into the store and asked the clerk to get a half dozen pairs of socks for the boy. She then asked him if he could give her a basin of water and a towel. He quickly brought them to her. She took the little fellow to the back part of the store and, removing her gloves, knelt down, washed his little feet, and dried them with the towel.*

*By this time the clerk had returned with socks. Placing a pair upon the boy's feet, she purchased for him a pair of shoes. She tied up the remaining pairs of socks and gave them to him. She patted him on the head and said, "No doubt you will be more comfortable now."*

*As she turned to go, the astonished child caught her by the hand, and looking up into her face, with tears in his eyes, asked her... "Are you God's wife?"*

### ***Reflection Questions***

- How do you react to Jesus as a foot-washing Messiah?
- How can you empty yourself and serve others as Jesus did?
- What are, or were, some of the times in your own life, when you, like Peter, would not allow Jesus to wash you?