

Trinity College Cambridge
9 November 2014
Remembrance Sunday

**A (VERY BRIEF) HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY
IN BRITAIN IN 7 OBJECTS**

**The First World War
Stanley Spencer's *The Resurrection of the Soldier* (1929)**

Isaiah 2: 1–4 Luke 9: 23–27

Frances Spalding

A widespread desire to commemorate the First World War, in this centenary year, has produced diverse cultural manifestations: concerts, readings, ballets, light beams and a ceramic poppy field, to name a few. Yet it seems appropriate that silence still plays a part in our remembrance. Silence neither justifies nor condemns; it doesn't tidy up, explain, or put away. And yet it is far from inert, for it opens up space and time for thought and feeling, as it must have done after the Armistice, on 11 November 1918, when the strafe of machine guns ceased; and the constant pounding of trenches by bombardments of shells gave way to an uncanny quiet.

As the first anniversary of the Armistice approached, a second silence was mooted. The King was against it. Being a stickler for punctuality, and aware of the difficulties it caused his own family, George V doubted whether the British people and such a carefully timed event were compatible. But, as we know, the proposal went ahead, although the suggestion of a five-minute silence was reduced to two. And at the eleventh hour on the eleventh month of 1919 the famous 'Great Silence' descended on Britain: traffic, trains, the London tube – all came to a halt; factory production ceased; telephonists unplugged their wires...

Then, in 1920, came a third, unexpectedly deep, silence that fell over the crowds that lined the streets of central London, to watch the coffin of the Unknown Warrior, mounted on a gun carriage and drawn by six black horses, pass from Victoria Station to Whitehall, for a short ceremony in front of the Cenotaph, before being taken to its resting place in Westminster Abbey. Again doubts had preceded this event. Those who felt it leaned towards sentimentality dreaded a mawkish display of bad taste. But this proved not to be the case. Because the bodies of those who had died fighting in the 'Great War' had not been repatriated, the Unknown Warrior provided a focus of attention for large numbers of people who had been denied a funeral for their relative, neighbour or friend; and the tomb at the Abbey became a welcome alternative to Lutyens's Cenotaph, as a site at which to mourn.

By then the commemorative period was well underway. Sculptors were hard at work producing war memorials, commissioned by almost every village, town and city, and by a great many institutions. Some of these were workaday, or simply took the familiar form of the cross; but the British War Memorials Committee, founded in 1918, sought to echo the achievement of the Italian Renaissance by commissioning paintings similar in size to Uccello's *The Battle of San Romano*, as well as much funerary architecture. And all this took place amidst sharp political debate as to how to remember the dead.

This is the context in which the artist Stanley Spencer, began to dream of decorating a memorial chapel. Eight days after the war had begun, he had felt an urgent need to get involved. But, he said: 'If I go to war I go on one condition: I can have Giotto, The Basilica of Assisi ... & Fra Angelico in one pocket, and Masaccio, Masolino and Giorgione in the other.'

Of course, being only 5ft 2 inches in height and weighing just under seven stone at the time, he was below the physical standard required for the army, though, later, its standards were lowered. On his mother's advice, he and one of his brothers, Gilbert, sought enlistment in the Home Hospital Service in the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC) and both became medical or 'nursing' orderlies at Beaufort War Hospital in Bristol.

This grim set of buildings had previously been the Bristol Lunatic Asylum. Entrance lay through a high massive gate. Spencer later recalled: 'as soon as I passed through that gate, and was walking down the drive, all my patriotic ardour ... seemed ... again to leave me. A great clammy death seemed to be sitting or squatting on all my desires and hopes.' This hospital appears to have been in the grip of such an inhumane system that those who were cured were almost relieved to be sent back to the Front. Convoys of wounded men kept on arriving, as the enormity of this war began to make itself felt. Spencer recollected being exposed to 'innumerable, unanalysable mental shocks'. Yet he retained what he called 'some kind of homing instinct' so that [as he said] 'I am always finding spiritual nesting places'.

But he was at his lowest ebb when Desmond Chute appeared. This young man had read that the painter Stanley Spencer, whose pictures were on show in a London exhibition, was working in Bristol. He went in search of Spencer and found him scrubbing floors. He took Spencer home for meals, to concerts and familiarised him with the city. He also gave him a copy of St Augustine's *Confessions*, and it was Spencer's reading of this book that transfigured his daily life. He took from it an understanding that God is served and glorified by the smallest of tasks, even the sewing on of a button, and these enter into the rhythm, the rites and celebration of daily life. This book gave back to him some of the mental freedoms he associated with peacetime. He wrote to a friend: 'After my day's work at Beaufort, I have wanted to draw a picture of everything I have done. But why ... I could not say.'

Late autumn 1915 he applied for overseas service. He underwent preparation for Field Ambulance work at Tweseldown Camp, before being shipped to Salonika, and there, in Macedonia, latterly as an infantryman, he had further experiences which, like his work at the War Hospital, fed into his decoration of the Sandham Memorial Chapel, at Burghclere, near Newbury in Berkshire.

This Chapel is, at first sight, unprepossessing. But if outwardly dull, the chapel, inside, brims with surprises, for three of the interior walls are covered, floor to ceiling, with figurative scenes. The model in Spencer's mind was Giotto's Arena or, as it is also called, Scrovegni Chapel at Padua. Both, architecturally, are little more than viewing boxes, built primarily with the purpose of showing pictures. At Burghclere the chapel is lit from tall high windows above the entrance door, in the wall opposite the altar.

