

The Banners in St Stephen's Church

More than works of art

The six banners that hang in St Stephen's church are far more than just colourful decoration; they can be admired and appreciated as significant works of art in their own right.

It is said that a picture is worth a thousand words, and in every age and every culture, humankind has used pictures as symbols to help express ideas and beliefs, especially when few people could read.

In churches the most usual place for pictures is in stained glass windows, but before the mid-sixteenth century the walls of churches were often covered with images. Banners were more portable and could be carried around in a procession, or hung from pillars, as in St Stephen's.

Some symbols are easily recognisable. On our banners you will see fish, hares, a snow goose, a dove, a fern and a salmon, symbols which have meant different things to different cultures and different generations. Many people today would recognise the dove as a symbol of peace, because that is part of our present culture, but the other symbols may be less familiar.

For each banner there is an 'invocation', a poem-prayer, written by Richard Skinner, a member of our congregation. The invocations show how we might interpret the image, the final two lines being a prayer that helps us to integrate the meanings of the symbol into our own life. Take time to read each poem more than once, and reflect about how these ideas may be able to help you in your journey through life.

There is also for each banner some additional text describing its traditional significance. Taken as a whole the symbols on the banners can be seen as representing a spiritual journey taking us through sea, land and sky, in terms of past, present and future.

Three Fishes

O Fishes

darting among the weeds,
gliding between the riverbed pebbles,
dependent on the fresh replenishment
of a life-giving current;
you are the glimpse beneath the surface:
come, refresh our imagination,
entice us into the stream of life.

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The fish symbol was used by the ancient Celts who associated fish with knowledge, wisdom, inspiration and prophecy. In Christianity the fish is seen as a symbol of abundance and faith. Early Christians adopted a simple fish symbol to distinguish their beliefs, as the Greek word for fish (ichthys) forms an acrostic for 'Jesus Christ, God's Son, Saviour'.



The Salmon



O Salmon

leaping with life in your natal stream,
contending with the contrary current,
returning to your origins
to bring forth the next generation;
you are the triumph against the odds:
come, endow us with your persistence,
return us to our true origins.

According to the ancient Celts, the salmon is one of the wisest fish and finds its way into many Celtic myths and legends. The hard journey of the salmon making its first and last return up its native stream to spawn and die, is linked with journeys in which we overcome obstacles to gain meaning and purpose in life, eventually meeting death and spiritual rebirth.

The Unfolding Ferns



O Fern

ancient life inhabiting the many terrains
of mountain and desert, woodland and moor,
emerging in the warmth of spring,
fronds uncurling to capture the sunlight:
you are nature's interrogative:
come, inhabit the terrain of our soul,
enlighten us with your questions.

In Maori art and tradition the unfolding ferns or 'Koru' represent growth and transformation. The spirals symbolise the unfolding journey of life and in many cultures and religions they represent divine energy. As they often grow in shaded areas, they are also associated with the humility of the hermit. The landscape for the ferns on this banner reflects the red soil and moors of Devon.

The Three Hares

O Triplet of Hares

circle-dancing in a sunlit field,
boxing bouts with mates and rivals,
not the madness of tradition
but exuberance in the springtime of the year;
you are the overflow of life's energy:
come, embrace us in your threefold unity,
overflow us with your exuberance.

The hare is a common image in medieval churches especially on Dartmoor, where there are seventeen examples of roof bosses where the motif is known as 'The Tinnners' Rabbits', reflecting the significance of tin-mining on the moors. The three hares may also have been another symbol of the Holy Trinity. Hares are found as emblems in many other cultures and religions, for example in the second of the twelve emblems of the Emperor of China representing the 'Yin'.



The Dove



O Dove

cooing in the quiet evening,
softness concealing strength,
renowned as the bearer of the olive leaf
back to the ark;
you are the icon of peace:
come, quieten the clamour of our lives,
strengthen our soft resolve.

The dove is universally recognised as a sign of peace and love. Through the story of Noah's Ark, it is seen as a symbol of deliverance and forgiveness, and Christians view the dove as a symbol of the Holy Spirit appearing at Jesus's baptism. In Greek mythology, the dove was the bird of Athena and associated with renewal of life; while for the Chinese, the dove symbolises longevity and peace in the next life.

The Snow Goose

O Snow Goose

winging your way across the sky,
spanning land and sea,
free as the air that bears you,
sounding your signature clarion call;
you are the denizen of heaven:
come, awaken us with each wing-beat,
call us to follow in freedom's way.



The goose was revered as a sacred bird in ancient Rome, and the city was saved by the alarm calls of geese warning of an unexpected night attack. For the native North Americans, the snow goose was the totem for the winter solstice, and in Nordic cultures it is associated with the Northern Lights.

The honking cries of the snow geese in autumn as they start their migration, call us to new journeys and challenges. Flying in their characteristic V-formation, each bird has a clear view of the way ahead, yet is supported by and supports the others in the group.

The Makers of the Banners

The banners were designed and made by members of 'The Perfect Circles', a group of quilters who have undertaken a number of projects in Exeter. Most of the design and selection of materials for our banners was undertaken by Juliet Orsler, the hand and machine sewing by Barbara Janssen and the quilting by Marlene Chaffey. The banners were produced between September 2012 and June 2013, after several months of discussion and consultation.

The Writer of the Invocations

Poet Richard Skinner, a member of the Parish of Central Exeter, has published several books of his work, including 'Invocations', a series of forty meditative pieces similar in format to the six banner invocations.

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Text by Keith Walton