

SHREWSBURY: THE ST AMBROSE WINDOW

Margaret Rope created the St Ambrose Window, depicting scenes from the saint's life, to mark the appointment of his namesake Ambrose Moriarty as 6th Bishop of Shrewsbury in 1934. It is the seventh and last window which she made for Shrewsbury Cathedral. Interestingly, unlike the other six, it is not in the main body of the Cathedral but in the vestry, so it cannot be seen by the congregation: it would, however, have been seen by Bishop Moriarty every time he prepared to celebrate Mass. Ambrose Moriarty and Margaret Rope would have known one another well: he had been priest-in-charge at the Cathedral in 1901 when she, her mother and her sisters were received into the Catholic Church there and had served at the Cathedral ever since, so would have been involved in the commissioning of all seven windows. Two of the other six had a close family connection for him: the Great West Window, her first major commission, commemorated his uncle Samuel Webster Allen, 4th Bishop of Shrewsbury, and the St Laurence Window was a memorial to his mother Sarah Ann.

The artist had become a Carmelite nun, Sister Margaret of the Mother of God, in 1923, and she designed and painted this window at her monastery at Woodbridge, Suffolk.

-oOo-

St Ambrose (339-397) was Archbishop of Milan at a time when Milan, rather than Rome, was the capital of the Western Roman Empire. He vigorously defended the doctrine of the Holy Trinity - that there are three equal Persons, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, in one God - against the then widespread Arian heresy - denial of the divinity of Christ - and the window has several interlinking themes relating to the Trinity. The artist's St Ambrose bears a remarkable resemblance to Bishop Moriarty!

Look at **the bottom of the central light**. The year is 386: armed imperial soldiers surround a church in Milan which Emperor Valentinian II's mother Justina, an Arian, wants to appropriate for the use of her fellow heretics. I assume that the two soldiers with red cloaks and crests on their helmets are of a higher rank than the others. I'm not sure about the significance of the dog, but I understand that the word 'dog' was used at the time as a derogatory term for an Arian.

Above, inside the church, Ambrose preaches to his followers on the doctrine of the Trinity. We know that this is Ambrose because of the beehives on his vestments. They refer to the legend that when he was a baby sleeping in his cradle a swarm of bees covered his face and mouth so completely that it looked as though they were flying in and out of a hive. This was taken as a sign of his future greatness and eloquence. Ambrose is standing in front of his bishop's throne, a symbol of his teaching authority. The candles are a sign that he is keeping the light of the True Faith burning. Among the congregation are St Augustine of Hippo and his mother St Monica, identifiable by their haloes. Augustine has recently converted to Christianity, to the great joy of his mother, hence the words on the hem of his robe LUMEN CHRISTI (The light of Christ) and on hers DEO GRATIAS (Thanks [be] to God). Below the scene we read GLORIA PATRI ET FILIO ET SPIRITUI SANCTO

(Glory [be] to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit), the doxology, or acclamation to the Trinity, which is recited or sung at the end of psalms¹.

Ambrose and his followers remained in the church for several days until Justina abandoned her attempt to seize it.

The Holy Trinity theme is carried across **the head of all three lights**. In this **central** one we read PATER EST DEUS (The Father is God), the **left hand** light is headed by the words FILIUS EST DEUS (The Son is God) and the **right hand** one has SPIRITUS EST DEUS (The Spirit is God). The words to either side of Ambrose's head **in the central light** remind us that these three Persons are UNUS DEUS (One God).

At the head of the central light is an image known as a 'Throne of Mercy' – God the Father, a seated figure wearing a triple crown not unlike a papal tiara, supporting the cross on which hangs the crucified Christ, God the Son, with God the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove at Christ's feet. To understand the Throne of Mercy we need to understand the Sacrifice of the Mass, or Eucharist. At the Last Supper Christ took bread, broke it and gave it to his disciples saying 'This is my Body, which will be given up for you, do this in memory of me.' and took wine and gave it to them saying 'This is my Blood ...' ². On the following day he offered himself to God the Father as a sacrifice for the salvation of humanity by dying on the cross. Catholics believe that Christ's sacrifice is made present and actual every time a priest celebrates Mass: the priest, acting in the person of Christ, repeats the words spoken at the Last Supper over the bread and wine, they are transformed by the action of the Holy Spirit into the real Body and Blood of Christ and are offered to God the Father. The Throne of Mercy image represents the Holy Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit at this moment.

And why is this image called a Throne of Mercy? In the Old Testament we read how the Ark of the Covenant had a golden lid, the Throne of Mercy (Mercy Seat in some translations). Every year on the Day of Atonement the Jewish High Priest, on behalf of the people, would sprinkle the blood of sacrificed animals onto the Throne of Mercy as an act of atonement for the sins of the people so that God would show them mercy and they could be reconciled with him³. This is seen as a prefigurement of Christ's sacrifice of himself, the spilling of his blood, on the cross⁴.

The rays emanating from the Throne of Mercy show that God is protecting Ambrose and his followers. The bolder rays emanating from the Holy Spirit show that the Spirit is inspiring Ambrose as he speaks.

Now to **the head of the left hand light**. 'The Son is God', and here we see the dead Christ on the cross, blood running from the nail wounds in his hands and feet and blood and water flowing from his side, which has been pierced with a lance by a soldier⁵. The blood and water are signs of the Eucharist and Baptism respectively. Christ died on the cross so that humanity could be reconciled with God: **below** is the story of one man's individual reconciliation.

