

THE IMAGE OF CHRIST

In my exit interview with my mission president, he asked me what I had learned as a missionary. I told him that I had come to sense more fully Christ's power to bring things together that were falling apart. I talked about different experiences I had had and situations in which I had seen reconciliation and healing. I shared a passage at the end of section 6 of the Doctrine and Covenants that had helped me have confidence in Christ's power when everything seemed to be going wrong.

Christ's words had been a voice of comfort in hard experiences and times of disappointment: "Therefore, fear not, little flock; do good; let earth and hell combine against you, for if ye are built upon my rock, they cannot prevail. Behold, I do not condemn you; go your ways and sin no more; perform with soberness the work which I have commanded you" (Doctrine and Covenants 6:34–35). But more than just hearing that I was forgiven and encouraged to get up and get going again, what I had really learned from this section was that Christ's gift of the Atonement,



Christ invites us to behold the wounds and the prints of the nails so our faith and hope can grow. Geertgen tot Sint-Jans, Man van Smarten, ca. 1490. Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht.

his redeeming gift of ransom, stood behind every hope of things ever turning out right.

“Look unto me in every thought; doubt not, fear not. Behold the wounds which pierced my side, and also the prints of the nails in my hands and feet; be faithful, keep my commandments, and ye shall inherit the kingdom of heaven” (Doctrine and Covenants 6:36–37). In these verses I had found the constant when everything else—myself included—seemed fated to fall apart, over and over again. Christ pointed me to the source of faith and hope in every situation—looking to him and beholding his wounds.

When I was a child, my mother would encourage us to be quiet and reverent as they blessed and passed the sacrament. She told us we should think about the Savior. I tried to do that. I mostly found myself thinking about Jesus on a hillside surrounded by sheep. For a long time those pastoral scenes from Church artwork were the images that I had to meditate upon when I tried to remember the Savior.

If I had grown up in the later Middle Ages, it wouldn't have been so hard to behold Christ's side wound and the prints of the nails in his hands and feet. They were everywhere in late medieval piety. In addition to the many depictions in churches, woodblock prints spread images quickly in the era before the printing press. Working on my dissertation about the changes in Jerusalem pilgrimage in the context of late medieval passion piety, I looked at hundreds of images of Christ bleeding profusely. The wounds in his side, hands, and feet were all a source of great attention and love. Sometimes the wounds were exaggerated in the image for closer devotional reflection. Sometimes they were even separated from the body of Christ and displayed independently. There may have been a time when this devotional art was startling to me, but through my study, I could see the love that people felt for Christ reflected in these images.

We have many pictures of Christ in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and we are beginning to welcome a greater diversity of art styles into our religious artistic vocabulary. I'm glad that we're not iconoclastic, meaning that we don't reject images of Deity. Some religious

traditions have interpreted the Ten Commandments in that way and don't allow pictures, or at least any pictures of God, to be created or displayed. Many branches of Islam produce primarily geometric art, and some Christian traditions, such as the Calvinist tradition, have had a focus on the word, not using religious images in churches for fear of idolatry.

Perhaps because there is such power in the visual, for believers there will always be some tension with images. One warning is to not make them the focus of our confidence. We see powerful corrections of idol worship in Old Testament prophetic writing. In very poetic terms, Isaiah reminds the people that when they go into captivity, they will be dragging their graven images with them. They will be a burden, not a source of help. "Bel boweth down, Nebo stoopeth, their idols were upon the beasts, and upon the cattle: your carriages were heavy loaden; they are a burden to the weary beast. They stoop, they bow down together; they could not deliver the burden, but themselves are gone into captivity" (Isaiah 46:1–2). The burden of carrying the images of the gods of Babylon is in direct contrast to the role of the true God of Israel, their Redeemer Jehovah. "Hearken unto me, O house of Jacob, and all the remnant of the house of Israel, which are borne by me from the belly, which are carried from the womb: And even to your old age I am he; and even to hoar hairs will I carry you: I have made, and I will bear; even I will carry, and will deliver you" (Isaiah 46:3–4). The Lord is there to carry us, not to be carried by us.

