

There is a focal point in a painting in the National Gallery of London, which in recent years has compelled the independent attentions of my next of kin and myself. It is the light the emanates from the eyes of Christ as he washes Peter's feet. Here is Man of God anointing the feet of the fisherman that once cried out: "Depart from me, master, for I am a sinner!" In Romance languages, sinner and fisherman are expressed by similar words. In addition, the sign of the zodiac for *Fishes* corresponds in astro-medicine to the feet, the sign for *Pisces* showing two angled fishes pulling in opposite directions, which demonstrates the ambivalence (or walking apace) of the human condition.

What is the implication of Christ's washing the feet of Peter, who in turn is overawed by the lord of his soul in guise of servant? There seems to be a connection with verse 52.7 in the Book of Isaiah: "How beautiful upon the mountain are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings....." It is an invocation to chose the right path, a washing of the dust that adheres to our soles, analogous to the sins that adhere to our souls, and also an act of veneration as in the Vedic culture of India, where touching another's feet is a sign of respect and devotion.

Having on two occasions been treated as Peter was by Jesus, my embarrassment was mitigated by the love expressed in those given moments by those who embodied respectively Mary of Magdala and Martha of Bethany. The former wanted to testify personal devotion, the latter to impart a token of maternal caring. I experience their touch without words in a vat that evoked a baptismal font as an initiation to service, where doer and receiver are one in the unity of the Holy Ghost.

The light of Christ — liberator and anointer, servant and liturgos, that radiates from his eyes and from his head into the dimly lit room leaves my mouth ajar. Here the role-model of the civilization into which I was born reminds frail humans of their divinity. Emmanuel raises mortals to the throne. Simon-bar-Yochanan (Peter) is seated and Emmanuel kneels before him with a look of unresistable love. This is not the enthroned *Christos Basileos* of Byzantine or Carolingian vaults, that stares into space, nor the *Victor Rex* of Gothic cathedrals that raises his hand in judgement, but the Christ who said to the judges that condemned an adulteress to be stoned according to the law: "Let he who is without blemish cast the first stone".

Emmanuel (God-with-us) decriminalized sin because he had compassion for the human condition. And thus he broke with the magisterium of his time.

There is commotion in the room, where this interaction takes place. The other disciples are already rinsed and dried; a fire is stoked and, as some move to prepare for the commemoration of the Passover and Exodus, one can fathom Jesus walking Simon through the Red Sea, as the new Moses. As Adonai commanded Moses to remove his sandals because the earth whereon he stood was holy, Emmanuel sanctifies the feet of Simon because he would be a bearer of good tidings wherever he journeyed henceforth. If the earth of the land was considered holy, why then wash the dust from the feet that have trodden on it? To refresh them from the heat of the day? Or to make them holier than the earth? Not the land is holy but the living being that you touch.

Simon Peter is a strong partner in the dialogue with Christ; he looks like a challenge for a God. Kneeling before him was not the “Son of David come to restore the Kingdom of Israel” but a sovereign whose “kingdom was not of this world” or, as the disciple Thomas quoted him saying: “The kingdom is in you”.

But I indulge here in interpreting Jacobo Robusti, termed Tintoretto, whose love for the Christ who gave of himself so totally, unconditionally and consequentially, engendered a painting that shows the man who acknowledged to be Son-of-God, not as king of kings, nor as supreme judge of the living and the dead, but as brother of sinners and servant of servants, who is not to be encountered with the folded hands of a liege nor with the knockknees of petitioners but with upraised arms like his awe-struck friend Simon-bar-Yochanan, whom he repeatedly surprised with the wonders of his ways.

There is a pendant to this painting. It is Tintoretto’s representation of The Last Supper which hangs above the altar of San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice. Though it is less known than Leonardo’s in Milano, it expresses a moving intimacy that one best contemplates in total silence. For this master of colors each stroke of the brush was an act of adoration with which he made light shine in the darkness, though the darkness comprehended it not.

Great works of art are born, their masters make them happen. Then, as a child that is well turned out leaves its proud parents’ home to embark on its journey, such works render a testimony more compelling than dogmatic teachings. In the hands of skilled artists, magisterium becomes poetry.

