

Westminster Cathedral – Key Stage 4

Statues, Religious Art and Symbols



Context

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2. The Cross
3. Fish (Ichthus)
4. The Chi Rho
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1. The Crucifix





The Crucifix

A cross with the figure of Jesus on it is called a crucifix and reminds us of his sacrificial death for the life of the world. The style can vary greatly, but it will be placed in a focal point to remind Catholics of how Jesus manifests God's great love for them.



The Great Rood

Westminster Cathedral is dominated by a huge crucifix which hangs in front of the main sanctuary. It is called the Great Rood (from the old English word 'rod', meaning cross). It is 30 feet high, 23 feet wide, weighs two tons and is made of wood. The figure of Christ was painted on canvas which had been stretched over the wood. On each of the end panels is the symbol of one of the four Evangelists. What is unusual is that on the reverse side, seen only by those on the sanctuary, is the figure of Our Lady of Sorrows.



The High Altar

A crucifix, made for the consecration of the Cathedral in 1910, stands over the main altar. The figure of Our Lord is of gilt bronze and around the crucifix are glass beads. Above the figure of Christ are the letters INRI and a chalice, a reminder of the Cathedral's dedication to the Most Precious Blood, is below his feet.

2. The Cross





A Cross

Decorated forms of crosses are also found in Catholic churches and many Catholics wear a cross or crucifix as a tangible personal reminder of their religion. Making the sign of the cross is a natural act for Catholics to demonstrate their faith in Christ and hope to share in his resurrection.

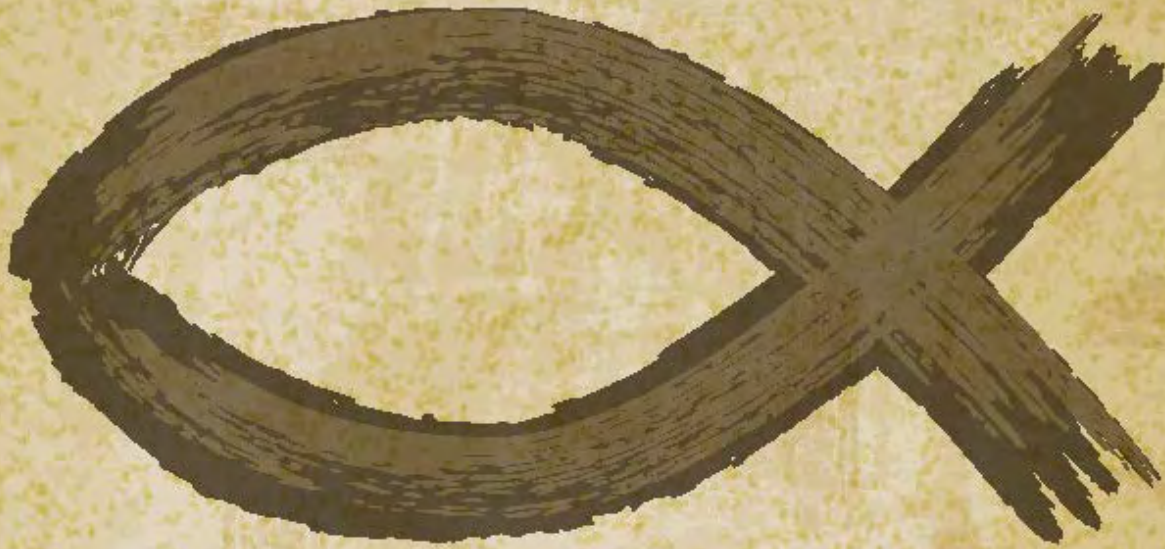


St. Andrew Cross

The Chapel of St Andrew and the Saints of Scotland has a mosaic representation of the saint's distinctive cross, whilst in the Baptistry there are crosses to mark each of the eight sides of the font.

The mosaics of the Blessed Sacrament Chapel show a jewelled cross above the altar and tabernacle. In the Holy Souls Chapel, the first to be completed in the Cathedral, a cross within a halo crowns Christ's head.

3. Fish (Ichthus)



Ichthus

Fish are mentioned a number of times in the Gospel accounts and have symbolic meaning. In addition, some of the disciples were fishermen and Jesus called them to be 'fishers of men'. (Mark 1:16-18). It is unsurprising, then, that the fish became a secret symbol used by Christians in the Early Church, from the second century A.D. and used up to the present day.



