This photograph shows the Altar (table with candlesticks) behind one of the Cathedral’s Nativity sets

Introduction:

Altars are an extremely ancient idea. They are an important feature in many religions. They offer a common focal point in a religious building.

An altar can be as simple as a candle on a small table, or as grand as a massive block of stone, covered with embroidered cloths and artefacts made from gold and silver.

An altar can be improvised if necessary. The Army, for example, has a custom of holding a ‘Drumhead Service’, with the regimental drums stacked neatly and used as an altar.

Cathedrals often have several altars, sited inside different chapels. We have several chapels, including the Latin Chapel, the Lady Chapel, the Bell chapel, the Lucey chapel and the Remembrance chapel, and each one has its own small altar, made of stone or wood.

The main altar at Christ Church is called the High Altar. The table is wooden and very large but plain. However, embroidered cloths or altar fronts can be hung over the front. These are
often beautifully embroidered with Christian symbols. Their purpose is mainly to glorify God through their design, colours or subject matter. But they also mark the changing of the church’s seasons. Before Easter, during Lent, the altar fronts are solemn purple, the colour of sorrow and waiting. But, for Christmas and Easter, the altar cloths are usually gold, white, and very bright, to reflect the most joyful parts of Jesus’ story.

For Pentecost, the altar front might show a white dove or red orange and yellow flames. Both of these are symbols which are used to depict the Holy Spirit.

Christian altars usually have a cross in the centre and candles on either side. In a small parish church, the candles and cross on the altar are relatively small, but the ones on the High Altar in the Cathedral are very large, as they have to be seen from a distance in a large building.


In Christianity, the altar resembles a table, and the bread and wine in the service are the ‘food’, put there for all to share at Holy Communion, in the form of a shared meal. Holy Communion is offered to worshippers to remind people of Jesus’ last supper with his friends and disciples.

On the night of his arrest, Jesus met his friends and disciples in an Upper Room for a meal. During the evening, Jesus washed the disciples’ feet and then he broke bread and, passing it round, he asked his friends to eat it and remember him. Next, he passed around a cup of wine, asking them to drink it and remember him. The disciples did not really understand what he was doing but Jesus knew he was going to sacrifice himself and die. Later, the disciples realized that the bread and wine symbolised Jesus’ own body and blood.

Now, when they are given a little wafer or piece of bread and a sip of wine by the priest, Christians remember that special meal and the words of Jesus. Holy Communion is also called the Eucharist. The priest uses special prayers and always blesses the wine and bread before giving them to the worshippers.

A priest blessing the bread and wine for Holy Communion or the Eucharist
Background - the reredos:

In Christ Church, what is most remarkable about our High altar is the painted stone screen behind it. Such a screen is called a reredos.

Our reredos was designed in the 1800s, during the reign of Queen Victoria, by George Bodley, and the carving was by William Bridley, who also carved much of the decoration on the Natural History Museum in London. Most people assume our reredos is carved from wood but the general structure is of sandstone and the figures are made of marble (better detail can be carved in marble).

However, when it was first placed into the Cathedral, the Dean, Henry Liddell (the real Alice in Wonderland’s father), did not like the reredos at all! He considered it too ornate and colourful.

The Christ Church reredos

In the centre of the reredos is the figure of Jesus, nailed to the cross below the letters INRI. Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor of Jerusalem insisted that Jesus should be identified as King of the Jews and refused to change what he had written.

INRI stands for the Latin: Iēsus Nazarēnus, Rēx Iūdaeōrum (See the Gospel of John Chapter 19: verse19). In English, this can be translated as "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews".
Jesus was born in a village called Bethlehem, but he grew up in the town of Nazareth and died in Israel’s main city, Jerusalem. This is the golden city in the background behind the cross. In Jerusalem, Jesus was arrested, tried and condemned to death by crucifixion.

In a church or cathedral, the altar is always located in the East, because it is closer to Jerusalem, where Jesus died. Being reminded of Jesus’ death may seem a bit sad, even morbid, but Christians believe that Jesus rose again from the dead, after three days in his tomb. So, while the cross reminds us of Good Friday, it also helps us remember the good news of Easter Sunday. Christians believe that Jesus, by dying, conquered death forever, and gave us all the hope of rising again, and enjoying everlasting life in Heaven.

Under the crucifixion scene is: ‘Per crucem team libera nos Domine’ (Latin for ‘Through your cross you set us free, O Lord’).
On Jesus’ head, you can see the crown of thorns, placed there by soldiers, to mock and pain him. If you look closely, you may notice that some angels are collecting Jesus’ blood in cups called chalices. Interestingly, Jesus shows that he is full of forgiveness even for the soldiers who have nailed him to the cross. One of his hands has two fingers extended, in a sign of blessing. Jesus is blessing the world from the cross.

In the central panel of the reredos, we can see two people at the foot of the cross. The woman is Mary, the mother of Jesus and the man is John the Evangelist who wrote one of the four Gospels in the New Testament. John is usually shown at the Crucifixion because Jesus asked him to look after his mother after he died. In fact, he wanted Mary and John to look after each other.

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There are several other figures on the reredos.

They are: Archangel Michael with his golden wings. He is wearing armour because he fights evil. He is usually seen holding or wearing a sword as well. Not surprisingly, he is the patron saint of soldiers.

Next to St Michael, is St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr. A martyr is someone who has died for their faith. Stephen is usually shown holding rocks because he was, tragically, stoned to death.

On the other side, we can see another saint, St Augustine of Hippo, who is dressed as a bishop. St Augustine, who was from Africa and probably black, was an important leader of
the early church. The monks and canons who came to look after the shrine of saint Frideswide, in the 12th century followed the ideas of St Augustine and they were known as Augustinians.

Finally, on the far right, we find the Archangel Gabriel. Gabriel is usually shown holding lilies for purity because it was Gabriel who told Mary she was going to have a baby boy and she should call him Jesus.

![Painting of Archangel Gabriel and Mary by Fra Angelico (1445) in Florence, Italy.](image)

Other carvings are to do with what is called the crucifixion of Christ.

- Thirty pieces of silver (the money Judas accepted as a bribe to point out Jesus so he could be arrested).
- Ladder, hammer and pincers (tools used for crucifixion).
- Pillar and chords (to hold Jesus while he was being whipped)
- Scourges or whips (for whipping Jesus).
- Spear, sponge and nails (to injure Jesus; to allow him to drink; and to hold him on the cross);
- Jesus’ seamless robe and dice (the Roman soldiers gambled for His robe).
Things to do at home- a few ideas

- Find five (or more!) examples of altars from different religions and find out what ceremonies are practised at them.

- You have been approached by a modern cathedral, as they need a pair of new candlesticks designed for the altar. Your reputation has spread far and wide, and they have decided... unanimously... that the only person for the job is YOU!

- Have a look at some images of different altar fronts. Cathedrals sometimes ask famous artists to design a new altar front for their high altar. Draw a rectangle and design a new altar front for Christ Church Cathedral.

- Sometimes, on the altar or altar front, artists include a verse from the Bible that people would find inspiring and give them hope. Which verse would you pick? The Psalms can be a good place to start!

- Find out more about Jerusalem. Locate it on a map, and then see how far it is from Bethlehem and from Nazareth. Can you find images of Jerusalem in the time of Jesus and then images of today’s modern city.