

“Who do you say that I am?”

Week 9: Leonardo da Vinci, *Salvator Mundi* (c. 1500)

In this week’s *Images of Christ* series, we encounter a work by Leonardo da Vinci titled, *Salvator Mundi* (*The Savior of the World*), an oil on walnut painting, in which Christ is depicted as a European in Renaissance dress holding a crystal orb in his left hand with his right hand held upward in blessing. Well-known, even controversial, the provenance and history of the painting are long and also clouded by misunderstanding and misattribution. Though the painting is



attested to in nineteenth and twentieth century auction catalogs, its attribution shifted from being a work by da Vinci to one of his pupils, or even as a copy of a now lost da Vinci original. In addition to da Vinci’s notebooks and drawings, universally accepted paintings by da Vinci number fewer than twenty.

In 2005 *Salvator Mundi* was sold at an auction in New Orleans for \$1,175, a valuation well below that of an original da Vinci. Though the painting had been poorly restored in the past, in 2006 it was cleaned and re-restored. While on exhibition in London at the National Gallery in 2011, it was authenticated by experts as a genuine work by da Vinci. From here its value skyrocketed. In 2013 it sold for \$75 million and soon after changed hands again for \$127 million. In 2017, it was exhibited in Hong Kong, San Francisco and New York, gaining credibility and legitimacy through hype, advertising and media.

What came next no one could have predicted: on 15 November 2017 *Salvator Mundi* was sold at Christie’s in New York for an astonishing \$430.5 million, the most ever paid for a painting. Rumored to have been purchased by the Saudi Arabian royal family, the final buyer remains unknown as do the whereabouts of the painting.

As a work of art, “*Salvator Mundi*” is a genre used for icons, paintings, stained glass and sculpture in which Christ is shown, often seated on a throne, holding an orb, often with a cross at the top, symbolizing the entire world and cosmos, while the right hand of Christ is shown raised in blessing. The eschatological themes suggested in the *Salvator Mundi* genre are of Christ as king and judge, the beginning and end of history, the one who is “before all things, and in [whom] all things hold together” (Colossians 1:17).

I've come think of this painting as "Christie's Christ." Within a span of 12 years, a collectable painting thought to be worth only \$1,175 at auction realized \$430.5 million. The word of experts, promotion by public media, and major exhibitions legitimated a "newfound" masterpiece. Though generally accepted as a da Vinci, dissenting views also still argue that it is the work of another, or a copy of a lost original. We live in a world where public opinion and brand names are the lens through which we often perceive the world, and are often the reason we make purchases. In our commercially driven world, the sale of a rare image of Christ emphasizes how hype, advertising, and ownership seem to extend even to the image of Christ, leading to the absurd sounding question, "Is it possible to own Christ?"



Almost immediately after this record-breaking auction the question was asked, "Would Christ have agreed with this sum of money being spent on a painting of the 'Savior of the World?' Would not the money have been better spent in the service of others?"

Finding a hitherto unknown original by a Great Master is suggestive of Jesus' parables about treasure, "*The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.*" Art is often a sign or a symbol pointing to a reality existing beyond itself. Jesus' parable compares the kingdom of heaven to a collector who pays a great price for hidden treasure or a rare pearl. The meaning is, of course, that in finding Christ, we offer ourselves so that the treasure of Christ and his kingdom might dwell within us.

Like a painting about which there are many opinions, Jesus asked his disciples, "*Who do people say that the Son of Man is?*" Views about Jesus and the meaning of his work continue to divide the world, families and individuals. Jesus asked his disciples, "*But who do you say that I am?*" a question requiring not the opinions of experts or the hype of media, but a very personal response. Finding in Christ meaning and certainty about life leads one to also find that the kingdom of heaven is near. The experience of faith, about and in the one whom the painting points toward, gives meaning to all of life's other questions and issues.

The *Salvator Mundi*, the Savior of the World, calls humanity to follow him. It is an invitation of great value, the greatest treasure, because in following Jesus, one discovers one's true self, one's true identity. Jesus told his disciples, "*If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?*"

As Jesus suggests, spending vast sums or gaining worldly treasure, can lead one to forfeit what is most important in life, a clear vision of oneself. Jesus is suggesting that life with him is more valuable than the possessions we work so hard to acquire. In following Jesus, rather than being known as someone who owns a great treasure, we become known as people who share the treasures of Christ with others. In a consumer society, the *Salvator Mundi* is a reminder that no amount of market share or brand loyalty can change the fact the one who follows Christ already possesses valuable treasure hidden within them. Jesus continues to ask, "*Who do you say that I am?*" How we answer probably says a lot about what we treasure and how we seek to use ourselves, our time and our possessions for this world that the Savior so loves. Amen.