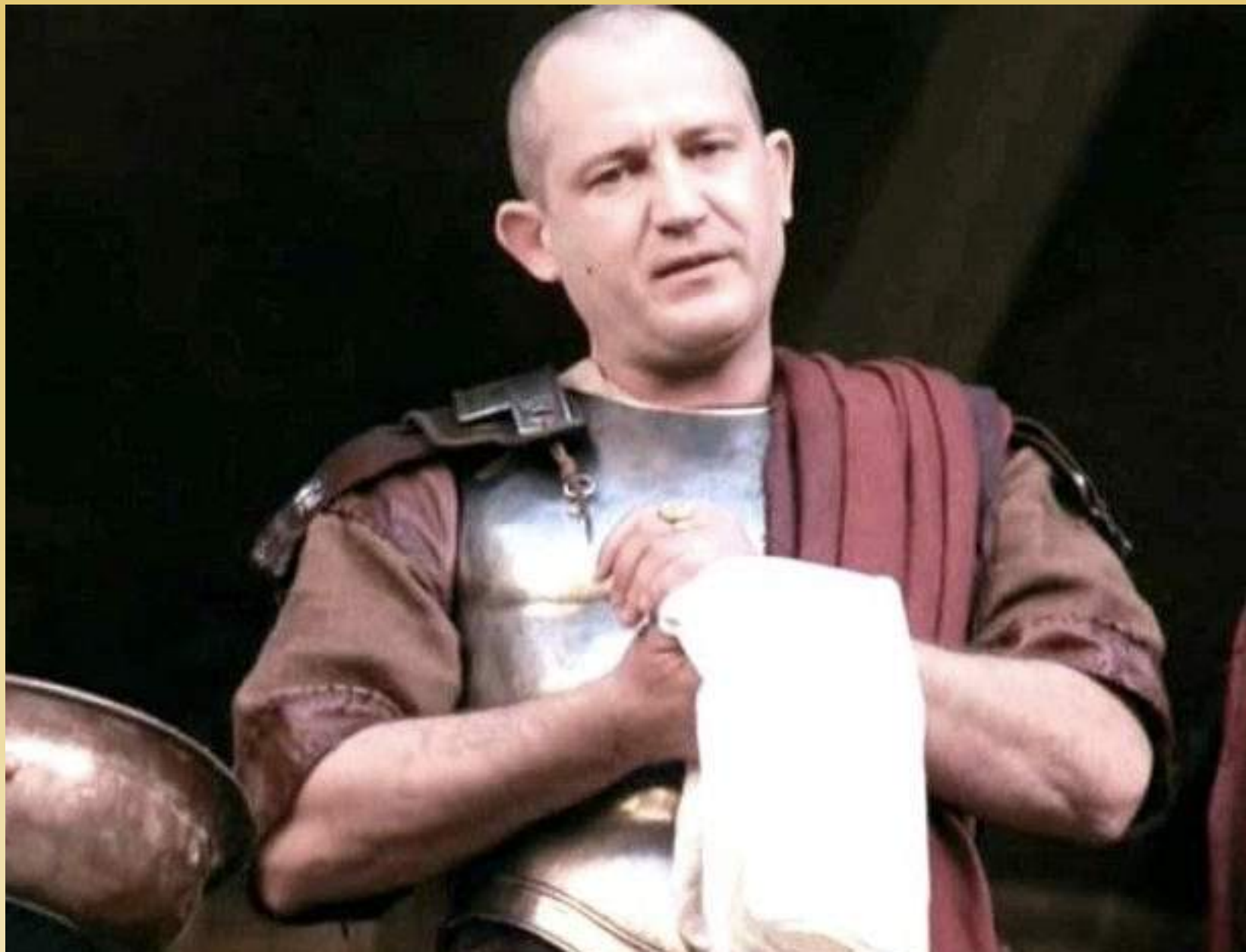




German Priest-Painter,
Fr Sieger Koder (1925 – 2015)

*A Story
of
Two Basins*

28 March 2021



The entire story of holy week can be told with two basins. And maybe the entire story of our life, can be told with two basins. There are two stories in the New Testament that occurred within 24 hours of each other, and they create a bewildering contrast of two individuals, two attitudes, two lifestyles and two perspectives. Which basin would we use?



