

THE FRIENDS OF ST MARY'S CHURCH, WREAY

Teachers Notes 4: Faith and symbolism



St Mary's is a Christian church that opens itself to symbolism shared by other faiths.

First of all, like all churches, it tells the story of the Christian journey of faith. On entering, the visitor is high up, looking across to the eastern end with its fossil windows and the glow of yellow glass spherical windows symbolising the seven lamps of the Holy Spirit. As with nearly all churches, the altar is at the eastern end where the sun rises and new life begins. This is the destination.

By the door is the font, carved in alabaster by Sarah and her cousin William with images of new life – butterflies, dragonflies, a lily pond. This is where life in the church begins with baptism. We then step down into the nave and walk the journey, passing the eagle and stork lecterns and the pulpit carved into a prehistoric tree stump out of bog oak, symbolising the root of Jesse, King David's father, mentioned in the Bible as the family tree of Jesus. At last we reach the arch, with man and woman "holding it up" and angels looking down from heaven and step up to the communion rail where we see the carving of grapes and wheat at the base of the altar. This is where Christians share the bread and the wine and glimpse the life of the kingdom as they look up into the dome of heaven.

Where is the cross? During services a plain silver cross is placed on the altar but Sarah did not design a permanent cross into her building (there are two in the stained glass above the door on the way in). There are no picture representations either in stained glass or carving of the crucifixion or indeed any other New Testament bible stories. Sarah seems to prefer symbols of rebirth and resurrection. The Arts and Craft lilies and images painted on to the apostles' seats in the chancel were done later in the nineteenth century after Sarah's death – she wanted the walls left plain.

Many other symbols abound inside and outside the church:

- Birds and animals symbolising light and dark - owl, cockerel, bat, dragon.
- Insects symbolising life cycles – butterflies, dragonflies, scarab beetles.
- Fossils around the outside windows, fossil plant stencils carved by Sarah in the windows in the apse- in her world view all part of God's design.
- Prehistoric creatures, quite comical and replacing the more conventional gargoyles of older churches – look out for the dragon above the boiler room which used to spout smoke when the boiler was lit.
- Lotus plants around the door, on the font and on the altar, symbolising purity and part of Buddhist beliefs.
- Pine cones on the roof bosses, carved as handles on the door, carved in stone at the entrance - ancient Egyptian symbols of rebirth, copied by the Romans and carved in stone in their cemeteries. Sarah planted pine trees along her roads and in the churchyard – possible one from seeds sent to her from Afghanistan by her friend William.
- Arrows on the railings outside, on the door and one mysteriously high up in the north wall. These we believe to be a personal symbol of grief for Sarah who heard of the death of her close friend Major William Thain in the 1st Afghan wars while she was building the church.

We do not know Sarah's inner thoughts, feelings and beliefs as she designed and made her church – she has left no journals or letters to help us. This leaves the church to speak for itself and many visitors bring their own ideas and meanings with them – children are particularly good at doing this.