

John the Evangelist

John 1:1-16

The iconography of this window identifies the subject as John, the evangelist. John is often depicted as a young unshaven man, however the giveaway is the eagle in the top of the arch. The four gospel writers were traditionally identified with particular creatures associated with faces on the winged creatures of Ezekiel 1:1-14. From the earliest of times, John was associated with the eagle, signifying the tendency for John's gospel to dwell upon the heavenly realms and the divine relationship of the Son with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

But what has always interested me about this window are the symbols integrated into the framework around John. Unlike the Peter window, which incorporated symbols of Peter's life and deeds, this window uses symbols that reflect John's theology.

The symbol at the peak of the arch is the Chi-Rho, an ancient Christian sign. It is the combination of the two first letters of the Greek word Christos. According to the

ancient church historian Eusebius, in 312 AD, the Roman emperor Constantine had a vision of this sign and the words "In this sign, conquer." In response, Constantine inscribed the symbol on the shields of all his soldiers. He went on to win the battle of Milvian Bridge, which ended the division of the empire. Constantine became the first Christian emperor and ended official suppression of Christianity.

Meanwhile, at the base of the window are highly stylized Alpha-Omegas, a symbol combining the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. This symbol refers to Jesus' words to John at the beginning and the end of Revelation: "I am the alpha and the omega" (1:8, 22:13). The idea is that Jesus existed before all of time (John 1:1-3) and that all things find their completion in him.

Moving up from the base, we see the unusual symbol of the cross superimposed over an orb. This is called "The Cross of Triumph." The orb represents the world, and the cross over it represents Christ's rule over all the earth. The next symbol up is also as symbol of Christ's victory: the cross with the letters IC XC NIKA. These letters symbolize the phrase "Jesus Christ, the Con-

queror." This theme of Christ's rule is seen yet again in the crown.

The lamp symbol immediately calls to mind the verses from our reading today "In him was life, and the life was the light of men, and the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not comprehended it."

Above the lamp symbol, we find a strange symbol that looks vaguely like an O over top of a triangle. I have theories about this symbol, but I've not yet been able to find anything else that looks like it. If you have any clues, I'd love to hear them.

Overall, though, the theme of the symbols is to convey to us the great theme of John's theology: Christ is the victor over sin and death and all the powers of darkness. John, as an aged man, received the visions recorded in Revelation, which dramatically depict Christ's victory. Let us all take comfort and hope and courage from the truth that Christ reigns, even now.

