

The Simple Symbols

Introduction

The Christian religion has always used symbols – most religions have. Except in the most extreme Calvinist sects, a Cross has always been the mark of the Christian, and a reminder of what a Christian is; and similarly the Fish, the Hand of God, and the Dove of the Spirit, the Chi-rho, the Cross Encircled, and the IHS have always been instantly recognised, instantly understood as Christian.

To fit my theme of threes and fours, I have split the seven commonest symbols into two fairly natural groups of four simple symbols and three compound or complex ones.

Cross



Meditations

Prayers

A Few More Thoughts

No, the Cross does not need an introduction.

But it does need the comment that meditations and prayers are so easy to lay hands on that I have only provided a couple here.

This is also one case where well known hymns can be *read* aloud (not sung) either together or by a leader with very great effect.



Fish

Meditations

The Risen Fish

It's strange, isn't it, how easy the resurrection is to understand – until we try to understand it. And mostly, it's the fish that's the problem.

How do you understand Resurrection? Return from the dead? Perhaps you think of people who have clinically died, but were brought back to life by heart massage, by artificial respiration, by hard work right at the edge of death. Like Lazarus, in fact. I mean, that's what we're supposed to believe as Christians, right? The resurrection of the body, the empty tomb... But I bet Lazarus never walked through closed doors, never startled anyone by suddenly appearing in the middle of a group.

Perhaps you think of a ghost – no, that won't do. Jesus says quite clearly that he wasn't. Anyway, Thomas touched him. Everyone knows you can't touch a ghost.

Or perhaps you think of a body, but a special body, a body healed, but also transformed into a new kind of matter, a new dimension. Ah, now that really makes sense. Yes the same body, yes the empty tomb, but completely changed into something entirely new, something spiritual, something holy, something that can be felt, because ultimately it's the same body, but it's a wholly new kind of matter, totally different from the matter we know. That really makes sense.

Of everything except the fish. It says, very clearly, that the disciples gave Jesus a piece of broiled fish, and he ate it. How can a wholly new kind of matter chew, swallow and enjoy a piece of fish? And when Jesus went out through those closed doors, how did the fish get through as well? It wouldn't have

been digested yet, even. There should have been a wedge of chewed fish left behind, splattered on the floor with bits still stuck against the door at stomach level.

The fish was certainly a sign that Jesus had come back from death; a sign that Jesus is real; but is it also a sign of just how much we need to change, to grow, before we can begin to understand what it's all about?

*That **** Fish*

It is curious what a – er, I'm not allowed to use words like that in Church – nuisance fish can be. They are a real pest all the way through Christianity.

In the resurrection, for instance. It's easy to understand what happened to Jesus' body at the resurrection – or rather, it would be if it weren't for that piece of fish he ate. That just doesn't fit with our nice schemata and theories.

And in the Old Testament – Jonah! There he is, blatantly disobeying God, Storm comes up, Jonah gets thrown overboard – and quite right too. And we're just composing a nice bloodthirsty sermon on God's righteous anger, how Jonah had turned his back on God's call, on God's purpose, on God's salvation, and how God can never tolerate sin, and throwing in a nice reference to crucifying Christ afresh – and along comes this interfering great fish, gobbles Jonah up, and spits him out, safe and sound, on a nice beach! As if he's never disobeyed God at all!

Then there's that thing about making us fishers of men. Well, I mean! Haven't we got enough to do keeping this place open without going out and dragging in outsiders! They'll only want to change things the way they want them. No, fish just make a real pest of themselves, wherever you look.

Prayers

Twelve Baskets

You shared five loaves among five thousand. You shared two fish among five thousand. I am not worthy to eat of what you shared, but may I at least help to gather what is left, that those who are not yet heard your words may also share in your loaves and fishes

The Salmon

The salmon is born, and lives on the yolk of its mother's egg: may I feed on what the mother Church has preserved for me

The salmon grows, and eats without pause: may I be always hungry for the bread you break for me
The salmon leaves the river, and ventures out to sea: may I have the courage to go wherever you send me

The salmon lives, and returns to its own river to die: may I return at the last to your river of life
Amen

For Good Preparation

Lord Jesus Christ, who called us to be fishers of men, teach us to set out in a sound boat, with mended nets, that we may bring home safely the catch you look for, for your name's sake.

A Few More Thoughts

Fish seem to have got popular all of a sudden. You see them all over the place nowadays. Presumably too many non-Christians wear crosses, as a sort of good luck charm, or simply as a traditional decoration, and so a replacement was needed.

A fish refers to Jesus's words 'I will make you fishers of men' and to the five loaves and two fishes at least as much as to the acronym ΙΧΘΥΣ – Ἰησοῦς Χριστός Θεου Υἱος Σωτῆρ – Jesus Christ Son of God Saviour, which frankly looks like an afterthought, whatever the books say.

It is well known that it was used as a recognition symbol in times of persecution. It is certainly easy to draw – and to rub out quickly – and it is very possible that those were the qualities which made it popular, rather than its acrosticality.

Hand

Meditations

Prayers

Guide

Your hand, O God, has guided your world before it existed.

We confess with shame how our world in selfishness has ignored your guiding hand

Your hand, O God, has guided your Church from before she existed.

We confess with shame how our Church has preferred threats, quarrelling and anger to your guiding love

Your hand, O God, has guided us before we existed.

We confess with shame how we have drifted away uncaring from the hand that held us.

Yet even now you promise that you will never let us fall from your hand.

We confess with shame how much we apply that to ourselves, and how little we apply it to our neighbour.

Amen.

A Few More Thoughts

I suppose this is the most debatable of the simple symbols. For a start, it's certainly the rarest, and there are other symbols which might be come across almost as often; and for another, it is very often combined with the rainbow – 'five for the fambles under the bow' as the Scots version of 'Green grow the Rushes-O' has it.

My argument is that it may be fairly rare, but it is widespread, in both time and place; it certainly isn't always combined with the rainbow; and 'the Hand of God' is easily recognised as a set Christian phrase – even without the help of a certain footballer in a certain World Cup match.



Dove

Meditations

Prayers

A Few More Thoughts

Some Final Thoughts

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