

The River of Life

By Honan Chapel, Cork | Volume 1.1 Fall 2014



River of Life Mosaic

Honan Chapel, University College, Cork, Ireland (1916)

Ludwig Oppenheimer Ltd, Manchester, England

The iconographic program of the mosaic floor of the Honan Chapel is shaped by liturgical song. The Canticle of the Three Young Men in the Fiery Furnace (Daniel 3:51–90) is quoted in the borders of the mosaic. It is a canticle of praise, calling the whole created world to bless and exalt God above all forever. All the creatures and elements named in the canticle are depicted in the mosaic, though not all have identifying descriptions. Shown above is the river of life, which flows from a sunburst at the western end of the chapel, where the baptismal font is now located, down the center aisle, to the altar.

The Daniel Canticle is sung at the canonical hour of Lauds on Sundays and feast days. Lauds, or Morning Prayer, is an office celebrated in the light of a new day and associated with Christ's resurrection. In the edition of the Roman Breviary current at the time of the floor's designing, this canticle was followed by three praise psalms (148–150). In the mosaic, verse 7 of Psalm 148 appears at the point where the western end of the nave meets the central aisle, leading Jane Hawkes to observe that "the decoration of the chapel, and the manner in which it is organized, can be understood within the framework of the celebration of Lauds."^[1]

The Daniel Canticle is of course not merely a hymn to the wonders of nature. In the biblical narrative the song arises from the pure hearts of three young men who were willing to undergo martyrdom rather than practice idolatry. Miraculously preserved from the fire that ought to have burned them to death, they sing this song. Christians have read the story of the three young men as a type or figure of the resurrection, lending an additional layer of theological significance to the song as an expression of eschatological hope. The passage from Daniel describing their trial by fire was included in the Roman Catholic lectionary for the Easter Vigil (from 1570 to 1951) as part of the catechumens' final catechesis before baptism.

— Editor

FOOTNOTE

[1] Jane Hawkes, "The Honan Chapel: An Iconographic Excursus," in *The Honan Chapel: A Golden Vision*, ed. Virginia Teehan and Elizabeth Wincott Heckett (Cork: Cork University Press, 2004), p. 114.

Detail from the mosaic floor in the Honan Chapel (1916), photographed by Daniel C. Doolan. Photograph used with kind permission of the Board of the Honan Trust, Cork. See more at the [Honan Chapel & Collection](#) online.