

# **CHRISTIAN SYMBOLISM**

## **The Forgotten Language of the Christian Faith**

**David J. Smith**

*"Pictures are used in churches in order that those ignorant of letters may by merely looking at the walls read there what they are unable to read in books".*

Pope Gregory the Great in a letter c600AD

*" ..... a universal non-verbal language which everybody understood, a language of symbols which has, practically speaking, since been lost. This symbolism is now hidden, not because it cannot be seen but because we cannot understand it".*

Melvyn Matthews (former Chancellor of Wells Cathedral)

What is it? Why is it? What purpose did it have? What are their meanings? Is it still relevant today?

Originally the intention of signs and symbols was to provide an instantly, visually recognizable representation, or mental picture, of a concept. Images have always conveyed ideas more swiftly than words, and they pre-date written words by thousands of years. The pictograms and ideograms led ultimately to the invention of the alphabet. Signs and symbols often overlap each other but have different purposes. Whereas signs simply provide information, symbols give ordinary things a larger dimension, often a spiritual one.

The Christian faith took many of their signs and symbols from the time before Christianity and changed the meaning of them to portray their belief and faith. In addition, they developed many more to supplement their portrayal of the Christian faith; when they built their cathedrals and other places of worship, they included many of these symbols within the physical structure, both inside and out. One of the main reason being that the vast majority of pilgrims to these ecclesiastical centres, could not read or write.

Another purpose is to deepen our encounter with God. From the tiny to the monumental, from a piece of personal jewellery used for private meditation to a massive stained glass window in a great cathedral, the function is the same; to catch the imagination, to open the heart and the mind, so that we may better hear the divine promptings. Christianity probably has the strongest visual tradition of all world faiths.

## Christian Signs, Symbols and Images - Their Meanings and Interpretations'

This is a vast subject and one that can lead to other fields of research, such as heraldry and Christian art to name just two. Although the purpose here is to explain the Christian meanings of symbolism, it will be seen how it strays into these other fields.

It is sometimes implied that Christian symbolism is some form of secret code. There was no secret society, this symbolism was far from being secret, it conveyed a meaning more than the written word could do, and at a deeper level.

**Poor Man's Bible:** This term came into use to describe signs, symbols and imagery, or works of art, within churches and cathedrals which either individually or collectively have been created to illustrate the teachings of the Bible for a largely illiterate population. These artworks may take the form of carvings, paintings, mosaics or stained glass windows. In some churches a single window has the role of *Poor Man's Bible* while in others the entire church is decorated with a complex biblical narrative that unites in a single scheme.

### Typologies

**Gryphons, Gargoyles and Beasts:** Cathedrals are decorated with a wide variety of creatures and characters, many of which have no obvious link to Christianity. A number of reasons are given for these grotesques carvings, (normally at the topmost reaches of the building and roof), that adorn the exterior, of ecclesiastical buildings. The Christian perspective is that it shows that there is no place for Satan, his devils and evil within the building as they have all been driven out by the presence of God's Holy Spirit.

Often the creature was seen to represent some particular vice or virtue or was believed to have a certain characteristic which could serve as a warning or as an example to the Christian believer. "Sins of the Flesh" were often represented by human figures poking out their tongues, stroking their beards, displaying their genitals or gorging on food. Gargoyles, the term originates from the French for 'throat', had a practical purpose as well. They served to divert rainwater from running down the walls and thus doing damage to the masonry, an early form of guttering system, also used at the times of the ancient Egyptians

**Stone:** Capitals of columns tended to be decorative, rather than narrative. It was in Western Europe, Northern France in particular, that sculptural narrative reached great heights in the Romanesque and Gothic periods, decorating, in particular, the great West Fronts of the cathedrals. The style spread from there to other countries of Europe. In England, figurative architectural decoration most frequently was located in vast screens of niches across the West Front. Unfortunately, like the frescoes and windows, they were decimated in the Reformation.

**Stained Glass:** Stained Glass windows were a major art form in the cathedrals and churches of France, Spain, England and Germany. With the Gothic Revival of the 19th century, stained glass returned as a major Christian art form in churches across the world.

**Mosaic:** Mosaic was a favourite form of decoration in the Byzantine period and richly decorated churches in this style can be seen throughout Greece, Turkey, Italy, Sicily, Russia and other countries. In the 19th century, gold mosaics were applied to the domes of the chancel of St Pauls Cathedral in London, illustrating the creation. In Western Europe, however, it was rare north of the Alps.

