

# Faith and Painting

Sermon at St Clement's  
2 June 2013 (evening service)

Wulf Forrester-Barker

My father is a trained artist. Most of his career was spent using these skills as part of primary school teaching but, even today, he still does some artwork and his paintings hang on the walls of my parents' home. Therefore, I grew up in a creative household and took painting for granted as an activity and means of expression. I painted on the walls although normally my parents managed to get sheets of paper in the way!

Through most of my school years, visual arts were very important to me although, thinking back, I did a lot more sketching and design work than full-blown painting. Along the way though, I discovered music and that gradually took over as an artistic focus. Once I might have considered art college but I moved to more academic training as I entered the sixth form.

Perhaps God was trying to tell me something as, to the surprise of myself, my father and my artmaster, I got a low grade for my A-Level in Graphic Design and an even worse one when I tried to retake it, so it was probably just as well that I wasn't relying on those marks as a route into further studies! I did do well though in the additional GCSE I took in "Critical and Contextual Studies in Art and Design"; I got a solid grounding in the history of Western art and proved I could write about it even if my attempts to execute my own pieces proved less convincing to other examiners.

👉 Slide 2: Wallpaper

I have actually done a fair amount of design work since and, in the context of my career, web design has been a significant part of it. For visual expression, I have discovered photography, enabled by the fact it has moved into the digital realm. As far as painting goes though, I have made one or two less than stellar forays into expressive canvases but the vast majority of my painting endeavours have been in the "... and decorating" category. Forty years on and I still haven't got much beyond painting on walls!

☞ Slide 3: Light of the World

One of the paintings which graces St Clement's is a copy of Holman Hunt's "Light of the World". The original was painted by Hunt in 1853-54 and can be viewed in the chapel of Keble College.

Hunt turned his attention to many "Christian" subjects, with scenes from the life of Christ but also allegorical images and from the legends of various saints. "Light of the World", with its allusion to Revelation 3:20 ("Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with me", NASB) is arguably his most enduring piece and we have heard it mentioned in previous sermons in this church.

I have to admit that it is not a particular personal favourite; I suppose I find its dark palette rather dull and the depiction of Christ makes me think of Victorian romanticism. It isn't just this copy; I have also had a chance to admire the original in Keble College. However, there is a larger copy, this one painted by Hunt himself,

which can be seen in St Paul's, London. I haven't seen that one "in the canvas" but found myself taking a deeper and more sympathetic view of the image when I encountered it in a novel I read last year.

"Blackout" and "All Clear" are a pair of books forming a continuous story, written by Connie Willis. They involve time travel but are principally set during World War II. Towards the end of the second book, one of the principal characters finds herself caught in the cathedral during a bombing raid:

"She hadn't realised they were in the bay the held *The Light of the World*. As the light grew, as orange as the light inside the lantern, she could see the painting more clearly than she ever had. And Mr Humphreys was right. There was

something new to see every time you looked at it. She had been wrong in thinking Christ had been called up against his will to fight in a war. He didn't look - in spite of his crown of thorns - like someone making a sacrifice. Or even like someone determined to 'do his bit'. ... He looked contented. As if he was where he wanted to be, doing what he wanted to do."

I don't know how that sounds coming to it cold - and I have edited a section packed with potential plot spoilers out of the middle - but, as I drew towards the end of the emotionally intense narrative, in which plenty of people had learned to freely make sacrifices empowered by their love for others, it caught my breath. Hunt's painting still isn't my favourite but now I see it in a new light.

Why do I tell that story? I want to illustrate that feelings about a painting can change. If we come to this kind of art with faith, we come with all that we are, buffeted and refreshed by all manner of experiences. Tonight I am going to show some images that you will love or hate or feel supremely indifferent about but keep your ears open for God to speak to you as you view each of them and for God to speak to you afresh each time you have the opportunity in future to stand in front of the result of someone's endeavour with paint and canvas.


👉 Slide 4: Sallman



Before digging further into the theory - at least, my theory - of what comprises a Christian approach to painting, I want to start with a further series of images of Jesus:

1. This is "The Head of Christ" painted by Warner Sallman in 1941. This is an immensely popular image. Based on data from Wikipedia, enough have been sold that every person in the UK could have nine copies! It is very similar to a series of images Sallman had produced from 1924 onwards although WWII probably contributed to its success as copies went to many US servicemen. I suspect that, at least in the the West, this is as close as anything to what most people think Jesus looked like. Gentle, serious, with

a beard and flowing blond locks.  
Possibly, but lets travel back 50 years.

