

THE CATHEDRAL CHURCH OF ST MARY, ST DENYS AND ST GEORGE MANCHESTER

EXPLORING CHRISTIAN SIGNS AND SYMBOLS

Signs And Logos in Everyday Life

Wherever we go in today's world signs and logos surround us. They give us all sorts of information in the form of pictures, patterns and shapes. As soon as we see one of these signs we quickly know what to expect. The big golden 'M' of Macdonalds is an example of a logo. A road sign with a black triangle tells us there is a steep hill ahead. We 'read' hundreds of signs every day. For a sign to be effective it must be understood by anyone who has never seen it before and who has no-one with them to explain the meaning. What do you think is the meaning of these signs and logos?



What is a symbol?

A symbol is a special kind of sign. Not only does it tell us something but also, more importantly, it often has a **hidden** meaning. It is rather like a secret sign. Before you can understand what it means someone has to explain it to you.

People who might be punished if others knew they belong to a special group sometimes make use of symbols. The symbol identifies a person as belonging to a particular group without telling

strangers. This was very important in the early church because if the Romans knew a person was a Christian they were very likely to be taken away and killed.

A fish became one of the earliest of such symbols, used in Greece in the first century.



This was because each letter of the Greek word for 'fish' (**ICHTHUS**) was the first letter of the words 'Jesus Christ, God's Son, Saviour'. Who would think of a fish as anything to do with Christians unless they knew about the story of Jesus?

If you cannot read and write symbols are very useful for letting you know the meaning of something. Very few ordinary people in the Middle Ages could read and write so symbols helped them to understand some quite difficult religious ideas. As with all churches, Manchester Cathedral is rich in Christian symbols. In addition there is also a wealth of Christian symbolism which might not be too obvious to us today but was particularly significant to the mediaeval mind.

The Direction of the Cathedral

Of all the points of the compass, the most sacred was east, pointing in the direction of Jerusalem. Sion, the Celestial City or Heavenly Jerusalem, were all phrases used by mediaeval writers

to connect churches in Western Christendom with the Temple in Jerusalem, a site revered by Jews and Christians alike as the one place on earth where God's presence was strongest.



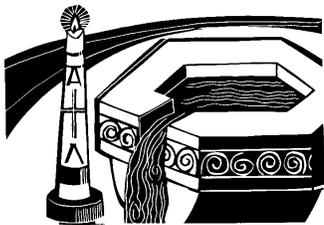
The high altar is placed at the east end of a church, side altars were placed on east walls and the congregation faces east.

All mediaeval churches were built from east to west because the sun rises in the east and sets in the west. The sun rising in the east was associated with dawn on Easter Day, when Christ rose from the dead. Burials beneath the paving were placed with their feet to the east, with the intention that on the Last Day, when they rose from their resting place, they would stand up and face their Creator and Judge. Christian burials still have this orientation today (look at the way the brasses in front of the High Altar are facing).

The east and west windows in a church are the most important; the east because they let in the morning sun, which symbolises God as the Light of the World, and the west because the dying sun reminds us of the Day of Judgement. The north side of the church is dark and traditionally represented the devil, and the south side is sunny, representing the Holy Spirit.

The Font

The great doors in the west wall are where people traditionally entered the church. The Font was always placed near the west doors of a church or Cathedral. This symbolised the beginning of a Christian's journey through life, as the Christian life begins with baptism, when the water symbolises cleansing from sin and rebirth to a new life in Christ.



The word Font comes from the same word as 'fountain' or living water.

When a baby is born his or her parents may want to have the child **baptised**. Baptism is a ceremony at which a person becomes a Christian. A person doesn't have to be baptised at birth. Anyone can become a Christian at any age and be baptised, but the ceremony and the symbolism is the same.

In just the same way that we wash every day to get ourselves clean and ready for a new day, at baptism a person 'washes away' their old life and promises to start a fresh, new life as a Christian.