So strong was Spencer's desire to create a house of remembrance that he had begun producing drawings for it, long before he had any building in mind, or any apparent possibility of finding one. Then, in 1923, while staying in Dorset with the artist Henry Lamb, he showed some of these drawings to the arts patrons Mr and Mrs J.L. Behrend, who happened to be visiting. It was they who put up the chapel and invited Spencer to decorate it in memory of Mrs Behrend's brother, Lieutenant Henry Willoughby Sandham, who had died in 1919, from an illness contracted while fighting in Macedonia. Spencer moved to Burghclere. Between 1927 and 1932 he did little aside from work on the chapel. Although dedicated to Mary Behrend's brother, it was always intended to be a memorial to all the fallen. The Bishop of Guildford consecrated it as the Oratory of All Souls on 25 March 1927, exactly the same day on which, six centuries before, the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua had been consecrated.

The scene you have in front of you fills the far end wall, behind the altar. It shows The Resurrection of the Solders, which Spencer imagines taking place outside the walled village of Kalinova, in Macedonia. Unlike his earlier *Resurrection at Cookham*, a mural-size canvas in the Tate Collection, Spencer does not show the soldiers rising up out of their graves. Instead they are mostly engaged with daily tasks, cutting wire, polishing epaulettes, or removing puttees, then part of the standard issue army uniform. In his design of the picture Spencer's intention was to create, by means of the crosses and the intimate spaces in between them, a series of waves, receding upwards and backwards. The first wave, in the lower part of the wall, brings with it varied states of consciousness as the men greet each other, shake hands, and gain awareness of a change state. Things are the same and yet different. Belongings are returned. In the lower right corner, to the left of the door, a soldier takes out a red pocket book. Spencer identified it as 'a little red leather covered Bible', given to a soldier by his sister but which he had lost. 'Being the resurrection,' Spencer explains, matter-of-factly, 'I find it.' In the next wave a more reflective stage emerges. Here, too, there are passages of touching simplicity, such as the soldier reaching out to stroke the tortoise, a reminder, perhaps, that each regiment in the Greek army had its own pet tortoise. In this segment there is also a sense of rest and remembrance: crosses are to be leant against or reflected on, as one figure does lying on his stomach above the two central mules.

But the vigorous twist and thrust of the necks of those two mules push us up and on, to a place where the soldiers take active hold of their crosses – crosses which Spencer regarded as ‘their last piece of earthly impediments or equipment’. Finally, the soldiers hand in their standard issue crosses to Christ, who sits near the top of the wall, much in the same way that, after the Armistice, army equipment was handed in. It is almost as if the Armistice has been transposed to a heavenly register.

This way of thinking about the resurrection is idiosyncratic, but not, I think, blasphemous. Earlier this year, on Holy Cross day, my vicar the Reverend Stephen Tucker, incorporated this same picture into his sermon, and spoke about it thus: ‘New life means handing in your cross. And from whichever side they come, these soldiers carried a cross on behalf of their nation. Each man’s cross was not just the suffering of trench life, their fear and their wounds; it was the fact that they were doing something on behalf of others – they were carrying out orders to do things they may not have liked or understood; they were put in a position of killing their fellow human beings in hand-to-hand combat; their desperate desire to survive was sometimes at the cost of killing the man before you, looking into his eyes and shooting or stabbing him, and they had to do that because their nations and their leaders had somehow willed it and they had been lead into this conflict. Their crosses may not have been very noble. They may even have acted cruelly or selfishly but they were also carrying a burden which was not their own sole responsibility. And so Spencer paints their resurrection as a handing in of their crosses. They look into the eyes of the man who first carried ‘the’ cross and hand back to him the whole bloody mess of their lives; and he looks at them with, we believe, an expression of forgiveness and love.’ You may yourselves have noticed that the figure of Christ, pushed far into the background, is muted, indistinct. Yet it is his presence that translates this crudely physical vision of crowds of morally-compromised soldiers into a resurrection. And so those crosses become symbolic also of burdens carried today, amid our own confusion and the moral chaos of the world in which we live.

One passage in St Augustine’s *Confessions* that caught Spencer’s attention describes the performances of a glorifying God: ‘Ever busy, yet ever at rest. Gathering yet never needing, bearing, filling, guarding, creating, nourishing, perfecting, seeking though thou hast no lack!’ Despite the busy scenes elsewhere in this Chapel, it is here, in the Resurrection, that a similar pulse of activity is best conveyed. Alan Wilkinson, in his masterly study, *The Church of England and the First World War*, notes that despite the readiness to believe in supernatural deliverances, in superstition and fatalism, the troops mostly had little time for Christianity. To many of the soldiers, it seemed that God, if there at all, was distant and helpless. Meanwhile the war threw into prominence for churchmen urgent questions about death and the future life. Spencer confronts these concerns in his Resurrection; he envisages the after-life mostly by holding up a mirror to life, and, in so doing, delivers an understanding of divine intervention and the sacredness of human life. The suggestion in this Resurrection scene and, indeed, in every scene in the chapel at Burghclere, is that the activity of God is to be glimpsed in and through humanity in all its multifariousness; and that St Augustine’s glorifying and performing God requires us simply to be there, attentive in intimate moments as well as to those routine and possibly menial tasks, even amid the wasted theatre of a world war.