

The stained glass windows of Margaret Agnes Rope (1882 – 1953)

SHREWSBURY: THE BAPTISTERY WINDOW

The Baptistry Window is at the back of the cathedral to the right of the main entrance, in the corner occupied by the baptismal font until a 1984 reordering. Margaret Rope has given us the key to reading it in the picture in the large roundel near the bottom. This depicts the font blessing ceremony from the old Holy Saturday liturgy¹, and perusal of an old Missal (preferably one with an English translation - the liturgy, as all those of the time, would have been conducted in Latin!) will show that the window, if read from the bottom upwards, illustrates stages of the ceremony in order. Reading from bottom to top may seem counterintuitive to us, but it was normal for medieval windows to be arranged like this, and Margaret Rope has done the same with the main scenes in the Cathedral's Soldier and St Laurence windows.

In the liturgy, as the celebrant and assistants processed towards the font, verses from a psalm were sung, beginning 'As the deer longs for running streams, so my soul longs for you, my God'², and **at the bottom of the window** is a fallow deer stag running across grassland, with what appear to be flowering horse chestnut trees in the background. In ancient legend the stag would pursue and devour a serpent and then counteract its poison by drinking from a spring. As Christians identified the serpent with the devil, so the stag could be identified with a candidate for baptism: the spring washed away the serpent's poison and the waters of baptism would wash away the person's sin.

In the large roundel above the procession has reached the font. In the foreground to the right is a boy server holding the Paschal Candle. On the candle we can see a group of five grains of incense, representing the five wounds which Jesus received at his Crucifixion, one in each hand and foot and one in his side. This server would have led the procession: behind him would have followed the young man carrying the processional cross flanked by the two other boy servers carrying the smaller candles. The celebrant, wearing a purple cope, would have followed, and then the other assistants. Here the celebrant is about to begin the blessing, reading from the service book held by an older boy server. On the font we can see an image of the baptism of Christ by John in the Jordan, with the Holy Spirit descending in the form of a dove. This is not the Shrewsbury Cathedral font – I wonder whether the artist used another for a model, or whether it is her invention. Above the font at the top of the picture is the cover which would be lowered onto it when not in use. In front of the font is a water jar into which water from the font, made holy by the blessing, would be put. It would then be used for sprinkling over the congregation before the start of the Easter Day masses.

Margaret Rope modelled figures in her windows on her family and friends. The celebrant is Canon Ambrose Moriarty, Cathedral Administrator, nephew of Bishop Allen and a friend of the Rope family. He came to serve the Cathedral parish as a newly ordained curate in 1894 and remained here for the rest of his life, becoming Bishop of Shrewsbury in 1934³. Margaret's brother Michael was the model for the cross bearer and the other young man assisting the priest. Michael Rope became an aeronautical engineer and a squadron leader in the RAF. He worked on airship

¹ In the 1950s this liturgy was modified considerably and moved from the morning to the evening of the day before Easter Sunday to become the Easter Vigil, still celebrated by Catholics all over the world.

² Psalm 41 (42 in some versions of the bible).

³ See the St Ambrose Window.

development, and was one of 48 people killed when the R101 Airship crashed in France in October 1930.

At the font a prayer was said drawing a parallel between the waters of the Flood⁴, which washed away the sins of the world and made a new beginning, and the water of baptism, which do the same for the individual Christian. **In the small roundel above** is Noah's Ark floating on the waters of the Flood. Tree tops are showing above the water. Noah is standing on deck watching the dove which he has sent out to look for dry land. Over the Ark is a rainbow: after the Flood God made a covenant with mankind, promising that he would never again devastate the earth with a flood and marking his promise by setting a rainbow in the sky.

The prayer continued by asking God to look down on his Church, 'you, who by the streams of your abundant grace fill your city with joy', and **in the larger roundel above** we see the Holy City, the banner over it bearing a quotation in Latin from Psalm 45/46: FLUMINIS IMPETUS LAETIFICAT CIVITATEM DEI (The streams of a river make the City of God glad); around the ramparts of the City is a verse from Psalm 86/87: SICUT LAETANTIUM OMNIUM HABITATIO EST IN TE (Those who sing and those who dance all find their home in you); and below the front gate of the City is a smaller banner bearing another verse from Psalm 86/87: GLORIOSA DICTA SUNT DE TE CIVITAS DEI (Glorious things are spoken about you, City of God).

