It’s an interesting thing, looking at the image in question. This image was made in the 18th century by English poet and printmaker William Blake. The person isn’t important, but his interpretation of the text we just read from Scripture in this image is. So let’s take a look at how William Blake put this Scripture into visual form.

The most obvious first observation is the central cross, with two crosses flanking it. The cross has its back to the viewers. In most depictions the cross is facing the viewer, as if Jesus is looking right at you, but here this is meant to be a behind-the-scenes look. This is what is going on in the background, a different angle or perspective on the old familiar image of Jesus on the cross. And in this view we get a perspective on what we do not see. Unlike the traditional image we do not see Jesus’ face, we do not see the backs of those facing the cross. Instead of the face of Christ we get the face of mankind. In the foreground are the guards rolling dice. A few are in armor, looking over at the gamblers, but three in the center have taken most of their armor off. They’ve relaxed, they’re at ease. They are rolling dice, and
one man has just rolled an 11. He has a big old smile because he has just won the game. He now gets a piece of the clothing that once belonged to the prisoner. Jesus and the two men are not yet dead but they’re as good as dead, and now it’s time to divide the spoils. Another day in the life of executioners. The criminal has no more use for his belongings, and they go to help supplement the pay of the soldiers. Just another day on the job of playing out Roman law, taking whatever pleasures they can from the dog-eat-dog of daily work before returning to the barracks. It was a job, a career, one that was supporting the local government and order. An honorable job in the military. Nothing special about the day, just another execution to do, another part of their work.

If you look back behind the crosses we get the view of the women at the foot of the cross. The disciples, except for John we suppose, had all disappeared, leaving primarily the women who followed Jesus to look up at the cross and weep as their teacher and friend is killed by the state for inciting revolution. And they are there, huddled together, faces up.

In the far background you see the spires of the city of Jerusalem. It’s easy to miss from the traditional picture of the crucifixion that Jesus was killed just outside the city walls. The looming, imposing, massive, guard walls of the city of Jerusalem here are right in Jesus’ line of vision here. In this painting Jesus looks out from the cross towards the city. And if you look at the city walls in this painting, though faint, you can see the silhouettes of unnumbered spectators. People who, from the city, had come to the top of the walls to watch the execution of these three men.

We’d like to see ourselves as the women at the foot of the cross, looking up at the crucified Christ. But by the way they’re positioned in the painting we’re not supposed to focus on these women, are we? They’re an afterthought. Instead we are meant to focus on the gambling men. Here we see the men gambling behind the scenes as a sign of exceptional ignorance. They, not the mourning women, stand in as representatives of you and me. And the crazy thing here is that what they’re doing is nothing out of the normal. They’re just trying to find some pleasure in their work, right? They are gambling for the clothes of Jesus, but it wasn’t like their actions were somehow immoral. Let’s not condemn these men as somehow worthy of our scorn because of their wickedness. We shouldn’t look at them as purely wicked men or examples of wrongful living. No, instead we should look at them as sad examples of a world that just doesn’t see God and what God does right in front of their faces. A world that ignores God, turns its back on God, doesn’t know God, and so is lost in total sin. A world living in darkness, unaware of the danger they are in. A world that is separated from God, alienated from God, lost. Like you and me, a world that would rather ignore God than listen to Him. You and me, who so often shun God when He tells us something in His Word that we don’t want to hear.

But this is contrasted to the scene playing out in the back. I want you to notice this contrast. The people on the wall are faceless. Where the men in the front could represent you and me, in the very act of disobeying and ignoring God, the people on the wall can represent a much more general world. The faceless masses, pushed together. An entire creation. And it’s this world that Jesus faces. In the painting we can’t really see Jesus. Instead, we get to look through Jesus’ eyes as He looks at the world. Those who would rather kill Him than listen to Him. And we see that it’s exactly for these people that He’s giving His life. The mission of Jesus was to come into this dark world, descend into it, and give His life in
substitute for our own. So that, when God the Father would examine our actions, our sins, our lives, He would instead look to Jesus’ actions, Jesus’ righteousness, Jesus’ life for our reward. That’s why, in this image, there is light coming from Jesus. It may be hard to see, but Jesus is a light source, shining light down to the mourning women and out to the city walls as He suffers our torment in hell, as He experiences our eternal judgment so that we could experience the rewards of His eternal peace in heaven and in the new creation.

This Lent, let’s let this image help us understand Christ. He came into the darkness of our sins to be our light. He descended into our ignorance to be the truth. He came into came into our death to be your life. He came for the forgiveness of the world, so that you are forgiven and chosen and loved. To give you His heaven by His experiencing your hell. We will finish this year’s Lenten journey soon, so let us rejoice and marvel all the more at the mystery of His pure sacrifice for you. Many blessings.