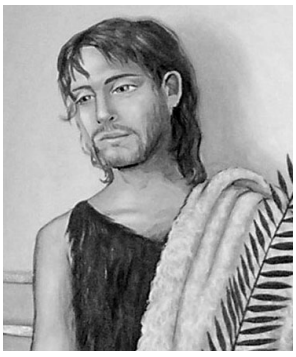
For All the Saints: A Liturgical Art Showcase

by Kelly Klages



with notes on

The Hebrews 11 Series

and

The Royal Figurines Series

Introduction

"For All the Saints" is an eclectic celebration of liturgical artwork inspired by the rich artistic history of the Christian church. The word **liturgy** comes from two Greek words which indicate a work that is done in the interest of the people. Throughout history the church's liturgies and aesthetic forms have served as teaching tools for believers, from the colored paraments and vestments, to the stories of stained glass, to the beautiful and unique musical forms. In modern times, the importance of beauty and value in our culture has waned and often gives way to commercialism, gimmickry, kitsch, and cheapness-- a sickness from which churches have not been immune. "For All the Saints" is an invitation for all to re-discover the role of beauty and art in the truly counter-cultural reflections of the church throughout time, and to consider faith as being worthy of the highest artistic expressions. The show features paintings on canvas, illuminated manuscript imagery, items of jewellery, mosaic, figurines, and other pieces utilizing a wide array of media.

Thomas Merton once wrote, "A saint is not someone who is good, but someone who has experienced the goodness of God." Christians speak of saints first and foremost as those who trust in the promises of God, and are deemed righteous for Christ's sake. The title of the show, "For All the Saints," refers on the one hand to the saints of old, whose faith and deeds we admire and whose received mercies give us hope in times of struggle. The saints refer also to also those who view the show to catch a glimpse of their own spiritual heritage in the vast aesthetic legacy of the church.

While the artistic approaches shown are numerous, spanning as they do throughout many centuries, the following notes are presented as an aid to viewers who may be interested in understanding some of the symbolic intentions of a number of the show pieces, particularly the large canvasses of the Hebrews 11 series and the series of biblical royalty figurines. These are the pieces I tend to receive the most questions regarding their iconographic significance.

The Hebrews 11 Series: The planning process and theological considerations

This series of paintings came about through an analysis of the book of Hebrews, chapter 11. This particular chapter, which commends the ancients for their faith, is sometimes viewed as a "hall of fame." My series, in contrast, does not depict and honor these saints because they attained unusually high levels of pious holiness, or because of a hope for some meritorious transaction they might attain for us, or because of their "victorious living." Rather than a hall of fame, they represent living testimonies of a faithful God, people who were strong when they were weak, called and led by God despite their great flaws and sins, and are now in the holy city that they had been looking forward to in hope all their earthly lives (11:16). These people of faith—that faith which cannot help but be active— point us to Christ, where our faith is solely rooted. In all these things they are examples of comfort and hope for us all.

Rather than abolishing the saints and all images in the spirit of iconoclasm, my church body instead encourages a proper use of the memory of the saints. Namely, that they are given to us in Scripture (Hebrews 11 being a notable passage) as examples of God's great grace extended to weak sinful beings like us, who trusted in God, being strengthened in their faith, and clung to his promises. In iconography, St. John the Baptist is easily recognizable by his gesture of pointing away from himself to Jesus. In a sense, that is what all the saints do— point away from themselves to Christ. I planned my depiction of these biblical saints from this theologically Christocentric starting point, seeking to emphasize both the humanity of those depicted, and the greater significance of the promises in which each saint found himself or herself.

Each figure is housed in an architectural niche in order to "house" the figure in their own environment. The repeated medallion at the top of each picture, VDMA, is a Latin abbreviation for the Scriptural phrase "The Word of the Lord endures forever," a prominent historical motto for many Christians who advocated the righteousness of faith. The frieze along the bottom presents both the name of the individual and scenes to further establish their story in the wider context of salvific history.

