

## Shrewsbury Cathedral: The Visitation Window

This window, in the south aisle<sup>1</sup>, was the first Cathedral window which Margaret Rope made after moving from Shrewsbury to London to work from a studio at the Glass House in Fulham. It commemorates Mary Cecilia Davies, a parishioner who died in 1911.

At the Annunciation<sup>2</sup> the angel Gabriel had told Mary that she would be the mother of Our Lord and that her cousin Elizabeth had, in her old age, also conceived a son, and was in the sixth month of her pregnancy (Luke 1:26-38). Mary had set out immediately to visit Elizabeth, who lived in the hill country of Judaea.

**The main scene**, spanning all three main lights, shows their meeting (Luke 1:39-56). Mary, wearing the traditional blue, is in the centre, and Elizabeth is kneeling on the left outside her house. Mary has greeted Elizabeth, and the child in Elizabeth's womb, John the Baptist, has leapt for joy in recognition of Jesus. When Elizabeth greets Mary and tells her this, Mary's response is the song known from its opening word in the Latin text as the Magnificat: 'My soul magnifies the Lord .....'. In the Church the Magnificat is sung daily in the evening prayer service known as Vespers

To the right St Cecilia, patron of musicians, plays the lute. St Cecilia is not usually depicted in a Visitation scene but is appropriate here because the person commemorated bore her name and because she is providing a musical accompaniment to Mary's song of joy. Cecilia was an early Christian martyr, and this is indicated by the palm branch on the ground in front of her. Palm branches are a symbol of victory and were presented to the winners of athletic contests in ancient times: in Christian art they represent the martyr's victory in passing through torment to a blessed life in heaven. St Paul in his epistles several times compares the hardships of the Christian life to a race for a prize.

Birds fill the air, swallows and sparrows: one of the swallows has a nest under the cornice of Elizabeth's house. When swallows appear in a depiction of the Annunciation, the Visitation or the Nativity they are a symbol of the Incarnation of Christ, when God took on flesh and became man. This connection has arisen because swallows return to southern Europe from their annual migration on or about the 25<sup>th</sup> March, the Feast of the Annunciation: folk tradition refers to this as the Feast of the Swallows, and to the swallows as Mary's birds. The sparrow is one of the lowliest, most insignificant of birds: Mary sings, in the Magnificat, that God has been mindful of her lowliness and that he exalts the humble and meek. The sparrows and swallows and the singing of the Magnificat also recall the words of Psalm 83 (Psalm 84 in some versions of the bible), 'The sparrow finds a home and the swallow a nest for her young near your altars, Lord of Hosts, my King and my

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<sup>1</sup> Because of the restricted size and shape of its site the Cathedral was built on a north-south axis instead of having the usual east-west orientation. For liturgical purposes, however, the main altar is regarded as being at the east end of the building. This convention has been adopted in the description which follows, so if you stand in the centre of the Cathedral facing the altar the 'south aisle' is to your right.

<sup>2</sup> For which see the cartoon and commentary on the artist's lost window for Our Lady's, Birkenhead.

God. They are happy who dwell in your house, forever singing your praise'.<sup>3</sup> There are more birds in the picture – a thrush and a starling.

The hills in the background are reminiscent of the landscape of south Shropshire, but towards the left we can see the domes and towers of Jerusalem. To the right there is a flock of sheep safe within a wattle-fenced enclosure – a sheepfold. This would be a common sight in hill country, but here it has a meaning beyond its literal one. The sheepfold is a metaphor for the Church on earth: Christ is the shepherd and his sheep are the Faithful. Also Jerusalem could be seen as a metaphor for the City of God, the Church in Heaven. So we would have the Church in Heaven on the left side of the window and the Church on Earth on the right.

The picture is full of flowers. Particularly noteworthy are the lilies, symbol of Mary's purity, and the roses, symbol of her physical and spiritual beauty.

**The two small lights above** depict the Ark of the Covenant and the Gate of Heaven. These are two of the titles by which Mary is addressed in the prayer sequence known as the Litany of Loreto. **The Ark of the Covenant** is an Old Testament prefiguration of Mary. It represented God's presence on earth and contained the tablets of the law, God's old covenant with man. Mary carried in her womb the Son of God, bringer of the new covenant. Here the artist has depicted the Ark as a gothic-style reliquary, a container in which sacred relics would be kept and displayed in a church. Around the image are climbing roses, more Marian symbolism. Mary is seen as **the Gate of Heaven** because she gave birth to Jesus, who invites us to enter the kingdom of God. Here outside the Gate is a tangle of brambles and weeds, but inside is a beautiful garden and park, and the sunrise, dawn of a new life. Below the image is a lily, and around it are thorny branches: in the Old Testament book the Song of Songs, or Song of Solomon, the bride, or beloved, who is identified by Catholics with Mary, is described as 'the lily among thorns'.

**At the top of the window** is a star, recalling one of Mary's other titles in the Litany of Loreto, 'Morning Star'. The morning star precedes the dawn of a new day, whilst Mary precedes Christ, the dawn of a new era.

Until 1969 the Feast of the Visitation was celebrated on 2<sup>nd</sup> July, but then it was moved to 31<sup>st</sup> May, between the Annunciation (25<sup>th</sup> March) and the Nativity of St John the Baptist (24<sup>th</sup> June) as this would harmonise better with the Gospel story. Celebrating the Visitation, when John was still in his mother's womb, eight days after celebrating his birthday had not made a lot of sense!

The inscriptions at the foot of the window, spanning all three lights, are PRAY FOR MARY CECILIA DAVIES WHO GAVE UP HER SOUL TO GOD JUNE 21 1911 and in smaller letters below PRAY FOR THE GOOD ESTATE OF A GRATEFUL CLIENT OF OUR LADY. The latter inscription probably refers to the person who commissioned the window. A client of Our Lady would be one who prayed regularly to Mary for help. To pray for their good estate would mean to pray that they might be in a state of grace, in other words that they might be in a good relationship with God.

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<sup>3</sup> In this psalm a pilgrim longs to be in God's temple, as the nesting birds are.