

“Christ is the Light and Bread of Life”

Week 3: Vermeer, *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* (1654-1656)

This week we encounter the work of Johannes (Jan) Vermeer (1632-1675), a Dutch Baroque painter, who lived and worked in Delft, Holland his entire life. Though Vermeer is best known today for his paintings of Dutch middle class domestic life, his genius lies in his handling of exterior natural light which floods interior spaces suggesting a larger world outside.

Largely forgotten in the centuries following his death, Vermeer was rediscovered in the 19th century and is today widely acclaimed as a master painter of the 17th century Dutch Golden Age. Vermeer’s influence has extended to modern era Scandinavian and North American artists whose depictions of domestic interiors evoke his use of space and light. Salvador Dalí’s work, *The Ghost of Vermeer of Delft Which Can Be Used As a Table* (c.1934) also makes surreal reference to Vermeer’s work *The Art of Painting* (c.1666). Another Dutch painter, Han van Meegeren (1889-1947) gained notoriety as a gifted painter who stood trial for the forgery and sale of paintings, including a forged Vermeer, to Nazi leaders, under the charge of selling Dutch cultural property during the Second World War. Vermeer’s influence reaches into today’s contemporary arts: Tracy Chevalier’s novel *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (1999), and the film of the same title (2003) demonstrate a continued well of interest drawing upon Vermeer’s work.

The *Peace of Westphalia* (1648) formally brought an end to the Thirty Years’ War, providing provisions for legal toleration of private worship and liberty of conscience for minority religious groups in Lutheran, Roman Catholic and Calvinist territories, eventually leading toward the broader modern concept of freedom of thought. Though Vermeer lived in the Protestant Netherlands, he and his wife Catherine were Roman Catholic. The couple moved into his mother-in-law’s spacious home in Delft, which was located next to a Jesuit “hidden church.” A hidden church (*schuilkerken*) was the church of a Christian minority, granted toleration under the terms of the peace treaty, yet which had to remain hidden within a larger religious majority in a given region. During the Counter-Reformation, the Jesuits worked in minority Catholic regions attempting to win back regions that had become Protestant during the Reformation.

Most of Vermeer’s works were painted in close interior spaces hinting at the hiddenness of faith, yet filled with wondrous light – suggesting an exterior world creating a continuum of interior light and space. It is thought that the rooms of his mother-in-law’s home were the setting for nearly all of his surviving works. Another aspect of Vermeer’s work that has long been suggested and hotly debated by scholars is his probable use of a “*camera obscura*” through which he may have looked to help give greater accuracy in painting his work.

This week’s image of Christ is Vermeer’s only known biblical subject, *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* (1654-56). For this painting, Vermeer chose a story told only in the Gospel of Luke (10:38-42, though Martha, Mary and their brother Lazarus also appear in John’s gospel, see John 11, 12). In Luke, this story appears immediately after the Parable of the Good Samaritan (10:25-37), and just before Jesus teaches his disciples how to pray (11:1-4).

Vermeer has captured the moment when Jesus looking at Martha, answers her, “*Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.*” Luke tells us that Martha had been distracted by her many tasks, “*so she came to him and asked, ‘Lord, do you not care*



that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?”

Compositionally, Jesus sits between the sisters, pointing with his right hand to Mary who is listening to Jesus, suggesting the presence of Jesus in and between the lives of siblings and family members with very different temperaments.

Another aspect of the composition is Martha's placement of a basket with bread onto the table, making the painting a contrast in two types of bread: ordinary daily bread and Christ, the "bread of life."

With the image of bread, Vermeer has also referenced Matthew 4:4 (and the shorter version in Luke 4:4) of Jesus' words during his temptation in

the wilderness, *"One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."* Further, John 6:35 is also suggested: *"Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.'"* In the background to the left, a window faces outside, yet the light in the painting radiates from Christ, further suggesting Christ, the Word (*logos*), who is "the light of the world" (Jn. 1; 8:12).

The ongoing significance of this painting is in its retelling of an encounter with Jesus in the midst of the worries and distractions of daily life. What are the moments in your life when you have found yourself on either side of Jesus – worried or listening? How does regular time for prayer and meditation allow you to bring your worries and distractions to Christ in prayer that you might be led and nourished by Christ – the light of the world, the bread of life?

Though Christ was a guest in their home, he was also very "at home" and "present in the moment" with both Martha and Mary. This should remind us that Christ is the unseen guest in our homes, at our tables, in our conversations, and at our bedside as we rest. Christ is the light of the world, illumining our homes, lives and paths. Christ is the bread of life whom we thank at meals and of whom we partake whenever we come to him in prayer and supplication. Christ is the light and the bread of life who never leaves us and who can never be taken away from us. We may become worried and distracted, tempted by life's struggles to go our own way, yet Christ always walks with us. Do we notice the presence of Christ in our lives? Do we use our worries and distractions as those moments that drive us to Christ in prayer, and to one another in Christian fellowship and encouragement? May we, like Mary, again today choose Christ, the light and bread of life, who can never be taken away from us. Amen.

(Image: located in the Scottish National Gallery, Edinburgh, Scotland)