 Slide 5: Simonet

2. Here is another "Head of Jesus" image. This one is by Spanish painter Enrique Simonet and was painted as a study for a larger work which he completed the following year (showing Christ weeping over Jerusalem. It was produced in 1890-91 and is clearly similar to Sallman's painting, although the hair is darker and the overall appearance perhaps more Spanish? Coincidence?

👉 Slide 6: El Greco

3. Four hundred years further back and this detail from El Greco's "Christ Carrying the Cross" (1580s) is still quite Spanish, or perhaps a bit Greek. This is a very intense painting and I don't want to devalue it but we are seeing as much of the artist and his milieu as of Christ himself.

👉 Slide 7: Turin Shroud

4. Is this next image a painting? This negative photo was produced in 1898 and makes the face clearer but there is strong provenance dating back to the end of the fourteenth century. Beyond that, it gets a little more murky. There are plenty today who revere this as a genuine image of Christ; I'm a little sceptical on this point but it is undoubtedly an enigmatic relic if not of Christ's tomb then of the skill of some medieval artist.

👉 Slide 8: Hagia Sophia

5. Here is a mosaic image of Christ from the Orthodox basilica Hagia Sophia, Holy Wisdom, situated in what is now Istanbul in modern Turkey. Strictly speaking, it isn't a painting but it shows the same iconography, here dating from the thirteenth century. So, are we settled that Christ had a beard and longish hair?

👉 Slide 9: Aberdeen Bestiary

6. Not so fast! If this image, from the twelfth century Aberdeen Bestiary, is correctly identified as Christ, it is notable for the missing beard. The figure is certainly surrounded by the four traditional signs of the gospels - Matthew's lion, Mark's ox, Luke's man and John's eagle - and who else would we expect to see seated at the heart of their combined witness.

👉 Slide 10: Sol-Invictus

7. Here is another mosaic, from a mid-third century Roman mausoleum, which has been entitled "Christ as Sol-Invictus". It is a little hard to read but appears that it may well also be beardless. There is also a lot of clear influence from pagan sources; there are theories that early images of Christ were based on depictions of the Graeco-Roman Apollo, their principal Sun-god.

Is this getting us any closer to what Jesus looked like? Quite the opposite; as we search around for a likeness in art, we find we are muddying the waters. If you want a picture of Jesus - and our New Testament sources are conspicuously short on descriptions - perhaps it is better to look further back to the Isaiah's pen-portrait of the suffering servant:

👉 Slide 11: Isaiah



He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,

nothing in his appearance that we should desire him

If we want something meaningful, we need to stop looking for a photograph and start looking at the picture painted by the character of Christ, which the New Testament gives us in spades. This is where we find the image of Christ which we should seek to emulate.

However, that isn't to say that painting is a waste of time. Shortly we will move back to more recent times and consider a number of significant artists but let us pause for a moment longer with the Old Testament prophets. There are a number of examples where God speaks to them in part by showing them something and then

drawing an interpretation out of it. For example, how about Amos and the plumb line?

👉 Slide 12: Amos

The Lord said to me, “What do you see, Amos?” And I said, “A plumb line.” Then the Lord said,  
“Behold I am about to put a plumb line in the midst of My people Israel. I will spare them no longer.”

It isn't just a piece of construction equipment; as God speaks, it becomes a vision which brings a message of truth. I'm going to return to that thought again before the end of this talk but first, let us consider the complexity of understanding art even without that dimension. Or perhaps it would be fairer to say the simplicity with which we can approach paintings by considering what contributes to their "meaning".

👉 Slide 13: Triangle (click for animations)

I propose a triangle. Art - perhaps particular painting - exists in a triangle of artist, subject and viewer. More poetry than prose, it is about learning how to see. We typically start from the chosen subject. What thing, person or event does the painting depict? This is a very fundamental level but it doesn't take long to realise that subject alone is not enough to give an appreciation of art. Surely an actual bowl of fruit ought to be more satisfying than a painting of a bowl of fruit but plenty of artists have painted still life pictures that feed the eye.

