Early Christian Art

Teacher Background

The dominant theme of early Christian art was salvation expressed through Christ, the saviour. The Good Shepherd and the Orante (featured in the previous activity) are the main symbols on which the iconography of the first centuries is based. All other figures, drawings and scenes express the salvation plan:

- The work of salvation prepared by God in the Old Testament
  (depicted in scenes of Adam and Eve; Noah and the Ark; Abraham; Moses striking the rock; Daniel in the lion’s den)
- The work of salvation fulfilled by Christ in the New Testament
  (depicted in scenes of the baptism of Jesus; the resurrection of Lazarus; banquet scene around the Eucharist; scenes from the passion)
- The work of salvation continued by the Church
  (depicted in scenes of Christ consigning the law to Peter and scenes featuring Saints Peter and Paul)
- Salvation already achieved in heaven.
  (depicted in scenes featuring the early martyrs; the crowning of the Apostles)

Besides Biblical episodes, early Christian art also used allegorical figures (such as the seasons), scenes from everyday life (such as trades and banquets), filling or ornamental themes (such as baskets of flowers, fruit, harvesters, leaves, palm branches, birds, vases overflowing with water and other geometrical patterns borrowed from Roman decoration).