

THE ADVENT APSE OF THE CRYPT CHURCH

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“**B**ut when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to ransom those under the law, so that we might receive adoption” (Galatians 4:4-5).

In my elementary years of school, I often wondered what, exactly, the “fullness” of time meant. It had to be something important because it was in the Bible, and it was referenced most often during the Advent and Christmas seasons. Although I had various notions of understanding, the most reasonable to my young mind was that “time” had somehow become sated; had “overindulged” as if at a banquet. Yes, a naïve understanding but as I would learn years later, not that far off the mark. A comparison of different translations of the original Greek text provides nuance and a clearer understanding of the phrase. Thus, the “fullness of time” or “the time that had fully come” was “*just the right time*” for God to fulfill his promise to send his Son into this world. It was a time that had been prophesied for generations; a time realized and hailed by Mary to her cousin Elizabeth (cf. Luke 1:55).

During the first century of Christianity, there was not a great deal of interest as to the date when Jesus was born. Having lived during the “fullness of time,” the early Christians fixed their gaze on the second coming of Christ, when the salvation promised by Jesus would be accomplished in his glorious return. *Marana tha!*, an

exclamation found in 1 Corinthians (16:22) and the Didache (10:14), was a prayer or supplication of the early Church for the return of Christ: “O Lord, come!” If this Aramaic phrase is divided differently, *Maran atha!*, it becomes a creedal statement of a past event, “Our Lord has come!”

Advent, a four-week period that begins the liturgical year, is similarly two-fold in purpose: 1) it prepares the Church for the season of the Incarnation or Christmas, when the first coming of Christ is remembered and celebrated, and 2) when our remembrance of the first coming is a joyful preparation and expectation for the second coming; for the end time. In this ritual cycle, the beginning and the end meet seamlessly: the last Sunday of Ordinary Time, the Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe or “Christ the King,” whose teachings are rooted in the Incarnation, and the season of the *adventus*, the “coming” or the “arrival.”

The artistic integrity of the Crypt Church was of particular importance to Bishop Thomas J. Shahan, the founder of this national church. An early publication of the National Shrine referred to the Crypt Church as “the catacomb under the sanctuary of the main church.” The Crypt Church is not a catacomb but catacomb-like. For the ethos of the Crypt Church to be truly catacomb-like, the artist, Mary Chase Stratton (1867-1961), with the help of Bishop Shahan, spent an entire summer exploring, studying, and sketching the catacombs of Rome. The



West Apse with
heralding angels
framing the arch.



Mary Chase Stratton

result was a Crypt Church ornamented with early Christian artwork culled from the catacombs of Rome. For Bishop Shahan this was “legible decoration,” artwork that is capable of being read or deciphered. It is a pictorial theology in ceramic design of the first four centuries

of Christianity based on the art of Christian antiquity and the Roman catacombs – and it begins in the west apse with the prophecy, the *adventus*, “the coming.”

The Crypt Church is beautiful and poignant in its simplicity. The west apse begins, as do the north and east apses, with heralding angels framing the arch. The ceiling of the west apse carries four prophecy panels.

The first prophecy panel is from Genesis and speaks of a new Eve, made by God in the Garden of Eden: “I will put enmities between thee and the woman and thy seed and her seed” (Genesis 3:15). It pairs with the first frieze on the left of the chapel of Saint Agnes above the first set of columns: *The Right Hand of God*. In the Old Testament, the right hand of God referred to the coming of the Messiah. In Early Christian artwork the countenance of God was not shown, for as the LORD told Moses, “But you cannot see my face, for no one can see me and live (Exodus 33:20). Thus, early Christian art only indicates the presence of God. The Pewabic ceramic panel shows three extended fingers, the sign of the Trinity. The rays issuing forth are the blessing of God.



The Right Hand of God

Moses, thought by many scholars to be the author of Genesis, is also a symbol of the Savior to come. He is depicted in a frieze next to the chapel of Saint Cecilia: *Moses percutit Petram*. The scene is that of Moses striking the rock

from which water came forth. Peter, as told by Jesus was the rock of the Church. This scene is modeled after the fresco in the Crypt of the Shepherd (*pecorelle*), catacomb of Callistus [Calixtus], 4th century. Moses is depicted striking the rock; Peter is loosening his sandal, he is without a beard as is common in Roman art; a Roman soldier, who appears to be drinking from the water given by God, is believed to be Cornelius, the first to be baptized by Peter.



Moses percutit Petram

In the center of the arch ceiling is a medallion of Miriam, the older sister of Moses and Aaron. “The prophetess Miriam” is described in the Old Testament as one who, along with her brothers, delivered the Jews from exile. She presages Mary of Nazareth, a woman who is the mother of the Savior and who also sings canticles to the fidelity of God.



