

Tuesday of Holy Week

The Light of the World: William Holman Hunt (Theresa Jones)

I'm sure many people will have come across the Victorian artist William Holman Hunt's painting of Jesus as 'The Light of the World'. It was painted in 1851 when Holman Hunt was part of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, a group which included the artist and poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Holman Hunt's paintings were notable for their great attention to detail, vivid colour and elaborate symbolism.

'The Light of the World' received negative responses from the public at first but following a commendation in the Times newspaper by the art critic John Ruskin, when he wrote that it was "One of the very noblest works of sacred art" it began to be appreciated and valued. The painting is based on a verse from the New Testament book of Revelation, Chapter 3. verse 20:

"Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me".

Today the painting is known and appreciated world-wide.

On the one hand the image is opulent showing a resurrected Christ figure wearing a crown upon his head and dressed in a jewelled cloak, befitting a king. The crown, however, while having a gold rim, is a crown of thorns. Holman Hunt had travelled in Palestine and researched his work well. The thorns on the crown are not the type you would find in an English hawthorn hedge. No, these thorns are the type soldiers would use as kindling wood for their barrack-room braziers. The spikes of the Palestinian thorn bush were three or four inches long; they were twisted or entwined into a rough and ready crown and "settled firmly in place", on Jesus's head in the events leading up to his crucifixion.

Looking at the 'nail pierced hands' in the painting we realise that although Jesus has risen from the dead he still bears those scars, the symbols of his passion, made by the nails when he was crucified. A verse in the hymn 'Give me a sight O Saviour of thy wondrous love to me' goes like this:

"Was it the nails O Saviour that bound thee to the tree?

No, t 'was thine everlasting love,

Thy love for me, for me.

O help me to understand it

Help me to take it in

What it meant to thee the holy one

To bear away my sin".

Holman Hunt painted his picture in such a way that wherever you stand to view it the eyes of Jesus seem to follow you. When the Apostle Peter denied Jesus three times we're told that: "The Lord turned and looked on Peter".

The painting has many symbols: the lifeless entrance, the latchless door all overgrown with dead weeds, the trailing ivy, and the starkness of the background. All symbolising the spiritual barrenness of the one who will not respond to Jesus's knock on the door of the human heart. All this is in strong contrast to the colourful figure of Jesus with his penetrating gaze that seems to question the viewer, seeking an answer, as he did with Peter.

In the picture Holman Hunt depicts Christ holding a lantern which lights up himself, his features, the doorway and the way ahead. It is the symbol of hope in the picture offering to illuminate the darkness that surrounds the one whom the Saviour seeks.



In this day and age, we all long to know the way ahead. We think of the threat of Corona Virus and its impact on our lives. We think of our loved ones and pray for their safety, we wonder when O when will this pandemic end and we can begin to relax again. Into all our fears and questionings Jesus, as this painting shows, is willing and waiting to offer hope and light, to be with us in our struggles and to strengthen us with his peace, if we choose to turn to him.

Amen.