Jesus was baptised in the River Jordan by John the Baptist. Early Christians were baptised in the same way as Jesus, by being washed in a river and by being totally submerged in the water. Today, for most people, the

washing is done symbolically at the church's Font where the priest pours a little water over the forehead of the person being baptised and then makes a sign of the cross with water.

The Font in the Cathedral has been moved from the west door and is now in the Regiment Chapel.

The Cross



It was a few hundred years after Jesus was alive on earth that the cross became the single most important symbol for Christians. This is because the Romans killed Jesus by nailing him to a cross, which is called **crucifixion**.

It was a slow and cruel way of killing someone and the Romans only used it for those that they thought were the worst kind of people. The cross reminds us that Christ was killed in this way and that he rose from the dead and is alive with God forever.

Some crosses are plain and some have a figure of Jesus being crucified. This kind of cross is called a **crucifix** and reminds us of the sufferings of Jesus. An empty cross symbolizes the risen Christ. Churches were often built in the shape of a cross.

The Nave

The Nave is the western end of a church or Cathedral and is the place where the people or 'congregation' sit. The word comes from the Latin word 'navis' which

means 'a ship', and symbolizes the passage of the Christian through the stormy waters of life. This image was inspired by the story of Noah saving humans and animals from the flood.



The Nave is like an upside down boat and if you look up in the Nave of the Cathedral you will see that the main central rib becomes the keel of a boat, the ribs form the bottom, the pillars the sides and the floor becomes the deck.

After the side chapels were removed in the 16th century, Manchester Cathedral has the widest Nave of any Cathedral in England.

The Angels



Angels were an important part of mediaeval religious belief. Every Christian was believed to have a Guardian Angel and people prayed to them, looked to them for protection and believed that nothing important happened without them. Good and bad angels were thought to be everywhere. There was an angel of baptism and an angel of death. Angels were behind the winds that blew and they guided the stars and planets in their courses.

The angels in the Cathedral reminded the congregation that at the Holy Communion heaven reaches down to earth and earth is brought into heaven. It seemed

obvious to the mediaeval mind that the chief work of angels was to lift ordinary men and women further towards God, as if on wings. Behind the uplifting music of Christian worship there must have been angels for how else could music have the power to lift the soul so high? There are fourteen minstrel angels in the roof of the Nave, each playing upon different mediaeval instruments.

Above the choir screen another consort of minstrel angels can be seen which were painted in Victorian times. The mediaeval woodcarvers who built the Quire placed an angel at the bottom of each canopy and carved yet more angels in the roof of the Quire. Throughout the Cathedral there are many more angels carved in wood and stone (look for the angels presenting the symbols of Christ's Passion in the North Porch).

The Quire



When the Cathedral was built the Quire was the most important place, and in many ways it still is. In mediaeval times the people were not allowed in the Quire, or even to see into the Quire, so it was separated from the Nave by a screen or **pulpitum**. Instead the people had to listen to the priests celebrate the Mass. Inside the Quire are beautifully carved choir stalls and canopies.

Underneath the seats are tip-up seats called **misericords**. The **Bishop's Throne** is inside the Quire. The carved stalls in the Quire are thought to be the finest

in the country. They date from 1421 and were carved by the same team of craftsmen who carved the choir stalls in Ripon Cathedral and Beverley Minster.

The Misericords



Misericords are the seats of the choir stalls which, when tipped up, allow a person to rest on a 'bracket' or ledge, giving the appearance of standing, while really sitting. Sometimes services in mediaeval times could be up to three hours long and the misericord was designed to give some comfort to older priests and monks. The word comes from the Latin words for 'pity' and 'heart' and they were sometimes known as 'mercy seats'.

These under-seat ledges were decorated with intricate carvings showing scenes of everyday life, moral tales, animals, plants, months and seasons and local legends. Sometimes the subject symbolised something religious.

One of the scenes on the north side is The 'Pelican in her Piety' which was a common mediaeval subject. The pelican is pecking her own breast in order to feed her young on her own blood. This story symbolises our own redemption through Christ's blood.