Again, I am grateful that we Latter-day Saints see religious art as an aid to faith and not as the source of our faith. Modern-day prophets have warned about idolatry. President Spencer W. Kimball's powerful 1976 article "The False Gods We Worship" comes to mind,¹ but the danger lies primarily in many other things in which we put our confidence. I'm grateful that we embrace the power of art, like the power of music, to lift our minds and hearts to worship and to contemplate the love and power of our Heavenly Father and his divine Son, Jesus Christ.

But, since we do use art, it helps to ponder briefly about how to use it in ways that can invite the Spirit of the Lord and increase our faith in

Christ. As we think more closely about devotional imagery, we can get insights into beholding Christ in the scriptures and the ordinances. While I focus here on medieval images, I am not advocating any particular style of imagery for our personal lives. My hope, instead, is that we can become aware of some things that we have in common with late medieval Christians and the role that devotional imagery played for them. This chapter focuses more generally on the use of devotional images as a witness of faith and a reminder of Christ; in later chapters we will be looking at more specific images and consider what we can learn from them in our effort to better behold Christ and more fully come unto him. Learning to see the images and symbols that point us to our Redeemer and his gift on our behalf increases our ability to behold our Father's message of hope.

DEVOTIONAL IMAGERY

When I was a child I had a very small picture of Christ in a bright yellow plastic frame that I kept by my bedside. I think it was given to me by a Primary teacher. I liked having it there. I felt that it helped keep me safe in the dark. I think it reminded me that I was not alone but that the Savior was there for me. It was the famous greenish-toned, traditional image of Christ standing, knocking at the door. We Latter-day Saints also have a version of this image, with Christ in a red robe, but the one I had on my nightstand as a child was one that we have borrowed from our Protestant friends—it is widely beloved. In a contemporary world in which digital images can be shared, it has been interesting to see how images that originate in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are also sometimes borrowed and used by Protestants.

In fact, having so many images that bring us together as Christians, we can hardly imagine a world in which images could be divisive, but that is part of what happened in the later Middle Ages and during the Reformation. The role of devotional images in the late medieval world as a sign or witness to others of faith is most sharply seen with the challenges of the Reformation in the sixteenth century. The iconoclastic, or

anti-imagery, tendencies of several branches of the Reformation turned religious images into a visible symbol of allegiance.²

Almost everyone in Europe was Christian, but by then there were different kinds of Christians. As governments sought to impose their versions of Christianity, devotional images went up and came down as signs of loyalty or resistance to politically dominant churches.³ One example of a religious image stashed away for future use is a nativity scene hidden under the church floor in Long Medford, England, during the reign of the Tudors—it was later “discovered unbroken under the church floor in the nineteenth century.”⁴ During the reigns of Henry, Edward, Mary, and Elizabeth, the English experienced many different versions of religious worship and dramatically different roles of devotional art. The faithful people in Long Medford wanted to preserve a scene at a time when it was not welcome, in hopes that the prevailing mood would shift and they could bring it out and celebrate the birth of Christ again with this representation of the stable of Bethlehem.

Like late medieval Christians, we members of Christ’s Church love nativity sets. Many of our congregations have open houses during the Christmas season to which we invite neighbors to view many kinds of Christmas crèches from around the world and to celebrate the birth of Christ with us. Religious images are a means by which we show our religious allegiance and faith in Christ. This role of religious images as a sign of our faith and commitment can be seen in a story told by Virginia U. Jensen, a former first counselor in the Relief Society General Presidency. A little girl was lost, but upon entering the home of a couple that offered to help her find her parents, she saw a picture of the Savior. The girl commented, “I was frightened until I saw the picture of Jesus hanging on your wall. Then I knew I would be safe.”⁵ We feel safe with these images of the Savior, and we want others to feel safe in his Church with images that they also love and cherish.

Having pictures of Christ in our churches and homes is a witness to others of our faith in him. President Ezra Taft Benson described the disciples of Christ: “Enter their homes, and the pictures on their walls,

the books on their shelves, the music in the air, their words and acts reveal them as Christians.”⁶ Devotional images can signal our beliefs and priorities to others and thereby invite them to be followers themselves.

