

Trinity College Cambridge
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Picturing the Christian Life
Genesis 9: 8-17; Mark 3: 1-8

‘Travoys Arriving with Wounded at a Dressing Station, Smol, Macedonia,
1916’, Stanley Spencer, 1919

Michael Banner, Dean of Chapel

From an elevated position we look down, over the rough thistles or holly which stand at the front edge of the picture, and towards a brightly illuminated dressing station. There, in the background, on a rough table, lies the shrouded patient attended by two medics, one holding a mask and ready to administer chloroform, another dealing with the patient’s wound. Around this dressing station are gathered the mules pulling the travoys of the title – travoys being a sort of horse-drawn sledge, traditionally used for moving logs over ground so rough that it will not bear wheels, and thus especially suited to the mountainous terrain of Macedonia. But here the cargo is not logs, but wounded men. The mules, with heads raised and ears pricked, are all attention. Their cargos, on the travoys, are, in contrast, seemingly oblivious to what is going on – the bodies are covered in blankets and the faces in gauze to prevent mosquito bites. The wounded are quiescent, presumably under the influence of morphine, awaiting their turn to be treated. And they are attended by the orderlies and soldiers of the medical corps, who seem to steady the mules and the travoys and the wounded, all at the same time, even whilst they, like the mules or horses, are drawn to the spectacle at the back of the scene. So too, the orderly in the right foreground, with the awkward cast on his arm, and the equally awkward pose, is drawn by the

scene, looking back over his shoulder towards that brightly lit makeshift operating theatre. And we, the viewers of this picture, join him and the others and become spectators ourselves, adding to the avid throng around the single patient and the two who attend him.

The painting was begun and finished in 1919, and it was the first work done by Stanley Spencer after the war. Spencer had barely established himself as an artist when war broke out in 1914, when he was just 23 years old. He enlisted in 1915 in the Royal Army Medical Corps and worked in a hospital, and was then sent to Macedonia where British forces were fighting Bulgarians and Greeks. In 1917 he volunteered for the infantry, and spent time at the front line. In September of 1918 one of his brothers was killed on the western front, and in December he was invalided out of the army and returned to Cookham.

The picture recalls an incident which occurred while Spencer was still with the Field Ambulance Unit: 'About the middle of September 1916', Spencer later wrote, 'the [22nd] Division made an attack on Machine Gun Hill on the Doiran Vardar Sector and held it for a few nights. During these nights the wounded passed through the dressing stations in a never-ending stream'. 'I was standing a little way from the old Greek church' (now become the dressing station), 'and coming there were rows of travoys . . . crammed full of wounded men.'

When Spencer came to paint this scene some three years after he had witnessed it, he, like many others, was trying to fathom and make sense of experiences of suffering and loss almost beyond our imagining. Like those many others, he had 'buried so many people and saw so many dead bodies',

as he said, that his recollections must have been chiefly painful or even horrific. And yet even as he witnessed the scene, he had an inkling of how it should be read or interpreted or understood in terms other than those of loss or suffering or pain: 'One would have thought that the scene was a sordid one, a terrible scene . . . but I felt there was grandeur.'

'Grandeur' may seem an odd thing to perceive in a stream of wounded and dying men being dragged on makeshift stretchers to a rough and ready clinic. Other war time artists might well – and quite reasonably – have seen only horror, and had Spencer chosen to conjure up the pain and the suffering and anguish of that night in Macedonia, when the scale of losses compared with the killing fields of the Somme and Verdun, his painting might have resembled some of the others which hang near it in the Imperial War Museum in London – such as Paul Nash's nightmarish visions of desolate landscapes illuminated by the lightning of the relentless shells of trench warfare. But Spencer saw something else besides the horror – 'I felt there was grandeur', and what he has given us is this grandeur, in a scene of monumental calm and stillness.

Of course, as Spencer himself said, the picture 'is not in any material . . . sense a truthful representation of the scene it is supposed to depict'. It is not a depiction of what was there, but a representation – a re-presentation. For what Spencer has done is to re-figure the scene in such a way as to reveal its inner sense or meaning. And to hint at this meaning – which we shall come to – what he has done, as you may already have noticed, is to have transfigured the stream of dead, dying and wounded arriving at the dressing station into the form of a nativity.

Spencer has disposed the figures around the ruined church which has become dressing station just as figures are deployed in any number of representations of the birth of Christ. The ruined church stands in place of the stable. The wounded replace the shepherds, the bystanders or the kings. The horses stand in for ox and ass. Instead of a manger we have an operating table, itself possibly the simple altar from the church. Instead of the holy family – the attentive Mary and the usually brooding Joseph and the fragile baby – we have the doctors or orderlies and the fragile patient.

Of course this nativity, just as indeed many of the medieval ones, contains references to the crucifixion – here rather explicit ones, as if nativity and crucifixion are joined. We have the red crosses on the sleeves of the soldiers; there are the outstretched arms of the figures in the centre as if they are about to be nailed to crosses; there are those huddled bodies on the stretchers, treated, as Spencer says, ‘with the same veneration and awe as so many crucified . . . Christs’. And we have a different sort of cross, a disciple’s cross, supporting that basin of water in the makeshift operating theatre – the basin itself suggestive of a baptismal font.