Westminster Cathedral

Fish are to be found in abundance in two places in Westminster Cathedral.

In the Chapel of St Andrew and the Saints of Scotland there is a 'pavement like the sea' referring to St Andrew's occupation. Twenty-nine fish and marine creatures can be found there.

Above the statue of St Anthony of Padua near the entrance doors there is a mosaic of the saint who is surrounded by many fish. This is because he is said to have preached to them, having had little response from his human audience. One of the fish holds a small ring in its mouth, a reference to Catholics' tradition of praying to St Anthony for help when they lose something.

There is also a fish on the floor of St Joseph's Chapel as one of the four symbols of Christ depicted there.

4. The Chi Rho

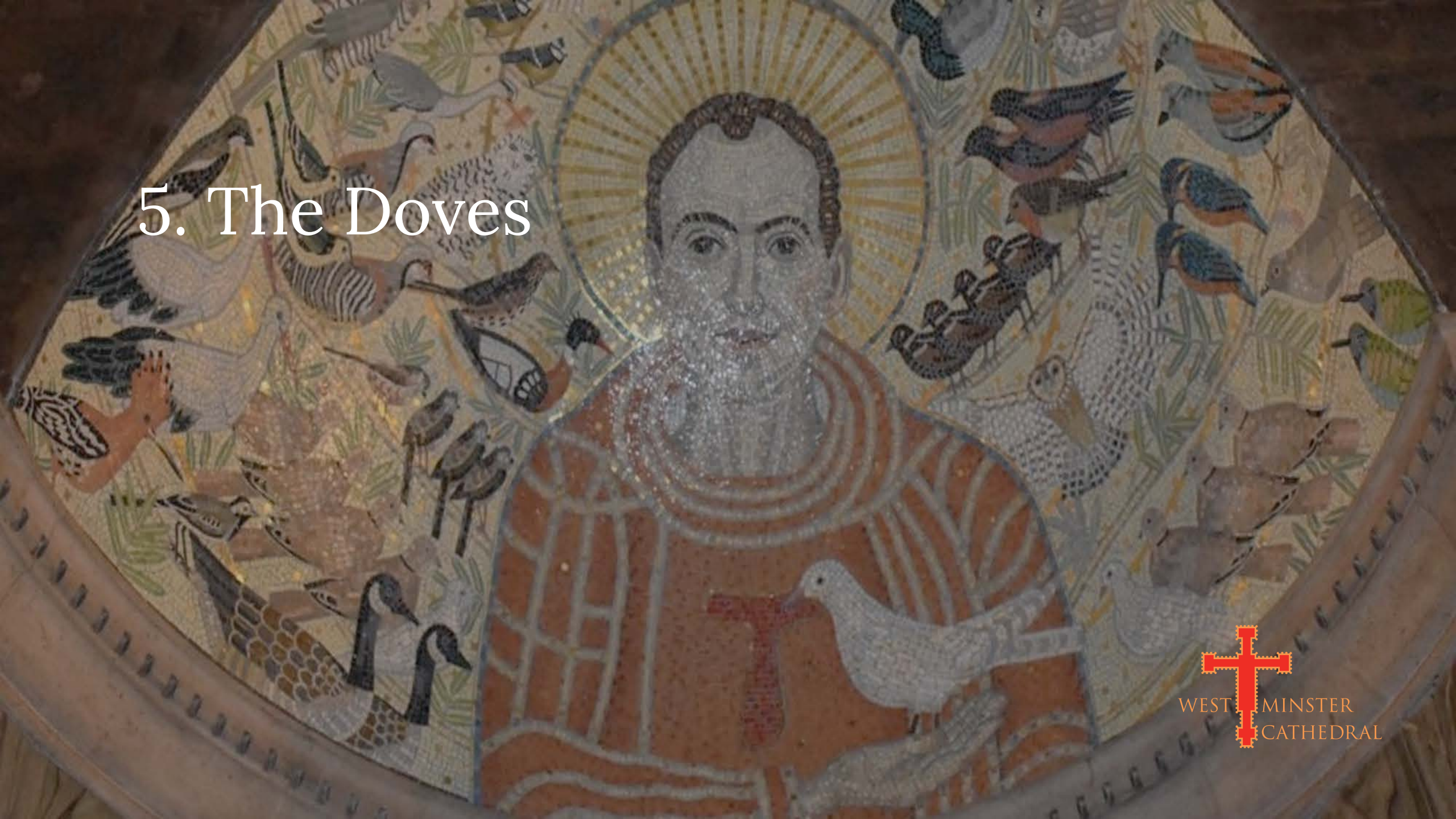


The Chi Rho

This ancient symbol shows the letters XP which are the first of the word Christ in Greek. This symbol may be found on everything from fabrics to baptismal candles. It was a vision of the Chi Rho before a battle which led the Roman Emperor Constantine first to tolerate and then embrace the Christian faith.

Perhaps the most striking example is the Second World War memorial to the Royal Canadian Air Force, close to the Lady Chapel. Hundreds of flat-headed nails pick out the Chi Rho, whilst also showing the plan of a wartime airfield.