Another aspect of the late medieval use of devotional images that can resonate with us is using images to remember. Surrounding ourselves with images of Christ not only signals our faith to others but can also serve as a reminder to ourselves. Late medieval piety centered on Christ’s suffering and death on behalf of humankind. Through the widespread and often graphic images of Christ’s suffering, people sought to remember and to more fully understand the extent of that suffering. They knew that Christ’s suffering and death were the means by which they had a hope of being free from their sins and being reconciled with God, and they sought to keep that awareness before them.

The forms of imagery that they used are often unfamiliar to us. We do not use crucifixes to remember his atoning death, and our popular images of Christ rarely depict his suffering on our behalf, but faith in his Atonement is likewise central to our faith. We have covenanted to always remember him, and devotional art can help us to always remember.

Just as the role of Christ was central to the faith of late medieval Christians, so it is with us. Likewise, the representation of Christ is something that we can think about seriously. The very foreignness of the distant mirror of late medieval piety can help us appreciate the importance of looking to Christ and not merely to a representation of Christ. Looking to Christ is the source of our salvation. Just as the children of Israel looked upon the type of the brazen serpent and lived, so we are invited to “cast about [our] eyes and begin to believe in the Son of God, that he will come to redeem his people, and that he shall suffer and die to atone for their sins” (Alma 33:22; see 33:18–23). Only by looking to our Redeemer and the ransom price of his atoning sacrifice can we find eternal life.

As we think about the role of images, we recognize that images can help us remember to look, but we must not look only to images. Images cannot be the source of a relationship or connection with the Savior.

Images alone cannot be a source of emotional reassurance and protection. Images cannot provide an assurance that Christ is real.

Thinking about the role of devotional imagery reminds us of the importance of having a spiritual relationship with a Being rather than an emotional relationship with an image. Familiar images can appropriately provide a source of emotional comfort, but we should not mistake the emotional reassurance of a familiar image with a spiritual experience. Having images of Christ cannot and must not be a substitute for looking to Christ. Images can, however, point us to the Being to whom we can look. They can help us to always remember him and the price he paid for our redemption.

When life is hard and painful, remembering Christ can pull us out of the discouragement that we can easily sink into. Consider Mormon's words to his son Moroni after describing the depravity of his people: "May not the things which I have written grieve thee, to weigh thee down unto death; but may Christ lift thee up, and may his sufferings and death, and the showing his body unto our fathers, and his mercy and long-suffering, and the hope of his glory and of eternal life, rest in your mind forever" (Moroni 9:25). Beholding his ransom price reminds us that we are free and we can live with joy and peace even in a fallen and wicked world. Christ's "sufferings and death, and the showing his body" are the images of late medieval passion piety, and they are the symbols of the ordinances. He invites us to "behold the wounds which pierced my side, and also the prints of the nails in my hands and feet" (Doctrine and Covenants 6:37). Beholding his wounds, in both his mortal and resurrected body, allows us to behold that he has truly paid the price and won the victory. When we let this rest in our minds forever, we can more fully have "the hope of his glory and of eternal life."

NOTES

1. Spencer W. Kimball, "The False Gods We Worship," *Ensign*, June 1976, 2–6.

2. The followers of Zwingli and Calvin are most noted for their iconoclastic positions. Lutheran practice was generally more accepting of visual images. See Carl C. Christensen, *Art and Reformation in Germany* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1979); and Robert W. Scribner, *For the Sake of Simple Folk: Popular Propaganda for the German Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).
3. This is most strikingly illustrated in the English Reformations. The dramatic back and forth religious changes were matched by changes in church and home visual imagery. See, for example, Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400–1580* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 421–22, 431, 439, 451, 478–503.
4. Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, 490.
5. Virginia U. Jensen, “Home, Family, and Personal Enrichment,” *Ensign*, November 1999, 97.
6. Ezra Taft Benson, *A Witness and a Warning: A Modern Day Prophet Testifies of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 65; see Benson, “Born of God,” *Ensign*, July 1989, 5.