The form into which Spencer has transfigured the original scene is the form of a nativity, with the hints of the crucifixion; as in a nativity, we have human and animals gathered as avid spectators of a mysteriously illuminated scene. But if this is the form Spencer has chosen, we still want to know why he has chosen it? What is the substance of what is going on which makes this the right form? What is it that captured Spencer’s imagination on that night in 1916 so that he read and re-presented the original scene in this way? What is it, we might ask alternatively, that causes that soldier with his arm in the sling, even while leaving, to turn back

to behold the spectacle? What is it that draws the orderlies, and even the mules, as spectators of all this – and invites our fascinated attention too? What is there to see as we join this band of spectators gathered as at a nativity?

If one were to try to explain what it is that makes the original nativity a spectacle to behold, there would be many things to say – but one thing would be this: that something of its grandeur consists in its being a moment of peace framed by violence. At the original nativity, that great and grand colonial power (Rome) asserted its ability and brutal determination to tax its subjects, requiring those subject people to go to their tribal homes – with no exceptions made for pregnant women. No sooner is the baby born than a petty tyrant (Herod), a client of the greater tyrant, jealous of this petty position, has the infants of Bethlehem massacred on the basis of a rumour of a prophecy delivered by wandering magicians or seers. The framing of the original nativity is conflict and violence born of base human motives and fears. The central moment, the moment when the child is displayed to human view, the moment which draws the spectators, is the all too brief moment when peaceful tender care becomes a fragile interlude between the violent before and the violent after.

Spencer depicts a similar moment. It was plainly fear and violence which led to the dressing station, Smol, Macedonia, 1916, and plainly there will be violence and death on the other side of this event. But Spencer has not illustrated the dreadful and tragic events which frame this moment, although he alludes to them, but the moment in which there is peace, comfort and care, when there is redemption and healing – no matter what there is outside the frame. Here a few men are snatching something back from the chaos.

‘Inserting peace in the face of war’ – was Spencer’s phrase. ‘It was possible even in war to establish to a greater or lesser degree a peaceful atmosphere, . . .[so] hope and some sort of constructive life was sustained’. The assertion of peace in the midst of conflict is the grandeur Spencer discerned and depicted – it is the assertion of peace in the midst of violence which is substance of this moment and which allows and encourages Spencer to transfigure the stream of wounded and dying into the form of the nativity.

In 1934, some 15 years after this picture was completed, some artists got together to publish a book of sermons. They seem to have done it in response (possibly retaliation) to a group of clergy who themselves had got together to exhibit their paintings in London. And in the collection of sermons there is one by Spencer. Now Spencer’s sermon is probably better than the parsons’ paintings, but however that may be, he had no need to write sermons when his paintings preach to us as insistently and persuasively as this one does. For it bids us, in his phrase: ‘Insert peace!’ Insert peace amidst the violence. Respond to the challenges and opportunities of the present – as these soldiers do in the picture – to assert peace where there is strife!

Well, you might be forgiven for thinking this a somewhat pointless point for those of us who, thank God, do not find ourselves in the midst of war. What can this charge and bidding have to do with us?

Perhaps when we think of wars we think, at least first of all, of those which involve armies facing one another across fronts, or invading and taking territory, or firing missiles and dropping bombs. But if this is war in its most dramatic or explicit or noticeable or photogenic form, these are not the

only wars of human making, since we only too readily engage in wars of other kinds in other forms, on other fronts. In a week which has given us both those terrible events in Cumbria and on that ship approaching Gaza, we surely need to reckon with the fact that war takes many forms.

But let me close by mentioning one of another kind. Within nations, or at least especially within those which have embraced the dogmas of free market economics (which is just about all of them), we have increasingly come to think of what it is to be human as economists think of it; that is, as the pursuit of self-interest (rather narrowly conceived as having to do with money). Now where we conceive human life in such a way, the ruling notion which informs our conception of our social space is the notion of competition, and competition which, in its more rampant or unconstrained forms, becomes not very readily distinguishable from simple and earnest conflict. The competition or conflict (in the way of competitions and conflicts), has its winners and its losers. In the UK, for example, the losers are the poor, and the poor will have higher incidences of problems of mental health than do the well off; the children of the poor will have fewer life chances of course; poor mothers will have greater chances of dying in child birth; the life expectancy of both them and their children will be significantly lower than that of a Cambridge don, for example; and their quality of life, in the shorter span, will be in countless ways worse.

To these dreary statistics, which could be recounted for many hours to come, we might respond by saying that there must be winners and losers and leave it at that. But to accept those terms is to accept that our social space is and must be a competitive one, so that stepping over the victims is the only option. But there really is no 'must' about it. Harsh inequalities tolerated are

not inevitable. Competition is chosen, not necessary. The fate of the victims is the result of things we do, not written in the stars.

The painting we have before us is not one of Spencer's visionary works in the obvious sense of that term – not in the way his famous *Resurrection, Cookham* is visionary, with the bodies rising from the tombs of an English village churchyard on an English summer's afternoon. There is in this painting, none of the 'weird ebullience' (as one critic puts it), which is expressed by the wild fancy and distortion of some of his other great pictures. But in another sense, this is indeed a great visionary work – and preaches to us a vision we should hold in our head and hearts as we go out from this place this evening. It conjures up before us a nativity which, like its great original, calls us to pray and hope and act for the sake of other and similar nativities – where, amidst the conflicts and violence of our everyday social worlds, we insert peace, and give birth to social forms of tenderness and care and love and solidarity in a world given to war.

Michael Banner

Trinity College

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