The kneelers that are around the High Altar are embroidered with some of the scenes and pictures on the misericords.

The Bishop's Throne

The Bishop's Throne is a very important part of the Cathedral. The word 'Cathedral' comes from the Latin word 'cathedra' which means a seat.



The Bishop is a very important priest who is in charge of all the parish churches in his diocese. His throne and the ceremonial vestments that he wears are symbols of his authority and power.

Yet at the same time he is like Jesus, a shepherd who cares lovingly for his flock, and for this reason he carries a **crozier** which is a shepherd's crook. The Bishop's Throne has a canopy on the top so that it can reach further towards God.

The Bishop's Throne in the Cathedral was made in 1855. It has a kangaroo carved on it because the third Bishop of Manchester had been Bishop of Melbourne in Australia.

The Altar



Very early man used to worship many different gods. An Altar was a special place made of stone where people made sacrifices to their gods. A sacrifice was something valuable such as an

animal or even a human being that was given up or offered to a god. killed so that the god could receive their offering.

People did this because they thought that by giving their god something so valuable it would please him or her and the people would then be given what they wanted. People might want rain for a good harvest or victory over an enemy that they were fighting.

We have Altars in churches today. There are many Altars in the Cathedral but they are not used in the same way as people who lived thousands of years ago used them. Today the Altar has become a symbol; it reminds us of the table at which Jesus shared bread and wine with his disciples to celebrate the Jewish Feast of the Passover.

During this meal he told his disciples that the bread was a symbol for his body and the wine a symbol for his blood. He said that people should share bread and wine forever after so that they would remember Him. An Altar has a cross in the middle and two candles, one on either side of the cross.

The main Altar (or High Altar) is always at the east end of a church or Cathedral. The priest also faced east. In this way the worshippers faced the rising sun - the symbol of the presence of Christ, the Light of the World. They also faced the Holy City of Jerusalem.

The animal or person had to be

The Lectern

The Lectern is the reading stand upon which the Bible is placed.

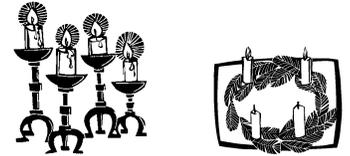


In many churches this is in the shape of an Eagle which is a symbol of St John the Evangelist who wrote one of the Gospels. Eagles are big, strong birds with a huge wing-span and can soar higher than most other birds. It was believed that an Eagle would carry God's word not only through the whole building but also out into the world beyond. The Eagle would always be standing on a sphere which represented the world.

In the Cathedral there are several lecterns, but none of them are in the shape of an Eagle. The Lectern in the Quire is unusual because it has four sides and can be turned around, or rotated. This was so that, during the service, the server could put the books in place that were to be read by the priest before they were needed. Then it could just be turned to the priest when it was needed. It was not actually made as a Lectern but was originally a music stand.

On top of the four-sided lectern is a statue of St Paul. This statue is much older than the lectern and has an interesting story.

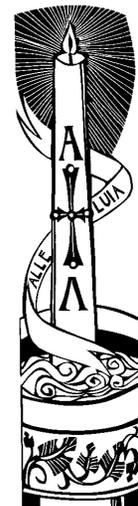
Light is a symbol of hope and goodness and symbolises the presence of Jesus in the world. Candles symbolise Christ as the Light of the World.



As well as being placed on the Altar, candles are also used at different times of the year such as Advent, Easter and Baptisms.

The Paschal candle is lit for forty days between Easter and the Ascension, marking the period when the risen Christ, in his own words 'the light of the world' appeared to his disciples before ascending to heaven.

After the Easter season is over the Paschal Candle is put beside the Font and the small baptism candles are lit from it. The person being baptised is given a candle, a symbol of Christ being the Light of the World and of their calling to take that 'light' wherever they find themselves. The Baptism Candle is a symbol that Christians share in Jesus' new life.



The Candles