

PICTURE OF THE WEEK

20th June 2020

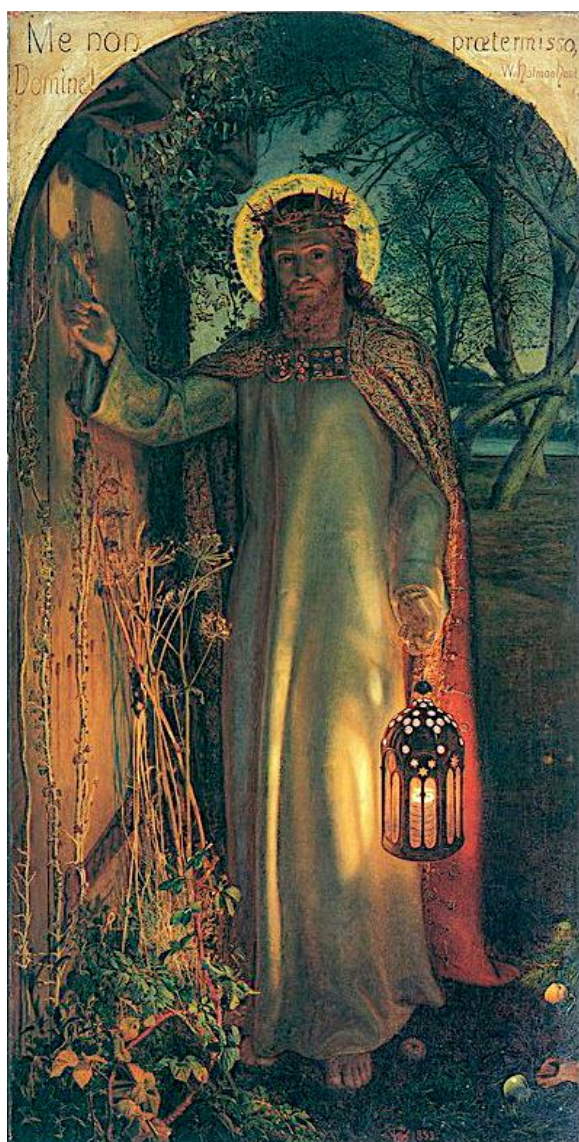
Norma Jenns



The Light of the World

(1853)

by William Holman Hunt (1827 – 1910)



On one of my earliest visits to Oxford some thirty years ago, I toured the red-brick Keble College, named after John Keble, an English churchman and poet (1792 - 1866), one of the leaders of 'The Oxford Movement'. This was a movement of High Church members of the Church of England, which developed into Anglo-Catholicism, from which many participants decided to convert to Roman Catholicism in the 1840s. A highlight of the College is its beautiful chapel and tucked away in a small side chapel I was amazed to find one of Oxford's best kept secrets - the original painting of 'The Light of the World' by Holman Hunt.

I was surprised on several levels. First, the chapel was dark, gloomy and unattended. Second, when I picked up an information paddle it requested the visitor to switch on a light and, when I did, it illuminated the extraordinary painting. Third, I was taken aback when I saw that it had been donated to the college by 'Mrs Thomas Combe', because my maiden name was Combe and my father's name was Thomas. Could I possibly be looking at an act of generosity from a famous ancestor? I let that little fantasy pass and went on to read that Martha Combe was the widow of Thomas Combe (1796 - 1872), an English printer and publisher. He was Printer to the University at Oxford University Press, and he was

also part of 'The Oxford Movement'. Both Martha and Thomas were keen patrons of the arts and particularly of the Pre-Raphaelites.

I was completely alone with the painting and had a wonderful, unhurried opportunity to appreciate its incredible beauty. This was underpinned by the full description of what Holman Hunt was trying to convey. The interpretation given by the College was:

'The Light of the World was begun when Holman Hunt was in his early twenties, and took a number of years to complete. Part of the reason for this was his desire to perfect the dawn, and he did not feel able to do this until his travels in the Middle East took him to Bethlehem, where he saw the perfect sunrise. There are two lights shown in the picture; the lantern is the light of conscience and the light around the head is the light of salvation. The door represents the human soul, which cannot be opened from the outside. There is no handle on the door, and the rusty nails and hinges overgrown with ivy denote that the door has never been opened and that the figure of Christ is asking for permission to enter. The bright light over the figure is the morning star, the dawn of the new day, and the autumn weeds and fallen fruit represent the autumn of life. The writing underneath the picture (on the gilded frame), which is rather hard to read, is taken from Revelation 3.20:

'Behold I stand at the door and knock. If any man hear my voice and open the door I will come in to him and will sup with him and he with me'.

A larger replica painted by Holman Hunt, when he was nearly seventy, hangs in St Paul's Cathedral, London. The colouring and the details of the replica are not exactly the same as the original.

Over the years I have visited 'The Light of the World' many times and continue to be amazed that this painting is accessible in such an intimate way. Keble College is not a well-endowed college but it does own and exhibit this true treasure.

Norma Jenns