The Prophetess Miriam

To the left and right of Miriam are images of two other women of the Old Testament who prefigure Mary of Nazareth: Deborah and Ruth. Deborah was also a prophetess and the only female judge mentioned in the Bible. She too, was a liberator of her people, acting with Barak and Jahel to defeat the Canaanites. The well-known Song of Deborah is a victory hymn sung by Deborah and Barak.

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The Female Judge Deborah

Ruth was a Moabite widow, the daughter-in-law of Naomi, who out of fidelity returned to Bethlehem with Naomi. At Bethlehem she married Boaz and became an ancestor of David and of Christ. Ruth is one of five women mentioned by Matthew in his genealogy of Jesus.



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Ruth the Moabite

These three women of the Old Testament prefigure Mary. Through their fidelity to God and, like Mary, their willingness to respond to the call of God, they help guide the story of salvation forward. Like the angels framing the arch, they too herald “the coming.”

The second prophecy panel is that of Isaiah 6: 14, “Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son and his name shall be called Emmanuel.” The detail of this prophecy is shown in the panel *Visio Isaiae*. This “vision of Isaiah” is

adapted from the 2nd century fresco in the Catacomb of Priscilla, which is one of the first extant representations of the Blessed Mother.



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Vision of Isaiah

The third prophecy panel comes from Jeremiah 30:22, “For the Lord hath created a new thing upon the earth a woman shall compass a man.” Jeremiah is one of the major prophets of the Old Testament. He is also known as the “weeping prophet” as he is known to do so. This text, though somewhat elusive, is thought to be his reference to Jesus in the womb of the Virgin Mary. For a few verses earlier, it is Jeremiah who gives the prophecy of God, that the time is close at hand when God will “fulfill the promise” of a “righteous branch” that will “spring up for David” (33:14-15).

The fourth prophecy panel is taken from Luke 2:35, “And thy own soul a sword shall pierce that out of many hearts thoughts may be revealed.” Unlike the previous three, this text speaks not of the things that Jesus will do and the effect they will have on Mary. It speaks of the mother-son relationship. This is part of what Simeon told to Mary during the presentation of Jesus in the temple.

Crowning the entire apse, the ceiling of the vault contains exquisite ceramic Pewabic panels replicating *Noah and the Ark*, a fourth century fresco found in the Catacomb of Saints Peter and Marcellinus; *Jonas and the Whale*, as found in the second century Sacrament Chapel of the Catacomb of Callistus or a fresco of the Catacomb of Peter and Marcellinus; the prophet *Malachi*, who promises a clean and eternal sacrifice and a symbol of Christ as our hope, and the great warrior *Judas Maccabeus*.

Malachi is one of the last Old Testament prophets who lived about 400 years before the birth of Christ. His is the last book of the prophets in the Bible and the last book of the Old Testament. The word *malachi* means “messenger.” At



West Apse Ceiling with Pewabic Panels



Malachi

the time of Malachi, the people were struggling to believe that God loved them: “I have always loved you, says the LORD” (Malachi 1:2). Through his “messenger” God tells the people how they have fallen short of their covenant with him. The final lines of

the Word made Flesh and the Eucharist.

In many ways, the west apse is like an icon: it is a portal that leads into a state of meditation and prayer. The west apse is a meditation on the supplication *Maran atha!* (“O Lord, come!”) and creedal statement, *Maran atha!* (“Our Lord has come!”)

This coming Advent, bring your Bible, your Rosary, perhaps even this issue of *Mary's Shrine* and spend an hour or so in the west apse of the Crypt Church. Spend time surrounded by the prophets and prophecies of old, recalling those holy women and men who, “in the fullness of time,” helped to create “just the right time” for the Incarnation of Jesus. So that we, like the early Christians, might fix our gaze on the second coming of Christ, when the salvation promised by Jesus is accomplished in his glorious return. 🙏

the prophecy of Malachi tell of Messianic redemption: “Now I am sending to you Elijah the prophet, Before the day of the LORD comes, the great and terrible day” (Malachi 3:23).

Finally, the west apse closes with a frieze depicting the ancient symbol of the anchor with pendant fish: *Hope in Christ*. This image is from the Catacomb of Priscilla, Gallery O, 3rd century. The anchor is the symbol of hope; the fish is the most common symbol for Christ; the five Greek letters spell the word “fish” (ΙΧΘΥΣ) and are the Greek monogram for “Jesus Christ, God’s Son, Savior.” The earliest depiction is Livia Primitiva, 2nd century. This leads into the north apse, “The Promise” or the Incarnation,



Hope in Christ