

## **Birkenhead: Church of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception: The Annunciation with the Expulsion from Eden**

This was Margaret Rope's only known depiction of the Annunciation in stained glass: it was lost as a result of enemy action during World War II.

On the night of 12/13 March 1941 there was a full moon and Merseyside was heavily bombed. The presbytery of the Church of Our Lady received a direct hit, killing Parish Priest Canon John Tallon, his housekeeper and his maid, who were all sheltering in the cellar, and badly damaging the church. It was restored and reopened in 1951, the damaged windows, including this one, being replaced by fresh designs. So the window no longer exists: all we have is a studio photograph taken before it was installed and a cartoon (full size design drawing) now in the Margaret Rope archive. Both are black and white, so anything which the artist wanted to convey by the use of colour is sadly lost. Also there might have been minor variations from the cartoon design in the final window. You should bear all this in mind when reading this commentary, which is based on the cartoon.

At the Annunciation the Angel Gabriel announced to the Virgin Mary that God had chosen her to be the mother of his son Jesus, Mary accepted God's choice and Jesus was conceived in her womb by the power of the Holy Spirit (Luke 1: 26-38). God did this so that mankind could, through Jesus, be reconciled with him and learn of his infinite love. Mankind's relationship with God had been spoilt when the first man and woman, Adam and Eve, tempted by the devil in the form of the serpent, had disobeyed God by eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil – the original sin, inherited by all their descendants - and had been banished from the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3). The effect of their disobedience was reversed by Mary's obedience, and this connection between the Fall of Man and the Annunciation is shown here, as in many other works of art, by including the Expulsion from Eden as a subsidiary scene.

A picture usually shows things as they are at a particular moment in time, but in the main scene here we are free from this constraint, and have the whole of the Annunciation story contained within a single image. Mary is kneeling before the angel Gabriel, God's messenger. On the floor in front of her is a scroll which she had been reading when he appeared: it contains Isaiah's prophecy ECCE VIRGO CONCIPIET ET PARIET FILIUM ET VOCABITUR NOMEN EIUS EMMANUEL ('Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel<sup>1</sup>.') (Isaiah 7:14). Gabriel holds a lily, symbol of purity, and has his hand raised in greeting ('Hail, highly favoured ..')(Luke 1:28). He is surrounded by fire, which symbolises God's power: an angel surrounded by fire is reminiscent of the account in Exodus 3 of Moses and the burning bush, when Moses saw an angel in flames within a bush but the bush, though it was burning, was not consumed. There, too, the fire signified the power of God. As early as

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<sup>1</sup> Immanuel means 'God with us'.

the 4th century the Church saw a connection between the burning bush and the Virgin Mary: just as the bush burned but remained whole so Mary conceived and gave birth to the Son of God but remained forever a virgin<sup>2</sup>. Mary wonders what Gabriel's greeting means – note the questioning expression on her face. He tells her that she will conceive a son, and she asks how this can be, when she is a virgin. The words below the scene give part of Gabriel's answer: QUOD ENIM EX TE NASCETUR SANCTUM VOCABITUR FILIUS DEI ('For the child will be holy and will be called the son of God'). This is from the Office of Matins for Advent, part of the prayer of the Church, and is based on Luke 1:35. Gabriel also tells Mary that 'The power of the almighty shall overshadow you', and we can see that the fire surrounding Gabriel – God's power - also extends to surround Mary. She accepts God's will ('Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Be it unto me according to your word.')(Luke 1:38) and God the Father in heaven, shown as a hand at the head of the window, above a cloud, sends down the Holy Spirit, shown as a haloed dove, onto her. This is the moment of Jesus' conception.

The subsidiary scene below shows Adam and Eve, wearing the clothes which God had made for them from skins, walking despondently away from the Garden of Eden followed by the serpent. At the entrance to the Garden is an angel with a flaming sword, one of the cherubim whom God has posted there to prevent their return. The Garden is surrounded by a wattle fence and within it is the tree of life, whose fruit they are now unable to eat. Note the sun behind the Garden on the left and the gloom in the oval on the right: Adam and Eve are passing from light and life to darkness and death. Ahead of them are a tangle of brambles, and trees without fruit: instead of being able to stroll at leisure in the Garden and pick fruit from the trees there whenever they feel hungry they must now work, clearing the land and tilling and planting it to feed themselves. Above and below the expulsion scene are the words IPSA CONTERET CAPUT TUUM ('She will crush your head') and INIMICITIAS PONAM INTER TE ET MULIEREM ('I will put enmity between you and the woman'). These phrases are from Genesis 3:15, and are parts of what God said to the serpent after Eve had told him that the serpent had tricked her into eating the forbidden fruit. 'She will crush your head' can be interpreted as a prediction of Mary's bringing Jesus into the world and thereby making possible his victory over the devil<sup>3</sup>. The enmity can be interpreted as the struggle between good and evil.

In the borders of the window are stars, roses and towers. These are references to titles by which Mary is addressed in the prayer sequence known as the Litany of Loreto: Morning Star, Mystical Rose and Tower of David. This Litany has been in use since the 16th century, but these particular titles have their origin much earlier, being based on

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<sup>2</sup> Margaret Rope made specific reference to this metaphor in another of her windows, showing Mary, St Elizabeth and St John the Baptist, at Holy Name church, Oxton, Birkenhead, where the burning bush can be seen at the bottom of the central light below Mary.

<sup>3</sup> The artist's window of Our Lady Help of Christians at Newport, Shropshire illustrates this interpretation, showing Mary holding the infant Jesus and standing on the serpent.

passages in the Old Testament book the Song of Songs, or Song of Solomon, describing the bride, or beloved, who is identified by Catholics with Mary. The morning star precedes the dawn of a new day, whilst Mary precedes Christ, the dawn of a new era. The rose is a symbol of Mary's beauty, both physical and spiritual, and of love, the love which believers have for Mary and the love which Mary has for mankind. The Tower of David, labelled in the window with its Latin name TARRIS DAVIDICA, is a strong fortress: 'on it hang a thousand shields, all of them shields of mighty men.' The Catholic Church holds that Mary was free from all sin, original and personal, so she is a tower of strength against all the temptations of Satan.

At the foot of the window is a bridge, with a radiant lily, symbolising Mary, in its centre. When Mary consented to God's plan she became the bridge by which Jesus his son came down from heaven to earth and became man. She is still a bridge between man and God: Catholics believe that, as Mary is alive in heaven with Jesus, they can ask her to intercede with him on their behalf. In the words of the Hail Mary 'Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners ...'.

The Church celebrates the Feast of the Annunciation on 25<sup>th</sup> March, 9 months before Christ's birth on 25<sup>th</sup> December.

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