



North side chancel window,
left panel



North side chancel window,
centre panel



North side chancel
window, right panel

This month we go back to look at scenes of Jesus' early life as depicted in the stained-glass windows in St Mary's Church, Dedham. We know very little about Jesus' early life as the son of Joseph, a carpenter, and his mother Mary but two important stories are depicted. By Jewish custom and law, babies were circumcised at one week of age, to be followed at 40 days by a ceremony of Purification for the mother and Consecration of the first born male child. Mary and Joseph went with Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem for this ceremony. They were clearly a poor family for they took a pair of doves for sacrifice as allowed for those who could not afford both a lamb and a dove. (Leviticus 12). This event is depicted in the window on the north side of the chancel nearest the altar. In the left-hand panel the Prophet Anna is standing beside Joseph who is holding the two doves and the cage in which he brought them is held by a small boy. In the right-hand panel stands Simeon, whom God had promised would not die until he had seen the Lord's Messiah. In the Bible once Simeon has met Jesus he says "Now Lettest Thy Servant Depart" which in Latin is "Nunc Dimittis Servum Tuum" and is written in a speech ribbon in the window. (Luke 2: 21 – 40).

In stained-glass windows there are often lots of little details, for instance above Joseph's head in this window, on the temple wall is a carved scene of Daniel in the den of lions (Daniel 6). It was probably shortly after this ceremony that Mary and Joseph fled with Jesus to Egypt to escape the slaughter of the infants, ordered by Herod, and only returned to Judea, after Herod's death, when Jesus was about 5 years old. (Matthew 2: 13 – 23).



Detail - Daniel in the
Lions den



Dedham Church, South side of the Chancel nearest the Altar.

It was the custom at that time for Jewish families to make a pilgrimage to the temple in Jerusalem at the feast of the Passover. Jesus and his family along with others went and when it was time to go home his parents thinking that Jesus was with their friends in the pilgrim group set out without Him.

Realising Jesus was not with them, they returned to look for Him and found Him in the temple. (Luke 2: 41 – 52). The window on the South side of the chancel nearest to the altar captures the moment when Joseph and Mary find Jesus in the temple. They are depicted in the left-hand panel peering into the room where we see the young Jesus discussing scripture. The chief priests and teachers are clearly listening intently to the young Jesus and what He has to say and are “amazed at his understanding and his answers”. They are clearly referring to the Scriptures; a scroll lies open at the feet of Jesus and many of the teachers are holding books which they are studying intently.

Medieval and Renaissance artists almost exclusively set their depictions of Biblical scenes in the clothing, buildings and culture of their own period. This tradition was maintained into more modern times and Victorian stained glass continues in this style, and so it is with this depiction of large ornately bound books.

Writings in the codex form, i.e. books as we know them, only appeared in the first century AD as multiple sheets simply sewn together and did not replace scrolls in general usage as bound volumes until around the fourth to sixth century AD, so they would, in fact, in Jesus' times all have been using scrolls.

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