Abel

Abel is depicted as a young man, referencing that his life was cut short before his time. The palm that he is holding is a symbol of martyrdom, as we may consider Abel to be the first person who was killed for his faith. As his primary garment, he is wearing a dark, ragged fur tunic. I conceived of this as a reference to the garments of skin that God made for Adam and Eve as they were driven from the Garden. I thought of it as being black, sackcloth-esque, as the original sin of his parents passes to Abel. More clearly, though, are these garments understood as Gospel. They are given by God to cover the shame of sinners, through the sacrifice of another— an allusion to Christ. The dark garment is tinged with red, a reference to both the shed blood of Abel as well as the blood of Christ. The blood of Abel is mentioned in the Bible as much as (or more than) Abel himself, and it is depicted as "loud," speaking out, crying for justice; the voice of the Law. As the hymn summarizes: "Abel's blood for vengeance pleaded to the skies/ But the blood of Jesus for our pardon cries."

The use of these colors may also bring to mind the highly relevant explanation of the interior of the Luther Rose: "The first thing expressed in my seal is a cross, black, within the heart, to put me in

mind that faith in Christ crucified saves us. 'For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness.' Now, although the cross is black, mortified, and intended to cause pain, yet it does nor change the colour of the heart, does not destroy nature- i.e., does not kill, but keeps alive. 'For the just shall live by faith,' -by faith in the Savior."

To emphasize this covering, Abel is also given a large, light wooly drape. This connects him with the lamb beside him, identifiably Christ, who takes away the sin of the world. The color of the drape and the lamb suggests innocence.

Next to Abel is a stone altar with a lamb. First, this of course helps the viewer to identify Abel in terms of the story of his acceptable sacrifice, as Abel kept flocks and in faith brought "fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock" as an offering to the Lord. This faith, for which Abel is commended, springs from the faithful God's promise of deliverance. The lamb, holding a cross-shaped staff with a white standard, is clearly a representation of Christ, the promised deliverer. Christ (or a lamb) with the standard is often used as an Easter symbol; the lamb has overcome sin and death and clears the way for the resurrection. The lamb cranes back to make eye contact with Abel. This gesture is one of the reassurance of resurrection and life. The lamb has a bleeding wound which sprinkles the altar, in reference to Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant, and the sprinkled blood, which speaks a better word than the blood of Abel (12:24).

The frieze at the bottom of the painting shows four scenes: Cain and Abel; the slain martyrs of the book of Revelation, depicted as crying out for justice from beneath the altar of God; the law of Sinai demanding punishment for sin; and the redeeming blood of the new covenant.

The following passages were also instrumental in pulling together the concepts that went into this painting: Genesis 4:1-16, Matthew 23:29-39, 1 John 3:11-16, John 11:25, Matthew 5:21-24, Revelation 6:9-11, Hebrews 12:22-24, Hebrews 11:1-4.

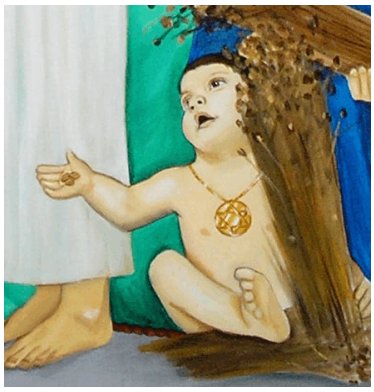
Rahab

Rahab is an interesting example of faith to include in the list. St. James also mentions her as being a person of faith, with almost a level of incredulity: "Was not even the prostitute Rahab considered righteous…?" Rahab was, in fact, a prostitute, a sinful woman. Not the kind of victorious lifestyle that most would include on their lists of "who's who" in the realm of righteousness. In fact, even in hiding the spies, one might feel inclined to see her as a miserable traitor to her city. Actually, her story is a stunning prefiguration of Christ's redemption.

