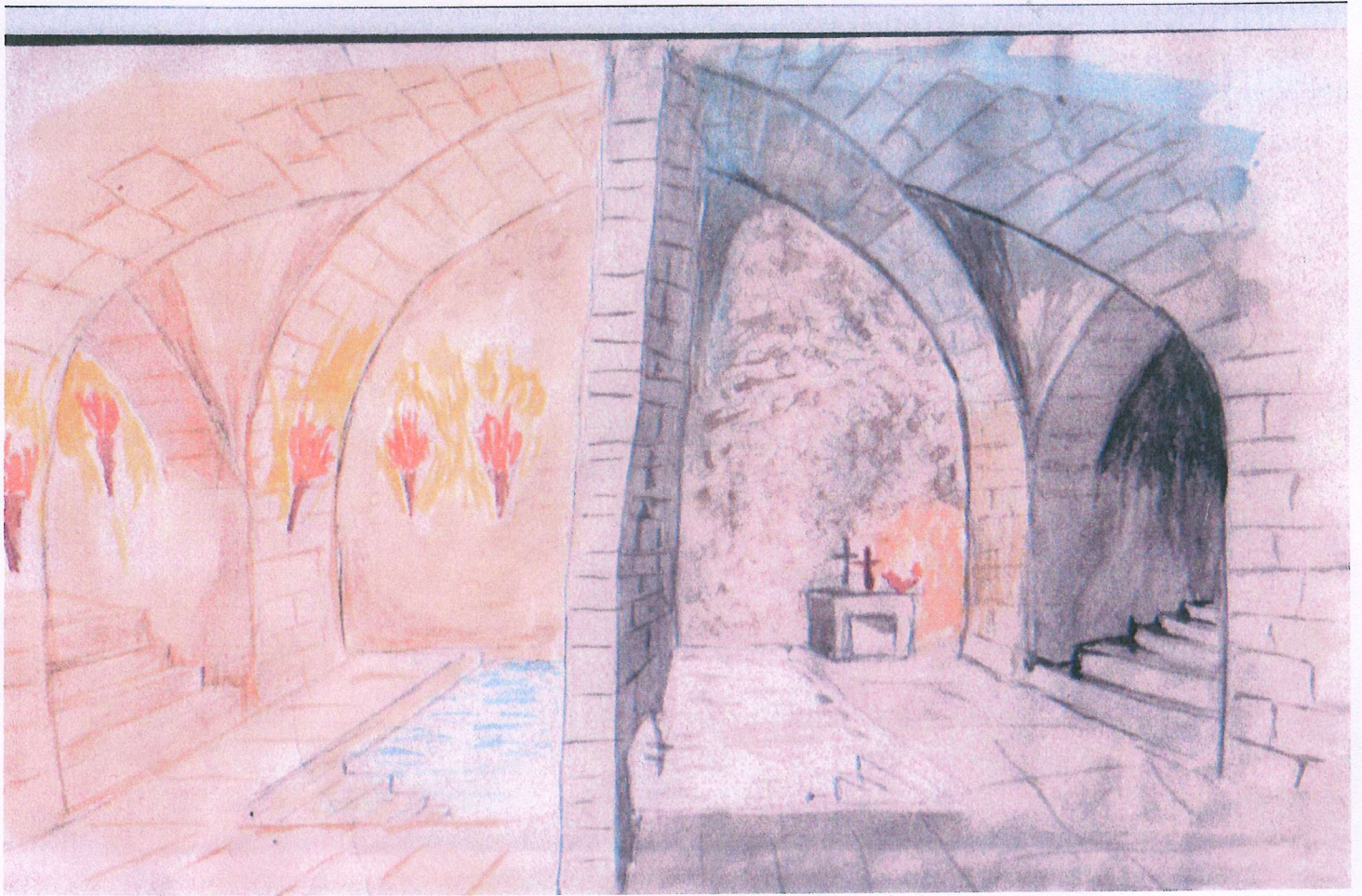


The Southern Steps of the Temple In Jerusalem.

Some of the 70 ritual baths outside the main Southern entrance to the Temple in Jerusalem in the time of Jesus. The washing was to enable worshipers to observe the cleansing rituals required before entering the Courts of the Temple and approaching the place where God was believed to have His dwelling.

They may also have been used for the washing rituals for proselytes before they were accepted into Judaism – an early, pre-Christian example of "baptism".





Baptistery in Nazareth.

The picture is an artists impression of a first century baptistery based on (i) archaeological interpretation of ruins in the crypt of St Joseph's church, Nazareth and (ii) description by the local Christian guide of the procedures involved.

Students find discussion of this to be one of the most challenging sessions of the whole course. The contrast between the early church understanding and "10 minutes and a splash of water before the children go out" is mind opening. It is worth spending time helping students to visualise the drama of the candidate's experience and its meaning to them.

The very first converts to be baptised did not need preparation – they had lived through the events. Very soon afterwards a need was seen for instruction for new believers. Candidates received instruction and mentoring for a year or more before the baptism either at Easter or at Pentecost. In the month before the event preparation was intensified to include periods of fasting and on the night before, candidates, dressed in old and dirty clothes were assembled on the "dark" side of the chamber for an all night prayer vigil. The only light would be one small oil lamp on the "altar".

For the ceremony they were stripped of their old clothes, entered the water, one by one, were baptised by total immersion (death and burial) and went through the tunnel to emerge (resurrected) into new (and eternal) life in the brightly lit side.

There they were clothed in new, white clothing (robes of righteousness) and welcomed by the assembled church members with shouts and songs of triumphant praise that they had entered a new life, been transferred from the kingdom of darkness into God's glorious Kingdom of Light and received the Holy Spirit.

People coming to faith in those days was an exciting business!