One other interesting feature of this depiction, though it's so small you might not immediately notice it, is the monogram in a shield over the foremost gate of the City: MR = Maria Regina = Mary Queen (of Heaven). Mary is referenced here because she has a metaphorical connection with the Sacrament of Baptism. Jesus, the Son of God, was born from Mary's womb, and at baptism Christians are reborn as children of God in the baptismal font, the 'Womb of the Church'. The prayer recited by the priest during the old font blessing ceremony asked 'that those who are to be sanctified in the immaculate womb of this divine font, and are to be born again new creatures, may come forth a heavenly offspring.' By placing Mary's monogram over the entrance to the City of God the artist is emphasising her role as the Gate of Heaven: Mary was the portal through which God the Son, Jesus Christ, passed to reach earth from heaven, and she is also the way that baptised Christians on earth can hope to reach heaven, by following her example and seeking her help. And there is another connection between Mary and the City of God: just as two millennia ago God came down to earth in Mary's womb to live among us, so at the end of time He will come down again in the City of God: 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them ...'⁵. Mary of Agreda, a 17th century Spanish nun, reasoned from this in her work *The Mystical City of God*, an account of the history and life of Mary based on divine revelations, that 'there is no doubt that this metaphor of a city [in the Book of Revelation] refers truly to the most holy Mary.'

Next the celebrant divided the water in the font in the form of a cross and prayed 'May all unclean spirits, by your command, O Lord, depart from hence; may all the malice of diabolical wiles be entirely banished; may no power of the enemy prevail here'. **From the gates of the City** pour three rivers, symbolising the Holy Trinity, in whose threefold name, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, all Christians are baptised. These merge and then flow down the window, encircling the pictures below: beyond the rivers, and held back by them, we can see the flames and demons of Hell, the abode of the enemy, the devil.

⁴ See Genesis 6-9.

⁵ Revelation 21:3.

Then the celebrant blessed the water, referring in his prayer to the water and blood which flowed from the wound in the side of the crucified Christ⁶: **at the apex of the main light** is the Sacred Heart of Jesus, here representing that wound. The water and blood are signs of Baptism and the Eucharist respectively.

Finally the celebrant took the Paschal Candle and plunged it three times into the font, praying 'May the virtue of the Holy Spirit descend into all the water of this font': **in the small light at the top** we see the Holy Spirit, descending in the form of a dove as it did when John baptised Jesus in the Jordan⁷. The dove's cruciform halo is a sign that the Spirit is one of the three Persons of the Holy Trinity. Around the dove is a ring of fire because the Spirit, like fire, transforms everything it touches.

To either side of the Noah's Ark picture are two more references to the old Holy Saturday liturgy. **To the left** is the triple candlestick (another symbol of the Holy Trinity) used earlier in the liturgy for bringing the 'light of Christ' ('Lumen Christi' in Latin) from the new fire into the church⁸, from which the Paschal Candle has been lit. **To the right** is the Paschal Candle being plunged into the water in the font (see previous paragraph). The crosses **in the bands above and below** are a reference to the celebrant's making the sign of the cross over the water several times during the ceremony.

The inscription at the base of the window reads 'Pray for the soul of ELIZABETH·M·de·SOUZA who gave up her soul to GOD on October 19th 1907.' Elizabeth Mary de Souza was 76 years old when she died⁹: she is buried in Shrewsbury Cemetery. Miss de Souza was housekeeper to Bishop James Brown, the first Bishop of Shrewsbury, in his final years when his health was failing.

Margaret Rope's window replaced one depicting the baptism of Christ, which commemorated Canon Eugene Egan. He was born in Ireland, had been the priest in charge of the Shrewsbury Mission from 1833 to 1853, became a Canon of the first diocesan chapter in 1852 and died in Bruges, Belgium, on 21st December 1871, aged about 67¹⁰. This earlier glass now forms part of a window in the old Convent chapel in Belmont.

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⁶ See John 19:34

⁷ See Matthew 4:13-17

⁸ There is a stained glass panel by the artist depicting the Lumen Christi procession at Kesgrave.

⁹ General Register Office Deaths Index.

¹⁰ 1851 Census [The National Archives ref. HO107/1992/468/10]; *The Tablet* 10th July 1852 p. 440 & 16th July. 1853 p. 454; *Eddowes's Shrewsbury Journal and Salopian Journal* 27th December 1871 p. 5.