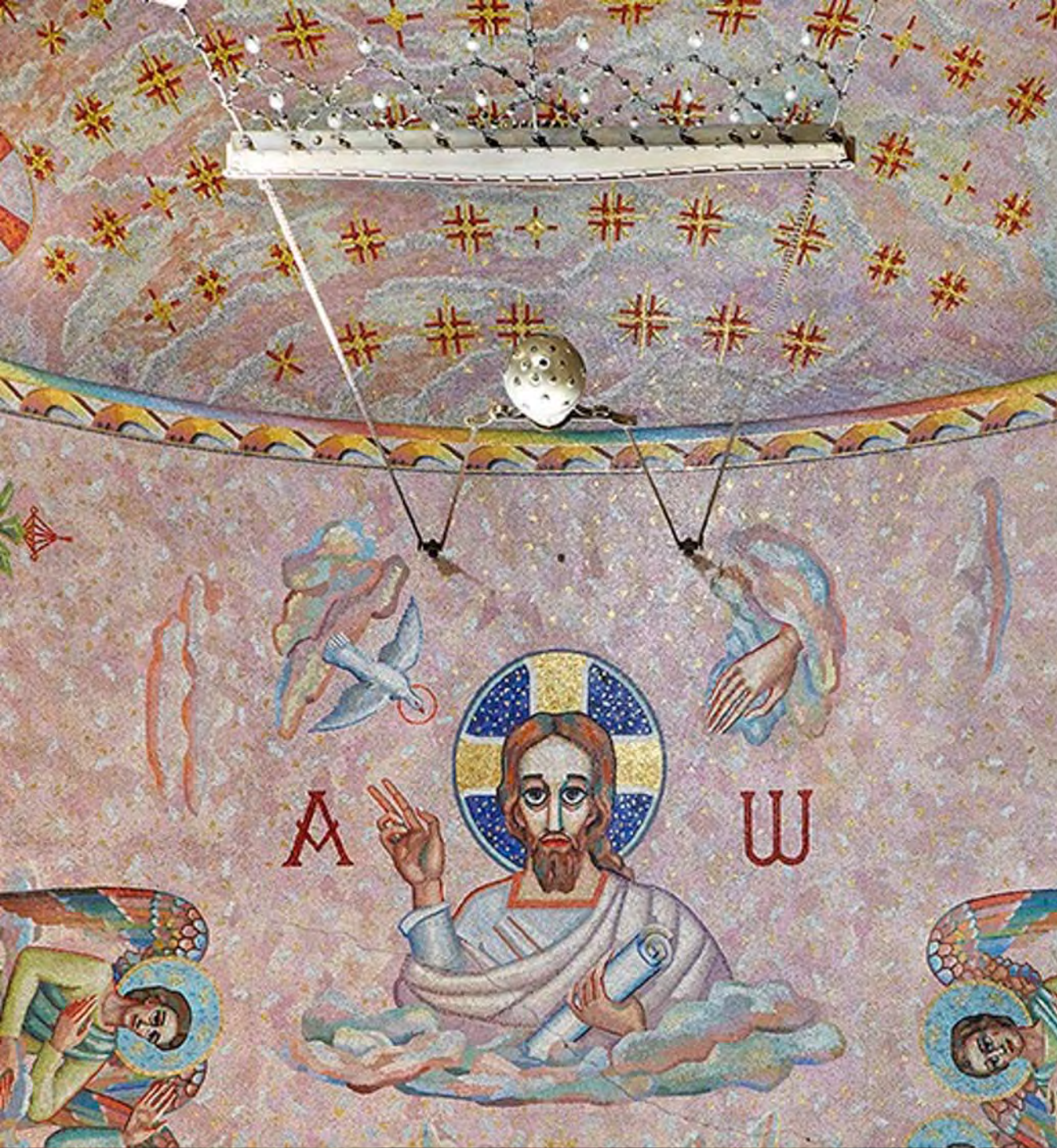
5. The Doves





The Dove

The dove is mentioned a number of times in the Bible. In the Old Testament it is a dove that brings Noah an olive leaf to demonstrate that the flood has ended. In the New Testament the Holy Spirit appears in the form of a dove at Jesus' baptism. Through these references, the dove has come to symbolise peace and the Holy Spirit.



Westminster Cathedral Doves

There is a dove in the mosaic of the Holy Family in St Joseph's Chapel and, as the dove of divine inspiration, over the head of Pope Gregory the Great in the Chapel of St Gregory and St Augustine

In the Blessed Sacrament Chapel there are several examples: twelve doves on the sanctuary arch represent the twelve apostles; high in the apse there is a dove representing the Holy Spirit; and there is also the dove that returned to Noah's Ark bearing the olive leaf after the flood.

5. The Lamb





The Lamb

The lamb is often used to represent Jesus. It is descriptive both of innocence and of willingness for sacrifice. He is addressed as the 'Lamb of God' in every celebration of Mass, since he offered himself in sacrifice to save humanity from sin and death.

For the Jewish people the lamb is central to the feast of Passover which recalls their being freed from slavery in Egypt. The Angel of Death is sent to execute God's judgment on the country, but the Israelites are commanded to mark their doorposts with the blood of a sacrificed lamb so that the Angel, seeing this, will pass over and spare them.



