



The Last Supper was the subject of choice by all the Renaissance masters who believed they were “worthy” of such a monumental scene in the history of the world; so why, among hundreds of depictions of this event, is the one by da Vinci the one the world knows best? In many ways it comes down to what so often singles out artworks of this period: Leonardo managed to combine the principles of the classical world of art with the new humanism for which this area of Italy would become famous. It is this humanism, this interweaving of human emotion with the ancient ways of portraying human beings, that is at the heart of why the Renaissance was so important; and on a monastery wall in Milan, da Vinci took that expression to new heights.

Until this work, Last Supper paintings tended to show their figures seated around a spacious table, with Judas the lone figure on our side. The inference was clear: Christ and his apostles were on one side, and we were on the other side with Judas, the betrayer. Leonardo, though, has another idea: his figures are crowded into a small space, almost jostling for position; and Judas is on the same side of the table as Christ, though his face is in a shadow. He is holding his bag of silver, although only he and Jesus would at this moment have any idea what that symbolised; but Christ has just announced to the table that one of their number will betray him, and the faces around him are reeling with shock.

HOPE IN DESPAIR

But something even more significant is taking place. Christ’s hands are reaching out across the table; one hand towards the wine, the other towards the bread. In the immediate aftermath of having announced that he is to be betrayed, Christ is reaching out for the elements of salvation. His body; his blood. It is yet to be broken and spilled, although both he and Judas know that is what lies ahead; but it will never die, and Christ knows that. In the midst of disaster, salvation; in the midst of despair, hope.

Mass text

ENTRANCE ANTIPHON

He fed them with the finest wheat and satisfied them with honey from the rock.

FIRST READING Deuteronomy 8:2-3. 14-16

PSALM Psalm 147

RESPONSE **O praise the Lord, Jerusalem!**

Or **Alleluia!**

- O praise the Lord, Jerusalem! Zion, praise your God!
He has strengthened the bars of your gates, he has blessed the children within you. **R.**
- He established peace on your borders, he feeds you with finest wheat. He sends out his word to the earth and swiftly runs his command. **R.**
- He makes his word known to Jacob, to Israel his laws and decrees.

He has not dealt thus with other nations; He has not taught them his decrees. **R.**

SECOND READING 1 Corinthians 10:16-17

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

Alleluia, alleluia!
I am the living bread which has come down from heaven, says the Lord.
Anyone who eats this bread will live for ever. Alleluia!

GOSPEL John 6:51-58

COMMUNION ANTIPHON

Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him, says the Lord.

Next Sunday’s Readings:

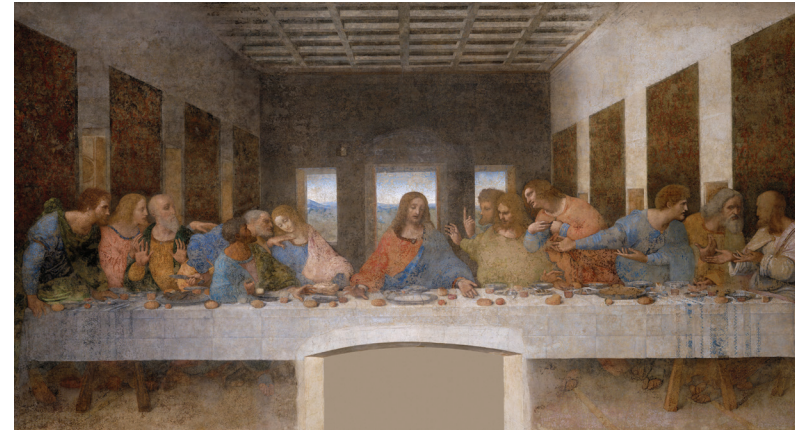
Jeremiah 20:10-13
Romans 5:12-15
Matthew 10:26-33



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LEONARDO DA VINCI, THE LAST SUPPER



It’s one of the most famous paintings in the world – alongside another work by the same artist, the *Mona Lisa* – and it hangs on a convent refectory wall in Milan. It is, of course, *The Last Supper* by the Renaissance giant Leonardo da Vinci; and it honours the first moment when bread was broken and wine shared by the apostles – the instigation of the Eucharist, which is remembered on this feast of Corpus Christi and indeed at every single Mass.

A refectory wall was a common place to find a Last Supper painting in Renaissance times; but in fact this room was not a dining room when the painting was commissioned. It was intended to be a mausoleum, and the work Leonardo was hired to do was conceived as the centrepiece of that space. However, alterations to the convent over time meant the large painting – it is fifteen feet by twenty-nine feet – ended up on the wall of the monastic refectory.

Today you’ll only see it if you book ahead online, and only small groups are admitted at a time. In many ways it’s a miracle there’s anything here at all because, though this work is often referred to as a fresco, and though it is certainly painted directly onto the wall, technically it is not a fresco as the paint, both tempera and oil, was brushed by Leonardo onto dry plaster, not the traditional wet wall required for a true fresco. The downside of wet plaster was that the paint had to be hurriedly applied, which Leonardo thought wouldn’t give him enough scope to include the detail he wanted to include. The upside, however, was that a true fresco would be more durable; and today, despite a huge renovation programme some years ago, the painting is in bad shape.

Divine images



Joanna Moorhead concludes this series on religious art by looking at one of the world’s most famous paintings – one especially appropriate for today’s feast day.

14 JUNE 2020

THE MOST HOLY BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST (CORPUS CHRISTI)

YEAR A

DIVINE OFFICE WEEK III