

NEWPORT: ST NICHOLAS WINDOW

Nicholas is patron saint of the town of Newport: the medieval Anglican parish church is dedicated to him. He was bishop of Myra, a seaport in Asia Minor (now Turkey), in the 4th century. This window, the rearmost of the four in the wall to your right as you face the altar, shows him in his episcopal vestments, holding a processional crucifix in his left hand and with his right hand raised in blessing. Bishops are usually shown holding a crozier - a pastoral staff shaped like a shepherd's crook - rather than a crucifix. The crucifix, with its image of Christ, may be a reference to Nicholas's vigorous defence of Christ's divinity and equality with God the Father at the Council of Nicaea, a gathering of bishops held in the year 325 at which the priest Arius of Alexandria asserted that Christ was created by God the Father and so was subordinate to him. It is said that Nicholas became so incensed by this assertion that he slapped Arius across the face. The Council decided that Arius's views were heretical and that the Holy Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit were one God, co-equal and co-eternal, and a statement to this effect was incorporated in the Nicene Creed, the profession of faith which is still recited by Catholics every Sunday at Mass.

Nicholas came from a wealthy family but gave away his inheritance to the poor. One legend relates how he learned of a neighbour who had fallen on hard times and could afford neither to maintain his three daughters nor to provide them with marriage dowries. They were considering selling themselves into slavery, or even prostitution, to survive. Nicholas took a bag of gold and one night secretly put it through a window of the neighbour's house. When the neighbour discovered the gold, which had landed in a stocking hung up to dry, he was overjoyed and used it as a dowry for his eldest daughter, and she was married. Another bag of gold followed, and the second daughter was married. To discover the source of such generosity the neighbour hid outside his house and kept watch on the window until he saw Nicholas putting in a third bag of gold for the third daughter. This moment is shown in a background scene just above the bishop's head. The neighbour is hiding behind a bush: he must have been formerly quite wealthy himself, as his house looks like a castle! The three bags of gold are the origin of St Nicholas's attribute of three golden balls: there should be three balls at his feet but one has unfortunately disappeared during 'restoration'.

Higher up in the far background is a depiction of the town of Myra: you can see the domes of the Byzantine cathedral. The town's defensive walls have partially collapsed: this happened some 700 years after Nicholas's death when Myra was besieged and captured by the Turks. The tall tower behind the cathedral is a Turkish minaret. The cathedral contained Nicholas's tomb: in the year 1087 three merchant ships put in at Myra en route from Antioch to their home port of Bari, Italy, and the merchants opened the tomb and took away the saint's remains. Here the three ships are leaving Myra, and on the deck of one of them is a chest containing the remains, which are radiating a holy aura. The Basilica di San Nicola was built in Bari to house these relics, and it is still an important pilgrimage destination.

Behind the saint is a forest of spruce, Christmas trees, reminding us of his close links with the Christmas season (St Nicholas = Santa Claus). There is also an English oak: he is the patron saint of more than 400 churches in this country. If you look carefully in the forest you will see a rabbit, several squirrels and a pigeon.

Between the main image and the scene below, in shields, are the three golden balls, the arms of St Nicholas, and three fishes, the arms of the town of Newport.

Nicholas is the patron saint of children: the scene near the foot of the window shows children at play, and some of their toys. A sailor-suited boy is crying because a wheel has come off his toy train and a girl, maybe his sister, is praying to St Nicholas for him.

There are a number of small pictures around the border of the window. On the right is one showing three boys emerging from a tub. This is a reference to a legend that three boys were murdered by a wicked innkeeper who then put their bodies in a tub of brine to pickle them. Nicholas intervened and brought them back to life. Opposite is a scene on board ship. Nicholas was on a voyage to the Holy Land when a storm blew up and the ship was in danger of foundering. The sailors begged him to help them, he raised his hand in prayer and the storm subsided. For this reason he is the patron saint of seafarers, hence one of the other border pictures is of a sailing ship and two are of anchors. There are also pictures of Christmas trees with candles and, at the very bottom, Christmas stockings. Stockings used to be hung up on St Nicholas' Day, 6th December, rather than at Christmas: they were a reminder of the legend of the three daughters and three bags of gold (see above). The small gifts put into them would have included an orange representing a golden ball.

The inscription at the foot of the window reads ERECTED FOR THE JUBILEE OF A PRIEST OF THIS CHURCH + PRAY FOR HIM & FOR THE DONORS. The parish priest of Newport from 1902 until his death in 1922 was Fr Chichele Giles. He was ordained priest in 1887, so his jubilee (25th anniversary of ordination) would have been in 1912. An essential part of his priestly ministry would have been the celebration of the Liturgy of the Eucharist during which bread and wine are, Catholics believe, transformed at the moment of consecration into the Body and Blood of Christ. At the head of the window are the consecrated host (wafer of bread) and chalice of wine, and below are the wheat sheaves and the grapevine from which they have been made.

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