

# Jasper



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OF THE LIBERAL ARTS

## Painting of the day:

### The Holy Family by Bartolome Esteban Murillo

I'm an Italian American, and happy to be so. If you go to Italy and turn to spit, you'll hit some great work of art – that is how common the works of art in Italy are.

But we Italians sometimes forget that there was art in other countries too, with magnificent painters, sculptors, poets, and composers. I've grown very fond of the works of the Spanish painter Bartolome Esteban Murillo (1617-1682), who

worked with bold contrasts of light and dark, imitating the style of the Italian master, Caravaggio. That contrast is called CHIAROSCURO (say it: kyah-ro-SKOO-ro). Like him, Murillo could and did paint everything, often with great sympathy, as his portraits of the poor, the elderly, and the suffering show. But he also often painted with a good-hearted humor that you don't usually find in the more soul-troubled Caravaggio. Urchins on the street eating fruit,

grinning boys playing dice, teenage girls looking out of the window as if they would eagerly take on any boy who dared to court them, Saint Elizabeth of Hungary washing a boy's head that is apparently crawling with lice, because the next boy in line has to scratch himself in two places with two hands, and

this painting of the Holy Family you see here: Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, and two other living creatures, a pigeon and a dog.

A pigeon and a dog? Why not?

This one's not the usual pious picture of Jesus as the boy carpenter, nailing together a miniature cross. It's as if Murillo had



sneaked into the home in the evening when everything was quiet, and caught a look at the Holy Family enjoying themselves without a thought of any hardships past or to come. Mary is to our left, working at what is called a distaff, making thread out of balls of wool, thread that she would then use to weave a garment. She seems to be working at her ease, as if it was the sort of thing she did all the time, and it does not keep her from being a part of the moment. She is seated, with a basket of cloth at

her side, but she is looking lovingly over toward Joseph and the toddler Jesus. Joseph is a man in the prime of his life, and his figure is the largest in the painting. He too is seated, with a royal red cloth like a blanket draped across his knees, as if he were a king sitting on a throne. Joseph leans forward, with one hand lightly embracing a sturdy little Jesus, and with his free hand motioning gently toward the figure in the painting that you cannot help but look at, and wonder.

It is a little white dog, sitting, gazing intently at Jesus, with one of his paws raised, as if begging for something. And then we see what it is. The somewhat mischievous Lord is raising high, in his hand, an object that the dog wants. It is a white pigeon. The dog is begging for the pigeon. The little boy Jesus is teasing a dog, with a pigeon.

That dog warms my heart. Murillo must have been fond of the scruffy fellow, because he painted him also in mid leap, wagging his tail for joy, in *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. And in that painting too the dog threatens to steal the scene. Threatens, but he doesn't, because what he is doing gives us in dog-drama the meaning of what is going on. The boy is home! That is all the dog knows, and that is all he needs to know. The boy he loves

is home. The dog does not grouse, as does the elder son in Jesus' story. The dog does not hedge, he does not hold back. The boy is alive, he is home, and the faithful dog shows us what we should feel.

So also in *The Holy Family*. Think of that little dog, wholly focused on the face of Jesus, raising his paw and begging for the pigeon. What if we were like the dog? What do we know about dogs? They are faithful. They want only to serve the master, whom they love. The masters here are Mary and

Joseph and Jesus, and the dog submits even to the little boy. He is begging for something from Jesus. He is begging for the pigeon. Or a dove, I might say. A dove is just a kind of pigeon. And a dove, as you know, is the symbol of the Holy Spirit.

That is why Murillo has painted the dog here. He is an example of the good Christian. We must look intently upon

Jesus, and beg him to send us the Spirit, who once descended upon the Lord at the Jordan River, in the form of a dove. Why did God make dogs? To help us herd sheep, to catch rats, to keep intruders away, and to teach us lessons in faithfulness. Why else?



**Anthony Esolen** is a lecturer, translator, and writer. Among his books are *Out of the Ashes: Rebuilding American Culture*, and *Nostalgia: Going Home in a Homeless World*, and most recently *The Hundredfold: Songs for the Lord*. He is a professor and writer in residence at Magdalen College of the Liberal Arts, in Warner, New Hampshire.

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