Secondly, what about the artist? I argued earlier that the depictions of Christ probably tell you a lot about the person who painted them and the historical situation in which they were created. Sometimes it might seem that knowing

about the artist spoils your enjoyment of their paintings; on the other hand, it can add a new resonance and there are undoubted riches to be found in understanding what influenced a work and what it in turn influenced.

Finishing our basic triangle is the viewer. What do you bring to it? As I explained earlier, I was able to draw a lot more from Hunt's painting when I returned to it on the back of a gripping novel. I was different and so I saw it afresh. Are your eyes caught by sensual details or by a spark of the divine? Blame some of that on the artist and subject if you want but don't neglect the way the painting may be acting as a mirror!

👉 Slide 14: 3

I now want to show you some paintings. I have picked three widely-known and significant artists and three works by each of them. For each one, I want to give you some time to view the paintings without any commentary - not even the name of the artist - and then to run through them again while providing a frame of reference. I hope you get something direct from the paintings but do also give a thought to how the two experiences of each set of pictures feels and how the words affect them.

👉 Slides 15 – 18 + 19 – 21

Caravaggio (1571-1610) was a wonderfully skillful painter. Even if you struggled to remember his name, you will almost certainly have seen one or more of the example images before. He was part of the Italian Renaissance, a little later than pioneers such as Leonardo Da Vinci and Michaelangelo but undoubtedly making a lasting mark. His paintings have a dramatic quality with a strong sense of perspective and extreme contrast between light and shade. In the 21st century, he might be an artist who would work with photos but they would be carefully staged. However, while many of his paintings depicted scenes of Christian interest, his life did not measure up to the virtues of his art. He was, in English terms, somewhat of a cad and a bounder and, after being exiled from Rome in 1606 as the result of killing someone in a brawl, died in rather murky

circumstances a little way short of his 40th birthday.

👉 Slides 22 – 25 + 26 - 29



Vincent Van Gogh (1853 - 1890) lived a similarly short life, terminated by suicide, but was a very different character. His life was characterised by faith and pain. It appears that he sought after living a Christian life with unusual devotion but also a level of mania. Having worn himself out in missionary work he later realised his gift for painting and was prodigiously active during the last ten years of his life. All three of the paintings I have selected are from towards the end of this period. They make vivid use of colour and bold brush strokes and the influence of Japanese artistic traditions is clear. His work is highly revered now but during his lifetime, even with the support of his brother Theo, an experienced art dealer, he could not survive by selling his paintings. The paintings haven't changed; from where do we derive aesthetic and

other values which lead to him being so well regarded now?

☞ Slides 30 – 33 + 34 - 37

Mark Rothko (1903-1970) was a painter in the modernist tradition. The representation of subject was deliberately rejected; painting was paint on canvas and should not even presume to tell a story. Some of you may love these works; others may have more sympathy with Ruskin's comment on Whistler, an early modernist, that they are "a pot of paint flung in the face of the public" (and Whistler, of course, was relatively figurative compared to many later artists, including Rothko). Despite rejecting meaning per se, viewing these meditations on colour can be a profoundly emotional experience. At Greenbelt 2004, Giles Fraser warned that Rothko can be bad for your spiritual health - he acknowledged their intensity but also argued that they represented a dangerous form of kitsch; vivid experience but also the illusion of freedom from

meaning. I find them deeply moving but would certainly hesitate to emulate their maker, who by all accounts was a rather bitter, angry and cynical character.

☞ Slides 38-39 (animations)

In looking at the subject of faith in painting, you can think about the faith of the artist or the value of the subject but remember also the active role of the viewer - you! - in drawing meaning from a painting. Then, above this all, consider God overseeing the whole. Guiding the choice of subject? Possibly - and even rogues may have had patrons with better intentions. Guiding the method of execution? Perhaps - and certainly with an influence on the shape of the artist who sees through the lens of their influences and makes the choice of how to convey

that. Most importantly, God able to speak to the viewer both directly and indirectly, revealing himself.

Homework. Spend time prayerfully considering both a painting you love and one you dislike and tend to dismiss. What does God say to you?