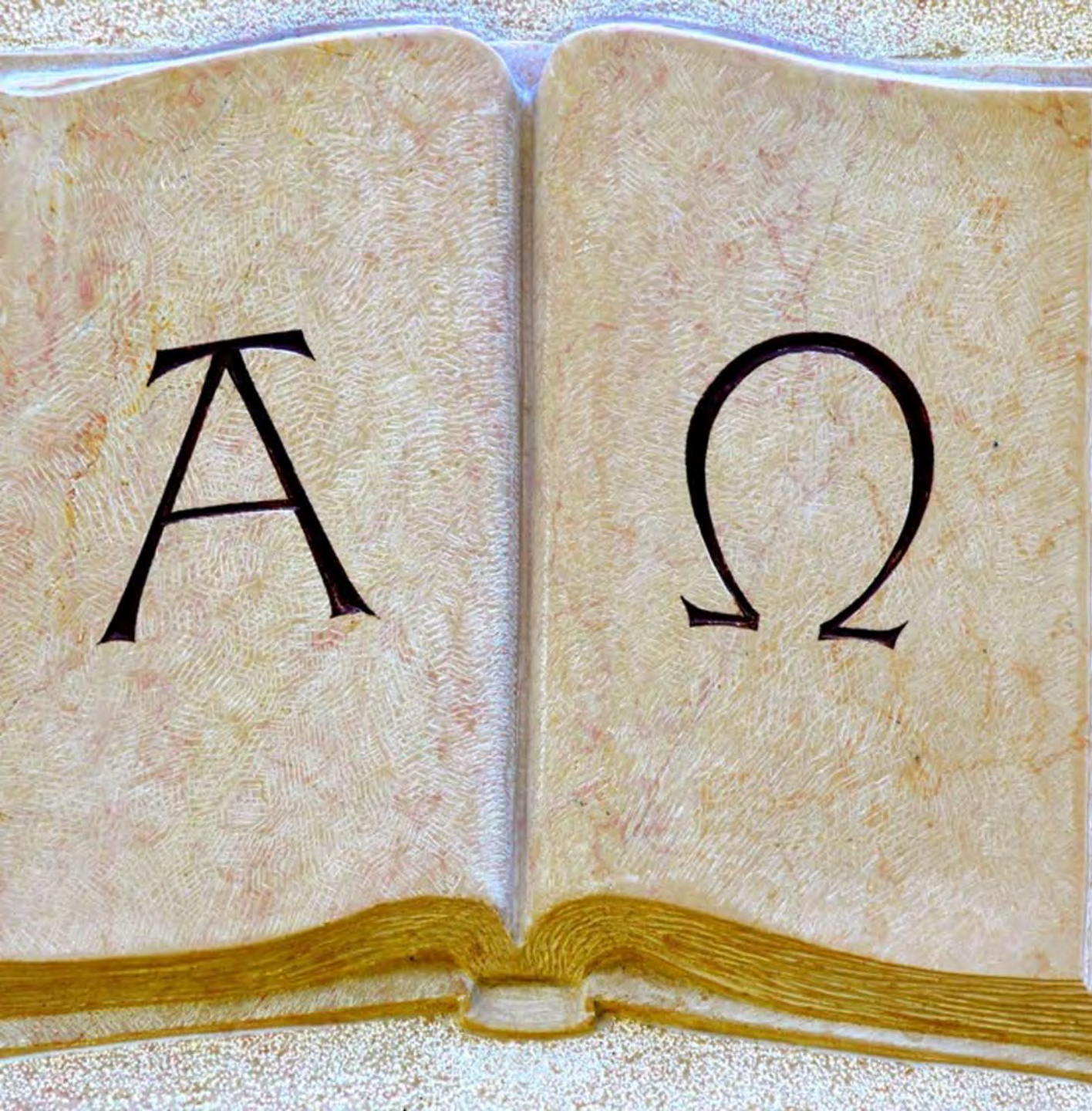
Westminster Cathedral Lambs

This Old Testament episode becomes an image of what Jesus achieves for believers as the sacrificial lamb who is willing to offer his own life and to shed his blood. Through this we are saved from sin and death, and freed for new life. The lamb therefore becomes a symbol of God's triumph. The lamb can be seen on the floor of St Joseph's Chapel and also on the front of the pulpit.

3. The Alpha and Omega

A

Ω



The Alpha and Omega

Alpha and Omega are the first and last letters in the Greek alphabet, so they are often used to describe something as being complete. In the Book of the Apocalypse (Revelation) these letters are used several times to symbolize Christ and God speaks of himself as the Alpha and Omega. They emphasise for believers that Jesus is both true God and true Man, embracing all eternity.



The Alpha and Omega Westminster Cathedral

The alpha and omega are a repeated motif in the Cathedral's decoration, initially above the main entrance doors. They are also pendent on the crucifix of the main altar. The Paschal Candle, blessed at the Easter Vigil Mass and acclaimed as 'The Light of Christ' is always marked with these letters.

7. The Four Evangelists



The Four Evangelists

The evangelists are the four gospel writers - Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Their texts are foundational for spreading the good news about Jesus and sustaining the life of the Church. They are often represented with their attributes: The Angel or Winged Man for St Matthew, the Lion for St Mark, the Ox for St Luke and the Eagle for St John.