**Mural:** Mural painting was to become a common form of enlightening decoration in Christian churches. Biblical themes rendered in mural can be found all over the Christian world. They are a more common form of church decoration in some regions than others. Painted churches are common throughout those areas where the Orthodox Church prevails. In Romania there is an unusual group of churches in which it is the exterior rather than the interior which is richly decorated, the large arcaded porches containing images of the *Last Judgement*.

Mural painting was also common in Italy where the method employed was generally fresco, painting on freshly laid, slightly damp plaster. Many fine examples have survived from the Medieval and Early Renaissance periods. Remarkably, the best known example of such Biblical story-telling was not created for the edification of the poor but for the rich and powerful, the Ceiling of the Sistine Chapel created by Michelangelo for Pope Julius II.

Murals occur in France, particularly in the south where the walls tend to be wider, rather than the north where the art of stained glass prevailed. In England, few examples survived the depredations of the Reformation. Some fine Early Medieval examples exist in Germany and Spain.

### **Example and Explanation of the Fish**

Long before the Cross was taken as the symbol for Christianity, the fish was used by the early Christians as a way to indicate their belief. This, it has to be remembered, was a dangerous time to be a follower of the crucified and risen Jesus, just to be known as one who followed the so called 'King of the Jews', would be enough to get arrested and, most probably, executed.

Therefore, to disguise their faith to non-Christians, they would use the sign of the fish that other Christians would understand, but non-believers would not. But why a fish?

Well it is an acronym, with each letter in the Greek word for *fish (ichthus)* representing another word and forming one of the first Christian creeds:-

‘*Jesus Christ God’s Son Saviour*’

(i)	(Iasous)	Jesus
(ch)	(Christos)	Christ
(th)	(Theos)	God’s
(u)	(Uios)	Son
(s)	(Sotar)	Saviour

If you walked past a home of a pagan and saw a fish symbol outside the door, it meant a funeral would happen that day. If it was the home of a Christian, it meant a Christian meeting would take place there.

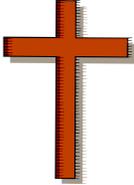
It was also used in speech. If I met you in the market place and I thought you were a Christian I would say, “*Ichthus?*” If you were a pagan, you would point me in the direction of the local fish market. If you were a Christian, you would respond “*Ichthus!*” We were then safe to discuss Christian matters.

Today you may well see the more modern *Fish Symbol*, below left, on the back of cars and as a lapel badge on people’s clothes.



The early Christian Fish symbol would have been more of a traditional image of a fish. Above right, is the funerary stele of Licinia Amias, one of the most ancient Christian inscriptions. Upper tier: dedication to the Dis Manibus (Latin: “*for the manes*” ancient Roman religion thought to represent souls of deceased loved ones. The Manes were offered blood sacrifices; again we have the connection to Christ.) and Christian motto in Greek letters ΙΧΘΥΣ ΖΩΝΤΩΝ / *Ikthus zōntōn* (“fish of the living”); middle tier: depiction of fish and an anchor; lower tier: Latin inscription “LICINIAE AMIATI BE/NEMERENTI VIXIT”. Marble, early 3rd century AD, from the area of the Vatican necropolis, Rome.

**Bishop's Palace & Gardens**  
**Christian Signs, Symbols and Images**

<p><b>Cross &amp; Crucifix</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. A crucifix portrays the image of Christ hanging on the cross as a reminder that the Son of God died to take away the sins of the world (our sins).</li> <li>2. Whereas a cross (without the image of Christ on it) reminds us that Christ Has Risen.</li> <li>3. Pommy or Pommee of St Michael the Archangel.</li> <li>4. Latin Cross.</li> <li>5. Greek Cross.</li> <li>6. Saltire Cross of St Andrew.</li> </ol>	<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; align-items: flex-start;"> <div style="text-align: center;">               1.         </div> <div style="text-align: center;">               2.         </div> <div style="text-align: center;">               3.         </div> </div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; align-items: flex-start; margin-top: 20px;"> <div style="text-align: center;">               4.         </div> <div style="text-align: center;">               5.         </div> <div style="text-align: center;">               6.         </div> </div>
<p><b>Dragons</b></p>	<p>The dragon is regarded in Christian imagery to represent Satan, symbolising the confrontation and conquest over evil. Revelation 12:7 describes St Michael the Archangel casting out Satan and his devils from Heaven.</p>	<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; align-items: center;">   </div>