Pilate's Basin of Water: Ditching Responsibility

The story of Pontius Pilate is most enthralling. As Roman Governor of Judea, he found himself thrust into a situation he could never imagined. The religious elite of the country came to him, fervidly demanding the crucifixion of one they claimed to be a horrible criminal. Pilate resented being summoned for any meeting early on a Friday morning. The high priest had said it was an emergency. But *"to the Jews,"* he muttered to himself, *"everything is an emergency."* If there was one thing Pilate had learned in his three years as governor of this backwater province, it's that Jews are fierce about their religion. Not easy to reason with.

Pilate gazed at the crowd and was blunt: *"I find nothing wrong with this man"* (John 18:38). He knew very well that the religious leaders had arrested Jesus out of envy (Matthew 27:18). So what did Pilate do when he caved in to political pressure and commissioned the execution of a man he knew to be innocent? The Mediterranean sun was already getting hot. Pilate wiped his brow - being careful not to move the laurel wreath that showed who was in charge here. Pilate spoke to the crowd for the third time and issued his judgment. *"But what harm has this man [Jesus] done? I have found no case against him that deserve death, so I shall have him flogged and then let him go"* (Luke 23:22). *"No! That's not what we want!"* they said. *"Crucify him!"* (cf. Luke 23:23)

Pilate saw that, he was not getting anywhere and that a riot was developing. He motioned for a slave nearby, **"Get me a basin of water."** Pilate washed his hands before the crowd, saying, **"I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourself"** (Matthew 27:24). So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, *"I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves."*

To Pilate, the basin of water that he called for, and in which he washed his hands, represent abandoned responsibility. He relinquished the operation of principles and ethics. He followed the path of fallen humanity and declared himself "innocent." It was here that things began to go wrong for Pilate. He violates the voice of his conscience. Pilate's wash basin was a dead failure because he was a man who proposed to wash away his guilt of sin which he does not recall and of which he does not take any repentance.

Jesus' Basin: Love in Action

Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off His outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. **Then He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around Him"** (John 13:3-5).

Jesus got up from the table on Thursday evening. He laid his outer robe aside. He wrapped a towel around His waist. Then He found a simple pottery basin and poured in water. He got down on His knees and worked His way around the table, washing each one's feet, and drying them with the towel at His waist. He had to lower His head, almost touching the ground. He felt at peace deep within. He knew that the Father had given Him authority over everything. There was nothing to prove, nothing to push for. Just the freedom to serve in all humility.

An emotive depiction of Jesus washing the feet of Peter at the Last Supper was the much influential work of German Priest-Painter, Fr Sieger Koder (1925 – 2015). On the night of Jesus' betrayal, in the Eucharist we remember His sharing of bread and wine. But this is not all that took place. During the meal, Jesus got up and proceeded to humble Himself and began to wash His disciple's feet.

The painting shows us a world inhabited by real people. We do not see the haloed Messiah. No! Rather this is the earthly and grabby world. To see the world as we see it. Peter's right hand is placed gently on Jesus' back, they are so close it almost looks like a hug. Peter's left hand was up as a sign for Jesus to stop, as he is not worthy to have his master wash his dirty, smelly feet. The painting shows us this scene in a heightened way. The feet are large and calloused. They are feet that really walked. They would ache, and they would be tired and in need of refreshing. And Jesus is there ready to be the one to relieve the pain of their physical burdens.

