

“Jesus the Light of the World”: A Sermon on Canvas.
by Nico Kross

What is the result when art meets divine Inspiration? William Holman Hunt masterfully answers that question through his painting “Jesus the light of the World,” by using biblical iconography and bible verses as a foundation and inspiration for his painting. “Jesus the light of the world” was one of the most famous religious paintings in the 19th century. A Printed reproduction of the painting can be found in the Dunham Bible Museum at Houston Christian University. Overall, William Holman Hunt created three versions of the painting with the first original painting, from 1853, currently being held in the Keble College in Oxford, the second one being held in the Manchester Art Gallery and the third version residing in St Paul's Cathedral in London. (St. Paul’s Cathedral).

William Holman Hunt was born in 1827 in London and is known for being one of the co-founders of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, an artistic movement that was inspired by the Italian Renaissance. This movement was a reaction against the academic painting style of the Royal Academy as well as a reaction to the negative impact of the industrialization (The Art Story). One of the artists main goals was to go back to a truthful, detailed and realistic depiction of nature in their paintings, by using bright colors and an accurate, precise and detailed painting style (Steinbach). Another characteristic of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was the featuring of many medieval

and biblical subjects and themes as well as the use of symbolism to represent those subjects in their paintings (Steinbach). All of those typical characteristics of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood can be seen in Hunt's painting "Jesus the light of the world", which is very rich in metaphorically representations of the Christian faith and salvation.

The inspiration for this painting and its name is based on a bible verse from John's Gospel: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." (Bible, John 8:12) (St. Paul's Cathedrale). This verse displays one of Jesus Christ's character traits, which is to bring light into the darkness, or in other words good and hope into our evil world. Furthermore, it illustrates the fact that his presence in our life give us clarity and purpose in difficult, confusing times. Hunt masterfully manages to capture those traits and display them in this artwork.

The painting depicts Jesus standing in an orchard, knocking at a at a rusty door that is overgrown with ivy and does not have a handle on the outside of the door. The scene is dark and grim, revealing that it must be night. However, a small light in the background hints the transition from night to morning and the dawning of a new day. Jesus is wearing a robe and two crowns and is holding a lantern. Hunt intentionally integrated a lot of biblical imagery on the basis of famous verses from the bible.

One of the main biblical symbols in the painting is Jesus knocking on the rusty and with ivy overgrown door. The door does not have a handle on the outside, indicating that it can only be opened from the inside. This is the reason for Jesus being depicted as patiently knocking on the door, waiting for it to be opened form the inside. Furthermore, the rusty hinges and the fact that the door is overgrown with ivy indicate, that the door

hasn't been opened in a while. The door is a representation for the human soul, showing that Jesus is not forcing his way into our life, but rather is waiting for us to open the door and invite him in. The bible verse that laid the foundation for this iconography is found in Revelation 3:20 where Jesus says: "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 that person, and they with me." (John)

Next, we have Jesus's appearance. He wears a white inner robe, which is a typical vestment of priests (O'Neill) and a red, golden outer robe. His clothing represents his identity and role as a king and a priest. Furthermore, he wears two crowns. A crown of thorns, which represents Christ's sacrifice and earthly and human identity, and a golden crown, indicating his heavenly identity and divine kingship. By purposely depicting both crowns, Hunt reminds and indicates Jesus's identity as a suffering human and the holy king of heaven at the same time.

Even though the whole scene of the painting is dark, 3 sources of light can be indicated. The first and greatest one is the lantern being held by Jesus. This light represents the light of conscience. (College, Keble). It represents Jesus's identification as the light of the world, which he himself refers to in John 8:12, saying "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life" (Bible). Another bible verse referring to this idea being depicted by the lantern is Psalm 119:105: "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." (Bible). The second light is the light around his head which is a representation of salvation. (College, Keble). As mentioned earlier, a small light in the background indicates the transition from night to morning or the beginning of a new day. This can be seen as a symbol for a new spiritual

awakening. Hunt himself explains that this hint of light reflects Romans 13:12 “The night is far gone; the day is near. Therefore, let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.” (Bible), (John)

Another powerful but often overlooked biblical theme that Hunt integrated in the painting is the Apple tree in the background. This symbol is a reference to the story of Adam and Eve in the Book of Genesis and the original fall into sin by humanity. (St. Paul cathedral). Jesus standing in front of this tree, can be seen as a visual representation of his victory over Sin and death (Bible, John 16:33). By living a perfect and sinless life, dying on the cross and being resurrected after 3 days, Jesus conquered all of the evil brought into the world by humanity’s fall and made a way for us to be made righteous with God again. Hunt emphasis this central message of Christianity by integrating the apple tree in his painting and by his intentional positioning of Jesus in front of this tree.

Hunt’s painting “Jesus the light of the world” perfectly aligns with the concepts and ideas of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, because of its realism, the truthful depiction of nature as well as the integration of Christian symbolism and themes. Hunt himself describes that he felt like this painting was a “divine command” (The living well), which shows his own Christian belief that he displayed in the painting. Because of its deep spiritual meaning and its reflection of core Christian beliefs, George Dawson, a nineteenth century preacher and social reformer, described the painting as “a sermon on canvas” (Hunt). “Jesus the light of the world” is not merely a painting for ornamentation but rather tells the story of Christianity and reveals the character of Jesus Christ. This conveyed message within in the picture makes it one of the most powerful religious paintings to ever be painted.

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