

PRAYING WITH THE DOORS

3 in a series of 3

March 2, 2008

This spring, the Seattle Art Museum is privileged to host a once-in-a-lifetime exhibit of three panels of Lorenzo Ghiberti's Renaissance masterwork, the bronze doors of the baptistry of the Cathedral of Florence. A series of inserts in the bulletin help us celebrate this event and learn more about "the Gates of Paradise" and our own magnificent bronze doors created by Ulrich Henn.

Our ceremonial bronze doors, beautiful as they are, weren't made just to look at—or to pass through on great occasions! They are intended to challenge us, to make us stop and reflect on the great mysteries of our faith. The following questions may help you reflect on the doors and perhaps look at them in a different way.

1. **Adam and Eve.** The journey begins as our first parents set out from Eden. At the Easter Vigil, the great Exsultet reminds us, "O, happy fault! O necessary sin of Adam that gained for us so great a Redeemer!" In our Christian faith, the expulsion from Eden is inseparable from the salvation Christ won for us. Do you see this Christian view of the fall reflected in Ulrich Henn's vision of the story?



2. **God's Covenant with Noah.** A rainbow arcs overhead, and Noah kneels, in adoration, in awe, even in jubilation. What a contrast this scene forms to the violence of the flood that lasted forty days. When have you had an experience of God's mercy following a particularly difficult time in your life?

3. **Moses leads his people through the Red Sea.** The crowd of people that follows Moses includes all of us— young and old, men and women. Some carry heavy burdens. A mother tenderly protects her infant. A young child turns around in amazement at the sight of the waves like a wall on their left. Who do you identify with in this crowd?

4. **The Baptism of the Lord.** What does Jesus' gesture and expression reveal about his attitude toward baptism? What does the figure of John the Baptist say to you?

5. **Healing Stories.** Look at the figure of the paralyzed man, sitting up for the first time. Jesus heals not just the body, but the soul. Below, the man born blind reaches out for Jesus with one hand while the other seems hesitant, unsure. Life in Christ demands huge changes from us. Are we ready to be healed?

6. **Beatitudes.** This scene is situated right before Palm Sunday, suggesting that acceptance of Jesus' teachings means setting out on the way of the Cross. Look at the faces of those gathered around Jesus as he teaches. Find yourself among them.

7. **Palm Sunday.** Study the figure of Jesus. In the images of Christ's ministry, we saw Christ speaking, gesturing, healing. How does Henn capture the *silence* of Christ during his Passion? Sometimes Christian life demands action on our part; and sometimes simply patient endurance of suffering. When have you experienced this in your life?

8. **Crowning with Thorns and Crucifixion.** We see Christ surrounded by a turbulent, accusing, hostile crowd. This is contrasted to the image of Christ,

solitary, bent double, seemingly crushed under the weight of the cross. Jesus experiences both the humiliation of public disgrace and the desolation of total abandonment.

9. **Tympanum.** The story of salvation is brought full circle in this dramatic vision of the Heavenly City. An angel pointed the way out of Paradise; now an angel points to the way back in—the triumphant Lamb of God. The cross has become burnished gold. The Lamb who was slain is at the center of the vision, and from him pour forth rivers of living water, trees bearing an abundance of fruit. What does this suggest about the Easter mystery we are about to celebrate?

Ghiberti's "Gates of Paradise" were created not just to dazzle the viewer, or to gain a reputation for the artist (though they achieved both of these things surpassingly well!). As sacred art, they are intended to challenge, to teach, and above all, to illuminate sacred mysteries.

1. **Creation of Adam and Eve.** Many artists focus on the anguish of the expulsion from Eden. But for Ghiberti, this story is about beauty—the beauty of creation, the sublime beauty of the human being created in the image and likeness of God. Are we able to see the beauty of God in our fallen humanity? In the least of our brothers and sisters? Does our own self-image reflect our belief that we are made in God's image and likeness?



2. **Jacob and Esau.** In the story of Jacob, stealing his brother's birthright with the help of his mother, we see God "writing straight with crooked lines." Ghiberti's composition of this panel suggests this. The busy figures are grouped here and there, but the magnificent soaring arches of the space in which they are situated suggest the divine order that God brings out of human chaos. "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob." God is not ashamed to be called our God.

3. **David and Goliath.** This panel is crowded with dozens of figures. A battle rages; Saul, clad in armor and raising his sword aloft, plunges down on the enemy in his chariot. But it is not Saul who actually wins this battle. In the foreground we see the little figure of David, cutting off the head of the massive, sprawling Goliath. The soldiers fight, but God has already given the victory—to the most unlikely victor imaginable. It is not our strength, but God's grace, that wins the day. As David the Psalmist would sing, "Not to us, Lord, not to us, but to your name give the glory."

—M & C Laughlin