

The Church Windows of St. Elisabeth

Designed by artist Markus Lüpertz

Individual viewing of the windows in sequence from the organ loft

Original German: Dr Barbara Kahle

English translation: Dr Robert Craig

Lepers

Sheltering the homeless

In the upper panels you can see Christ's head with a beard and the hint of a crown of thorns, a face marred by leprosy and deep, dark blue eyes, while in the lower area, a complete figure with a red (bloody) foot – also captured in vibrant colours – spans the whole panel. They carry their belongings in plastic bags: this is a homeless person, an outcast. The problem of social exclusion, along with a precarious housing situation, pose urgent questions for us today. These depictions can be related to a legend from the life of St. Elisabeth: the leper she has cared for in her own bed manifests as the image of the Crucified Christ when the sheets are thrown back. To recognize Christ in the poor is a call we know from St. Matthew's Gospel:

'As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'

Matthew 25:40

The full-panel ornamentation that surrounds the figures in the other windows becomes the dominant motif here. The powerful and luminous colours are further heightened by the black graphic lines of the lead came. Even prior to the theological message itself, the surface ornamentation takes on a significance of its own, as the individual forms of course suggest leaves and flowers, which evoke a life lived in the full fruitfulness of salvation. Those who follow Christ in his teaching of charity become part of a life-giving stream and can win salvation for both themselves and others. In particular, it is St. Elisabeth, in her social commitment to the poor and the sick, who is repeatedly associated with the image of the blossoming rose.

Miracle of the rose

Feeding the hungry

Legend has it that Elisabeth repeatedly distributed bread to the needy. Her husband Louis, incensed at her rumoured profligacy, finds nothing but roses when he checks; the bread has turned into red roses. The head of Elisabeth is depicted in the upper field, crowned with a simple crown of spikes, smiling in half-profile – her cheeks radiantly red like a rose. In the centre shines a basket full of roses. The scattered blossoms spread out, creating a connection to the bowl of small loaves held out by a pair of hands. At the bottom right, we glimpse a head with a haggard face and a hand reaching out for the bread. The testimony of the social gospel, which Elisabeth lived out for the poor and sick, remains an indispensable commission for today's Holy Church.

Sweet Jesus crucified and resurrected Clothing the naked

Dominating this window is the frontal depiction of an unclothed woman, her pubic area highlighted in a blushing red; and towering over her we see a bearded half-figure in a turquoise robe with stigmata on his hands. This figure, who should clearly be interpreted as Christ, embraces the woman, 'clothing' her body. God meets the naked, the exposed, and the defenceless with love and goodness. To put on Christ as a garment also means to clothe oneself in the virtues of mercy and charity.

At the same time, nakedness is a basic symbol of self-renunciation for followers of Christ: a life lived in humility and poverty, as it is exemplified in the figure of St. Francis, as well as in his following of St. Elisabeth too. The depiction may be associated with a vision of Elisabeth during a celebration of Mass. Here she encounters her true being, fully unveiled – virtually naked and bare – and she becomes as one with the risen and living Christ.

Handing over the bones Burying the dead

As legend has it, during her stay in Bamberg, Elisabeth receives from returning crusaders the bones and the ring of her husband, who had died in Otranto in southern Italy. This is signified in the depiction of the vessel (the urn) in the upper section of the window. Two heads, as well as the image of a skull carried by hands – which is repeated three times here – revolve around the theme of death and demand our engagement. As in the window 'Visiting prisoners', the caring holding of hands indicates that charity does not end with death. Accepting death, being reconciled to it, is a critical challenge not only for Elisabeth.

Old woman The giving of alms

Elisabeth, clearly recognizable here with her crown, her blue robe, and her dark flesh, looks at an old woman who has her hands raised defensively, captured in white-toned ornamental sections with black lines. In her encounter with the old woman, who fails to offer her due respect at a narrow passing point, Elisabeth realizes that after the death of her husband and her expulsion from the Wartburg she is on the same level as those who are socially marginalised. In the context of mystical theology, this can also be understood as an encounter with Christ: Elisabeth becomes as one with the 'poor' Christ, ready now to live entirely with and among the poor. Acting joyfully, she gestures with oversized hands towards a needy person in a passive, squatting posture, begging for alms. A dog and a hat complete the scene. Interspersed blossoms, visible at the connection between the two sections together, recall the 'Rose miracle'.

Prison Visiting prisoners

In the upper part of the central section, we can see Elisabeth's head, and down below her hands clasp at prison bars. This motif is repeated in the lower panels: the heads of four figures, flayed, distorted, and martyred, their fingers clasping the bars. The window makes direct reference here to Bamberg itself, as the city prison is located just behind the Choir of the church. This is also a reference to Elisabeth's own 'imprisonment' in Bamberg. Her uncle, the Bamberg Bishop

Eckbert of Merania, had assigned her his official castle in Pottenstein as a temporary residence with the intention of marrying her off again, a plan which Elisabeth, however, rejected.

The repeated representation of the prison bars in this window may be interpreted in several different ways: in addition to one's own culpable behaviour, there is one's imprisonment in social, cultural, and professional roles, as well as personal expectations, or indeed the imprisonment of torture victims and asylum seekers.

Accompanying the funeral procession

Visiting the sick

Depicted here we can see the crowned head of Elisabeth, along with her oversized hands, which comfortingly embrace a downwardly inclined head wrapped in bandages. Whitish tones and closed eyes help to accentuate the reference to illness and death. Just below, we can see two more faces, almost as devoid of colour, emerging from the coloured ornamental panels. Arms and hands with strikingly dark red stigmata are also visible and interpretable in their double meaning as a rose motif. This reference to Christ once again recalls Matthew 25:40. The practical realization of love for one's neighbour is one and the same as our love of God. The princess and the former Landgravine Elisabeth of Thuringia founded a hospital in Marburg in 1228, where she cared for the sick during the final three years of her short life.