The symbols of the four Evangelists can be spotted on the front of the pulpit.

They are also depicted on the end panels of the Great Rood.



St. Matthew

Is represented by a winged man because his text emphasises the humanity of Jesus more than the other gospels. For example, it begins with a description of the lineage of Jesus.



St Mark

Is represented by a lion. The lion is an ancient symbol of resurrection. His gospel has a focus on Jesus as a king.



St Luke

Is represented by an ox, which in turn represents the animals sacrificed in the Jerusalem Temple. His gospel focuses on the atonement of sins by the blood of the sacrifice of Christ. It can also remind people of the fatted calf killed in celebration when the Prodigal Son returns to his father.



St John

Is represented by an eagle. The gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke have much material in common (they are 'synoptic', one-eyed). St John has a wider theological interest, much as an eagle might observe from a great height.

Tasks

1. Name two Christian symbols.
2. Explain two ways in which religious art expresses beliefs about Jesus. Refer to scripture or another source of Christian belief and teaching in your answer.
3. In cathedral hall (or in your classroom) reflect on what you have seen and learnt. WHAT statue, religious art or symbol in Westminster cathedral do you like best and why?
4. In cathedral hall (or in your classroom) reflect on what you have seen and learnt.
5. Design a new symbol which reflects the importance of one of the sacraments

Thank You To The Following For Contributing To This Resource

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