One of the fascinating things about Rahab is this recurring thing of being hidden, covered up, absorbed into. We recall Rahab hiding the spies, of course, and sending them away secretly. In doing so, she expressed her faith in the God of Israel who had made a promise to his people. She pleads that God spare her and her own in the upcoming disaster. The scene of Rahab hiding the spies is shown in the first panel of the frieze at the bottom of the painting. Rahab is also pictured with two small children who primarily represent the children of Israel, shown "hidden" among

bundles of flax. The boy is wearing a Star of David medallion, and the girl is crowned with stars, rather like the image of the woman in Revelation (signifying the people of God; Israel or the church).

But Rahab goes further than hiding the spies and protecting the children of Israel. She hides and covers up her own family as well, sparing them from the impending doom of Jericho. Rather like a Passover image, the scarlet cord in the window signifies that all who are sheltered in Rahab's house will not be destroyed. Rahab's sheltering cloak is green, signifying life, and the all-important red cord is wound throughout, as a sign of security and promise. This is reminiscent of the blood of the Passover and the blood of Christ, which brings deliverance. "For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3).



In a third example of "hiddenness," Rahab and her family are taken in to the people of God (Josh. 6:25). Rahab, in the painting, is not just hiding and protecting a foreign Israel and a few close relations, but her own future family as well. She was preserving the line of the Messiah with the scarlet cord episode. In Matthew's genealogy, Rahab is described as the foremother of Boaz—they are of the line of David, and of Christ. The baby in the painting signifies Boaz, who is holding out in his hand three barley seeds. The story of Boaz and Ruth, pictured in scene #2 of the frieze along with a Jesse tree in the background, brings to mind another Gentile woman who was incorporated into the people of God, commended for her faith and righteousness, and included in Jesus's family line.

The third picture of the frieze is another nod to the scarlet cord motif. This illustrates a scene from the law where a priest is cleansing a person who had an infectious skin disease. A bird is sacrificed, and blood and water is sprinkled on the person with a branch of hyssop, cedarwood, and scarlet yarn. This is a parallel to scene #4, with the Roman soldier piercing Jesus's side, from which blood and water flows. The other soldier on the far right is proclaiming, "Surely this man was the son of God!" This scene brings together the overall theme of the Gentiles, even the most wicked, encountering the salvation of Christ through his blood. Those who were once far have been brought near to God, directly into the family of Jesus.

Further important reading for this painting: Ephesians 2:11-22; Hebrews 9:15-28.

Isaac

Of Isaac's own faith, Hebrews 11 is largely silent. While a great amount of detail is given of others, such as Abraham or Moses, Isaac is mentioned either passively, or in regard to his blessing of his sons Jacob and Esau (scene #1 of the bottom frieze). This blessing, we may recall, was obtained deceitfully from Isaac. He did not originally intend to give Jacob the blessing of the firstborn at all. Why then is Isaac commended?

I chose to use this painting as a portrayal of the "unseeing" nature of faith. "Faith is being sure of

what we hope for and certain of what we do not see" (11:1). Isaac did not foresee, plan out, or understand how God's salvation would come to pass, but he trusted in God and God's will was accomplished. The physical blindness that enabled Jacob to deceive his father is conveyed through the unseeing, washed-out gaze of Isaac's eyes, but his gaze reaches beyond sightlessness to something else.

Hebrews 11 reiterates in many places the fact that the ancients walked by faith, but did not see the end of God's promises fulfilled in Christ in their lifetimes, nor did they receive their earthly inheritance. Rather, they were looking forward to a heavenly dwelling, though they lived in tents throughout their lives. Isaac and his kin's tent-dwelling is established by the hammer and tent peg, as well as in the second scene of the frieze (11:9-10, 13-16). The third scene shows the curtain tearing to reveal the Holy of Holies on Good Friday, an allusion to the torn tent of Christ's body signifying access to God (10:19-23). The hammer and tent peg may also remind the viewer of the events of Good Friday. The fourth and final scene pictures the anticipated heavenly city obtained through this cross.