As Jesus is bending away from us, bowed low, we only see a glimpse of Jesus' face in reflection. Peter protested at the thought of the man he respected and knew to be Divine lowering Himself o such an act of servitude. The two striking colours are the blue on which Jesus is kneeling on, a colour for a king. Jesus Himself is in white, representing God's light in the world. Jesus has the towel over His head and shoulder in readiness for drying Peter's feet. The white light extends to the corner of the table to highlight the bread and cup of wine, in readiness for the soon to take place Last Supper.

Jesus performs an endearing act, humbling Himself and emphasising that He, though exalted was ready to serve. In seeing Jesus' face in the reflection in the water, the artist mirrors this theme. Only in service do we truly see the face of God. Only by being prepared to work for others and change and enrich their lives will we glimpsed the glory of God. *"So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another's feet"* (John 13:14).

However dark the situation may be, we realise as we serve Him, that we become His hands and His feet in the world. Many of us are good at helping others but we lack humility to accept help if it is offered to us. Love in action is a two way thing. It is altruistic to give but it is also humbling to receive. As Jesus said to the disciples, they were to serve others and receive from each other. This is the challenge that Jesus still leaves us with, to find those people in the world who need His healing presence and to become the serving, willing hands and feet of the Lord! Jesus is most clearly seen, most fully the Saviour when *He is the Servant* and in daily Acts of Service we see *Him Present!*

*Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, **took off his outer garment**, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was around him. John 13:3-4*

The Gospel of John describes Jesus **taking off his "outer robe"** which implies more than just stripping off some physical clothing. In order for Jesus to wash His disciples' feet, including Judas who will betray Him, Jesus must strip off a lot of outer things (pride, moral judgments, superiority, ideology, and personal dignity) so as to wear only His inner garment.

We wear more than physical clothing to cover ourselves up and separate ourselves from others. We cover ourselves with our political affiliation, religious identity, status, our possessions, ideology, a set of moral judgments, and a whole gamut of private wounds and indignations. Our outer robes divide us.

What is Jesus' inner robe? Our inner robe? Deep down, beneath our race, gender, religion, language, politics, and personal history (with all our wounds and false pride) our inner robe is the image and likeness of God within us.

We are carriers of God's love, joy, peace, and compassion. When Jesus takes off his outer robe, He has the courage and the compassion to wash His disciples' feet including the feet of Judas who will betray Him. Jesus reaches across every kind of divide that separates us from one another. Are we willing to follow His example?

When we strip off our outer robes and get in touch with our true selves we can find the strength to wash one another's feet and we begin to feel empathy for one another beyond our wounds and differences.

When we seek the Grace of God to take off our outer robes, we are vulnerable. Exposed. And we are in touch with the Divine love, joy, and peace within us that gives us strength to heal and to mend the division that separate us.



Reflection: Taking off the outer robe

1. What outer robes do we wear that keep us from reconciling with the other who hurt us?
2. What outer robes do we wear that stops us from forming trusting relationships?
3. What do we wear that prevents us from seeing the image of God in our neighbour?
4. What outer robes do we need God's grace to help us remove?

(Could our outer robes be selfishness, pride, self-sufficiency, vainglory, presumption, inauthenticity, sloth, laziness, pretence... may be there are layers upon layers to dis-robe, take off these outer robes).

May we strip off our outer robes and see one another as brothers and sisters in Christ.
May we embrace in compassion someone separated from us and bring our towel and basin of love and mercy.

The Touch of the Towel

(a poem based on [John 13:1-17](#), the story of Jesus washing the disciples' feet)

Jesus, you kneel before me
You remove my shoes and I am exposed
My feet are grimy
full of calluses and cracks
pungent with sweat and toe jam
I'm embarrassed by them
I pull back but you reassure
You're not offended
I feel welcome in your hands
vulnerable, yet safe

The cleansing begins
I see your reflection in the ripples
I see me, too
Your water brings truth and life
Who I am and who I can be

I am whole and home in the touch the towel
You look at my neighbour and hand it to me

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Fr. Andrew Wong, Spiritual Director & Veronica Nathan, Programme Manager/ Counsellor



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