



GOSPEL GOSSIP

The Light of the World

St Matthew 4. 12-23

Sunday 25 January 2026

You may recognise the small and rather fuzzy picture as being that well-known picture by Holman Hunt, called simply, the Light of the world. There were actually three versions. The first was painted for Keble College, Oxford, where it still hangs, and a smaller one hanging in Manchester art gallery. As Keble decided to charge people to see it, Hunt painted a third, full-sized version nearly 50 years after the first which went on a world tour at the turn of the 20th century, when the crowds thronged to see it. This version is now in St Pauls' Cathedral.

It is rich in symbolism. It is dawn, and Christ, carrying a lantern to dispel the darkness, knocks at an overgrown doorway, asking to be let in. This reminds us of the phrase from the Book of Revelation: 'Behold, I stand at the door and knock'. The wilderness represents the turmoil of human existence, the dark, our sinful nature, the lantern the breaking of this darkness by Christ, and the door our hearts and souls. The door has no external handle; it can only be opened from within.

- What does this picture mean to you and why?
- Do you think of Jesus as a light-bearer?
- In what way are you, or others, in darkness?
- Does Christ's humility in knocking demean him or exalt him?
- How do you open the door to him?

In this period of Christmastide, we might think this an odd image for a Sunday reading. The timing of Christmas is around the darkest time of the year. We recall that in the darkness of the night the shining heavenly hosts announced the Saviour's birth to the shepherds. We recall how the Wise Men, were led by a star to the infant Christ. And not forgetting that we are in the season of 'Epiphany' which means 'before the light'. Christ, the Light of the world, is a very fitting and, indeed, wonderful image.

In art, as well as in some literature, we need to see beyond what is immediately before us and see the greater truth that is being portrayed. It would be all too simple merely to look at the picture, and think, 'Oh yes. 'How nice'. 'How quaint'. Perhaps 'how moving'. And then we see that, although Christ is knocking at the door, he is looking at us, not the door.

- What is the darkness in your life?
- In what way is it lessened?
- How do you hear the sound of Christ knocking?
- Is it reassuring that the handle's on your side?
- Are you willing to open the door – what may prevent you?

The picture was rightly hugely popular from the outset, except with the architect of Keble College Chapel, William Butterfield. He did not incorporate it into his designs for the building, and so until a separate chapel was built later for it, the original painting hung in the College library. Yet it could not be suppressed – and neither can Christ. His knocking is gentle, but persistent.