¹ The rest of the present-day doxology, 'As it was in the beginning' was added later, after St Ambrose's time.

² Luke 22:19-20

³ See Leviticus 16.

⁴ See Hebrews 9.

⁵ John 19:33-34.

In the year 390 Valentinian's successor, Emperor Theodosius I, authorised a massacre of innocent people in Thessalonica. Ambrose heard of it, and when the Emperor came to church, as was his custom, Ambrose met him at the door and refused him entry. This is the scene shown in the **upper half** of the light⁶. The Emperor, accompanied by armed soldiers, is wearing a crown and a purple robe and carrying an orb – all symbols of secular power. Ambrose, accompanied by a deacon, is wearing a mitre and bishop's vestments and carrying a cross – all symbols of ecclesiastical power. The scene symbolises the authority of the Church over the secular powers. Note that Ambrose's cross is one with two cross-bars rather than the usual one. Use of this type of cross is restricted to Archbishops, and it appears in their heraldic arms today. Between Theodosius and Ambrose is a grapevine, another symbol of the Eucharistic Sacrifice.

Ambrose wrote to the Emperor⁷, urging him to acknowledge and show repentance for his sins, following the example of another erring head of state, King David, who had repented and been forgiven by God after the prophet Nathan had rebuked him for committing adultery with Bathsheba and having her husband Uriah killed⁸,

Penance was a rather lengthy process in those days. **On the left side of the lower half** of the light we see the Emperor again, dressed in a dark brown robe, after eight months of exclusion, prayer and fasting. He has placed his crown on the ground and is kneeling outside the closed door of the church with other penitents, making public confession of his sins. The swallows in the sky above the penitents are here a symbol of resurrection (because they were once thought to hibernate in the winter and re-emerge in the spring) – if we die to sin we will be raised to new life in Christ.

To the right Ambrose is absolving the Emperor inside the church. The lighted candles in the background symbolise the Light of Christ, to which he is being readmitted. The Latin inscription on the scrolls consists of parts of verses from the penitential Psalm 50/51: COR CONTRITUM ET HUMILIATUM, DEUS, NON DESPICIES (A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise) and SECUNDUM MULTITUDINEM MISERATIONUM TUARUM DELE INIQUITATEM MEAM (According to the multitude of your tender mercies, blot out my transgressions). This psalm, also known as the *Miserere*, is particularly appropriate here as it is said to have been composed by the repentant King David.

And finally to **the right hand light. At its head** we read 'The Spirit is God', and here is the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove, recalling Christ's baptism. The dove is surrounded by fire because the Spirit, like fire, transforms everything it touches.

Below we see Augustine's baptism. In the floor of the baptistery is the baptismal pool, forerunner of the font. Augustine has gone down into the pool and risen from it washed clean from sin and reborn by the power of the Holy Spirit: he has been symbolically buried with Christ and resurrected. Ambrose is presenting him with a white garment, a symbol of his purification. The acolyte on the right is holding the tray of holy oils used for anointing during the ceremony, and behind is the candle symbolising the Light of Christ. TE DEUM LAUDAMUS (We praise you, O God) is the opening phrase of the joyful outpouring of praise known as the *Canticle of Ambrose and Augustine*, said to have been sung for the first time by the two saints

⁶ There is a van Dyck painting of this encounter in the National Gallery, London.

⁷ The Letters of St Ambrose ... (1881): Letter LI.

⁸ See 2 Samuel 12.

after Augustine's baptism. It is recited or sung at the end of the Office of Matins on feast-days.

Below this is an incident described in the 6th Book of Augustine's *Confessions*, and a glimpse of the artist's sense of humour. Ambrose is studying, inspired by the Holy Spirit, oblivious to the group of people who have come to consult him. They have been there for some time, not daring to interrupt him: the old man with the crutch has fallen asleep and Monica is amusing the other woman's baby. What she is holding looks like a set of rosary beads, but they did not appear until long after Ambrose's time. Augustine is holding a book on which he wants to consult Ambrose and gazes earnestly at him, hoping he will finish his studies and notice them.

But Ambrose carried on reading, and eventually they all gave up and went away.

The Latin inscription above Ambrose, BEATUS VIR QUI IN LEGE D[OMI]NI MEDITATUR, translates as 'Blessed [is] the man who ponders the law of the Lord'. This is an antiphon from the Office of Matins, based on Psalm 1 and said or sung after it.

The wall of Ambrose's study is covered in pictures rich in imagery. There is yet another representation of the Trinity: in the top left corner of the scene is a hand pointing from Heaven, signifying God the Father; further along is God the Son on the cross; and to the right of this, above Augustine's head, is a dove, representing the Holy Spirit. The picture of Christ contains a grapevine, a tree, wheat sheaves and sheep. Grapes symbolise the Blood of Christ, and the grapevine also recalls Christ's words 'I am the true vine'⁹. The tree is the Tree of Life, symbolising the eternal life which Christ promises to all who believe in him. Wheat symbolises the Body of Christ and reminds us that Jesus said 'I am the bread of life'¹⁰ and 'unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains by itself alone. But if it dies, it bears much fruit'¹¹. We are the sheep, and Christ is the Good Shepherd who gave his life for us.

© Roger Hall 2019

⁹ John 15.1.

¹⁰ John 6.35.

¹¹ John 12.24.