

Gospel Contemplation: Jesus Washes the Disciples' Feet

Introduction

Gospel Contemplation is a way of praying that St. Ignatius proposes quite frequently in his *Spiritual Exercises*. You are invited to use your imagination to enter the scene, to take part, to let the scene unfold. As Ignatius suggests, notice the people, listen to them, watch what they do. Perhaps you may sense an invitation to be one of the individuals in the scene and engage in a conversation with one of them. You can do this on your own, or use the text below as a guide.

If this way of praying is new – simply relax and try to become engaged in the scene. Try not to worry about what you are “supposed to” be doing. If you find yourself distracted during your prayer, very gently bring yourself back to the scripture text or your imaginative contemplation.

If at any point during the guided contemplation your imagination comes to life in such a way that God invites you to stay with a particular moment, follow the invitation that you sense, rather than move on to where the written contemplation is going. In that case you might want to stop reading and continue on your own.

Background to the Text

We often think of the Last Supper as a Passover meal -- and Matthew, Mark, and Luke describe it as such. However, John places the Last Supper before the Passover, and the crucifixion of Jesus on the day of preparation for the feast. John's account is the only one that includes the washing of the disciples' feet, and also is the only one that does not include the ritual blessing of bread and wine that we know as the institution of the Eucharist.

Quiet your body and mind

- Choose a position where you can be relaxed but alert.
- Breathe deeply several times and let your body relax
- Breathe out any worries or stressful thoughts and put them in God's hands
- Become aware of God's presence here with you now, looking at you with love.

Ask for a grace

- Ask God for whatever you need at this time during this prayer period. If nothing comes immediately to mind, you might ask for the grace of humility to do as Jesus did.

Read the scripture passage

Read the passage slowly, savoring the words and beginning to imagine the scene. Read it twice if that helps you to visualize it.

John 13:1-15

Before the feast of Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to pass from this world to the Father. He loved his own in the world and he loved them to the end. The devil had already induced Judas, son of Simon the Iscariot, to hand him over. So, during supper, fully aware that the Father had put everything into his power and that he had come from God and was returning to God, he rose from supper and took off his outer garments. He took a towel and tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and dry them with the towel around his waist.

He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Master, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus answered and said to him, "What I am doing, you do not understand now, but you will understand later." Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered him, "Unless I wash you, you will have no inheritance with me." Simon Peter said to him, "Master, then not only my feet, but my hands and head as well." Jesus said to him, "Whoever has bathed has no need except to have his feet washed, for he is clean all over; so you are clean, but not all." For he knew who would betray him; for this reason, he said, "Not all of you are clean."

So when he had washed their feet and put his garments back on and reclined at table again, he said to them, "Do you realize what I have done for you? You call me 'teacher' and 'master,' and rightly so, for indeed I am. If I, therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another's feet. I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do."

Imaginative Contemplation

In your imagination, see the room where Jesus is having supper with his disciples. What is the room like – is it large or small? How is it arranged? Are there windows, and if so is there still light coming in at this hour?

Now see the people in the room, yourself among them. Who is there? Is it just the twelve, or a somewhat larger group of Jesus' friends?

Look around at all the people there, and take a moment to listen in on and draw profit from some of the conversations. What are they talking about?

Now notice Jesus. What is he doing during the meal? The scripture says, "He loved his own in the world and he loved them to the end." Can you see this love as he interacts with his friends? You know what he'll face in the coming hours – consider how Jesus chooses not to exercise any divine power, but to accept what will come.

At a certain moment, Jesus rises from the meal, removes his outer garments, and ties a towel around his waist. As he begins to wash the disciples' feet, how they react? What do you feel?

Jesus comes to Peter, and Peter objects. Watch the interaction between the two of them as Jesus explains that he must wash Peter's feet. What is Peter like during this conversation? And how does Jesus respond, his words but also in his expressions.

Now Jesus comes to you to wash your feet. Let the moment unfold in your imagination however it will, conversing with him or keeping silent.

After Jesus moves on to the next person, pay attention to what you are feeling and thinking as he finishes washing everyone's feet.

After he finishes and puts away the towel and basin, Jesus returns to the table and says, "Do you realize what I have done for you? You call me 'teacher' and 'master,' and rightly so, for indeed I am. If I, therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another's feet. I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do."

What does this mean for you?

As the supper continues, find your way to where Jesus is sitting and talk with him about what you have experienced. And when you are ready, finish with a favorite prayer.

Review of Prayer

St. Ignatius recommends that we review our prayer. A written review has many advantages. It enables us to look back on our prayer experience, and to notice what happened. It allows us to be fully present to our experience of prayer. We do not write while we are praying. The review of prayer enables us not to judge ourselves or look for how well we are doing. It helps us to become more sensitive to how God is speaking to us in the here and now. It is also a precious record of our journey with God, which nourishes wholeness and integration.

Some questions to assist with your review:

What happened in your prayer?

What feelings did you experience?

During the prayer period, when did you feel encouraged?

When did you feel discouraged?

Did you receive the grace you asked for?

What did you receive?