<p><b>Keys</b></p>	<p>Attributed to the Apostle Peter (St Peter); Jesus said, <i>“I will give you the Keys of the kingdom of Heaven”</i> (Matthew 16:19).</p>	  
<p><b>Pelican</b></p>	<p>An early Christian symbol of the Passion of Christ Jesus. The pelican in her piety is vulning (from the Latin <i>vulno</i> to wound) herself to make her breast bleed; the dripping blood feeds her young. This symbolises Christ on the cross, shedding his blood for God’s children.</p>	 
<p><b>Sword</b></p>	<p>Attributed to the Apostle Paul (St Paul). As well as a being a citizen of Greece, he was also a citizen of Roman and therefore, was executed, (beheaded) by the sword.</p>	  

<p><b>Stars</b></p>	<p>Stars are a very prominent symbol in Christian life and are mentioned many times in the Bible. The best known being the Star in the East that the Wise Men (Magi) followed. There are many types of stars and many meanings for them.</p>	<p><b>12 Pointed Star</b> for the 12 Apostles &amp; 12 tribes of Israel.  <b>9 Pointed Star</b> for the 9 Fruits of the Holy Spirit. (<i>Galatians 5:22</i>)  <b>7 Pointed Star</b> for the 7 Gifts of the Holy Spirit. (<i>Isaiah 11:2 &amp; Revelations 5:12</i>)  <b>6 Pointed Star</b> – Creation, one point for each day during which God created all things also the Star of David (two triangle shields).  <b>5 Pointed Star</b> – Epiphany, also the five wounds of Christ.</p>
<p><b>Water</b></p>	<p><b>A symbol of transformation</b> – This transformation is in the form of Dissolution (repentance) and regeneration (spiritual rebirth), as carried out in baptism. This is not the child baptism (christening), which became, and is, a more routine practice within the church in blessing the child in the name of Jesus.</p>	<p>This transformation refers to believer’s baptism which involves full body emersion, as carried out by John the Baptist on Jesus in the River Jordan, (<i>Mark 1: 9-11</i>). Jesus went down into the water, (Dissolution) and came out of the water (Regeneration), (<i>Mark 1:10, Matt 3:16</i>). It is likened to being ‘Born Again’ as Jesus said in John 3:3.</p>
<p><b>Trees</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Willow - Symbolizes the gospel message of Jesus.</li> <li>2. Yew – Symbolizes immortality</li> <li>3. Oak – Symbolizes Jesus, endurance and faith.</li> </ol>	<p><b>Willow</b> – Heavily trimmed and pruned but it keeps right on growing – In like manner the Word of God, no matter how suppressed, continues to re-emerge and spread.  <b>Yew</b> – Ancient peoples were in the habit of planting yew trees as acts of sanctification near to where they expected to be buried. Over the centuries, it has been widely planted in churchyards, and as an ornamental tree. It was believed that the ‘flesh’ of the Yew did not die.  <b>Oak</b> – A highly durable hardwood, symbolising endurance against adversity, steadfastness and faithfulness during times of trouble.</p>

<p><b>Flowers &amp; Foliage</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Rose (red) – Martyrdom, the Passion of Christ.</li> <li>2. Lily – Purity, an attribute of the Virgin Mary.</li> <li>3. Bramble – Tradition tells that the ‘burning bush’ found by Moses was a bramble – Exodus 3:2.</li> <li>4. Grapes – Eucharistic wine, also Christ the ‘true vine’.</li> <li>5. Ivy – Eternal life.</li> </ol>	
<p><b>Sacred Monograms</b></p>	<p>The use of certain groups of letters derived from Greek and Latin words.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. IHC - Jesus from the Greek.</li> <li>2. IHS - Jesus from the Latin.</li> <li>3. INRI - Latin: <i>Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews</i>.</li> <li>4. Chi Rho - First 2 letters of the Greek <b>XPICTOC</b> meaning, Christ.</li> </ol>	

## Architecture

The very buildings themselves were built to reflect the Christian faith and traditions. The custom was to build them on a plane West to East, with East the direction of Jerusalem. The vast majority would not have been able to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem in the Holy Land, so these great ecclesiastical centres were built to be heaven on earth. Built within, on and around were many symbols and images in stone, wood and stained glass.

1. Fleur-de-Lis – Purity
2. Leaf – Tree of Life.
3. Trefoil – Trinity
4. Green Man – Easter and the Resurrection.
5. Candle – Christ, the Light of the World.



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