Isaac is also spoken of in Hebrews 11 in terms of faith in the resurrection of the dead. Isaac's father was even willing to obey God and sacrifice his son, assuming that God was able to raise the dead. This scene, and the substitutionary lamb, prefigure Christ's sacrifice. Isaac is painted holding a *shofar*, or ram's horn, which is another reminder of the promise and carries this messianic connotation.

The water jar is one final reminder of events in Isaac's life which came to pass quite apart from his own doing or planning. Along with the numerous references to wells and water throughout his history in Genesis, the water jar is closely connected with his wife, Rebekah, who was identified to be Isaac's wife by her watering of the camels of Abraham's servant. The water jar indicates the gracious provision of God.

Texts considered for this painting: Hebrews 11:17-20, 13:11-14, John 1:14, 2 Corinthians 5:1-7, Revelation 7:15-17.

The Royal Figurines Series

This original series of mixed-media figurines is designed to portray various royal personages of the Bible. While not all those represented can strictly be understood as "saints," they are still "for all the saints" in that they point to the deliverance of God. Future figurines planned for this series include the Queen of Sheba and King David.

"Queen Esther"

Esther is depicted in pale green and white, symbolizing life— the lives of the people for whom she is here interceding. She is decorated with genuine freshwater pearls, peridot, and green crystal. In her left hand she holds a peacock feather fan, a symbol of Persian royalty. Despite her anxious expression, her right hand reaches out to touch the sceptre the king extends to her. By her rise to the position of royalty, she unwittingly obtains a role to become God's instrument in the redemption of her people through her bold intercession.

"King Josiah"

King Josiah was eight years old upon becoming king of Judah, as told in 2 Kings 22. He followed the Lord whole-heartedly, and is described comparatively to King David. Josiah is pictured in his youth, holding a leather-bound scroll. He is well-known for restoring God's Word to his people upon hearing the scroll of God's law, and stopping idolatrous practices in his land. Josiah is dressed in velvety black with a royal sash of red. Although he lived in a dark time, he was bold in his defence of the truth. Josiah's crown and necklace are made of gold vermeil and garnet carved into beads, leaves, and cabochons.

"Pharaoh's Daughter"

The daughter of Pharaoh, mentioned in Exodus 2 as finding and raising the baby Moses, is draped in sheer white garments. She is crowned with gold-coloured wire and drops of blue chalcedony; an Egyptian fan collar of mother-of-pearl is around her neck. Her girdle is a combination of blue chalcedony and gold vermeil, miniature freshwater pearls, and water sapphire. She stands on a base of deep blue agate, pictured in the very moment of finding Moses in the Nile. In her hand is the lid of the basket, made of genuine Egyptian papyrus reeds. Her expression is surprised and compassionate.

"Nativity"

This simple assembly of Joseph, Mary, the baby Jesus, and an angel is at the centre of all nativities. Mary wears traditional blue and Joseph wears common earth-tones; but both wear a gold belt to signify the Messiah's own royal line and the gift of God's Son given to them. The baby Jesus is lying on a bed of hay. His manger is hand-made from Bethlehem olive wood.

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For all the saints, who from their labors rest,
who thee by faith before the world confessed,
thy name, O Jesus, be forever blest.
Alleluia, Alleluia!

Thou wast their rock, their fortress, and their might;
thou Lord, their captain in the well-fought fight;
thou in the darkness drear, their one true light.
Alleluia, Alleluia!

O may thy soldiers, faithful, true, and bold,
fight as the saints who nobly fought of old,
and win with them the victor's crown of gold.
Alleluia, Alleluia!

O blest communion, fellowship divine!
We feebly struggle, they in glory shine;
yet all are one in thee, for all are thine.
Alleluia, Alleluia!

Text: William W. How, 1823-1897

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Some of the paintings in this gallery show utilized *Margo's Custom Framing* in Winkler, Manitoba.