

The Resurrection

Sir Stanley Spencer 1891-1959:
The Resurrection, Cookham (1924-26)
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A Sermon preached in
Trinity College Chapel, Cambridge

by the Revd Canon Andrew Greany

on Sunday 11th March 2007
Third Sunday in Lent

Ezekiel 37: 1-14

1 Corinthians 15

It is said that Sir Winston Churchill, on seeing Stanley Spencer's *The Resurrection, Cookham*, remarked: 'if that is the resurrection, then give me eternal sleep'. I suspect that if you tried imaginatively to place yourself within this painting, you might feel a certain restlessness. My own restlessness with this work relates, I think, to my discovery of the artist's shifting and ambivalent views about resurrection; and for this, as for much of the first part of this sermon, I owe a great deal to a paper by Susanna Avery-Quash. Spencer himself had a great confidence about the work: 'I was on a bedrock with this picture, I knew it was impossible for me to go wrong.' Clearly, resurrection was of huge importance to him – this is only one of several paintings on the theme; but it seems as if he understood it in at least two ways, and that as time went by the balance between them shifted. This painting illustrates something of both of Spencer's understandings of resurrection: first, as what we might call a 'Last Day' event, when the living and the dead are to be raised, soul and body, at the Second Coming of Christ. So, in the Resurrection, Cookham, people, recognisable people, are awakening and coming out of their tombs. There is, incidentally, compared with most traditional representations of the 'Last Day' (and indeed with one of Spencer's own earlier paintings, *The Resurrection of the Good and the Resurrection of the Bad*), hardly any sense of *judgement*. It does look as if the people in the left foreground are being held back by their hair, and the group of four in the

tomb behind them are being pushed into a corner of their tomb; but otherwise, it seems just to be a matter of some of the figures feeling rather as most of us do when the alarm goes off on a cold morning. And what about Christ? Well, he is present, indeed in the heart of the picture, under the flowers covering the church porch, and with God the Father standing behind and apparently ruffling his hair affectionately. And he's quite a feminine figure, holding two, possibly three infants; does this reinforce the sense that here is a personification of Love, Christ the *Lover*, not Christ the *Judge*? So, a Last Day, and in the presence of Christ, loving advocate...but the force of such a presentation would diminish in Spencer's later work, as he moved further away from what he perceived to be traditional Christianity, and as he was perhaps won over more fully to the second understanding: this is what we might call a resurrection on earth attainable at any time... moments of joy and transcendence, of ecstasy (and not least in physical and sexual relations)... and in awareness of the world transfigured... 'burning bushes', as Spencer himself expressed it, 'in Cookham', the village where he was brought up, to which he was so attached that at the Slade before the First World War he was nicknamed Cookham. He used always, we're told, to return there by the 5.08 train, missing part of the life-class so that he would not miss tea at home. In 1913 he wrote as follows: 'many people have tried to convert me to Hampstead Heath, but with all its fine trees, wonderful views, I always get horribly depressed whenever I go there... I wish the National Gallery was in Cookham'. And this is all part of the resurrection understood as place transfigured; the River Thames at Cookham he described as the 'River of Life', and the geography and architecture of Cookham and its church are altered in this painting to allow a pleasure boat trip on the river into the context of the resurrection of its passengers, who, we assume, have jumped from their tombs onto the boat.

In *The Resurrection, Cookham*, then, we find Spencer at a particular stage in the development of his thought... it was a time of personal happiness and fulfilment, following soon after his first marriage, and a time of a degree of equilibrium in the holding of two views of resurrection. But the balance shifted; Susannah Avery-Quash suggests that in a later painting, *A Village in Heaven*, 'although the theme is still the redemption of the world, here it is seen as achievable not through an acceptance of Christ, but through the acceptance of sexual love, freed of all traditional moral constraints'. Here then is a major question, as we stand in front of *The Resurrection, Cookham* and with some awareness of the movement of Spencer's thought... where does acceptance of Christ come into it, Christ in whom, wrote St Paul to the Corinthians as we heard earlier, all are made alive, Christ, who has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep?

In trying to answer that question, it may be helpful – and without wanting to force Spencer into an inappropriate place – to draw a couple of points from the painting, one in relation to each of our scripture readings tonight. Ezekiel 37, the dry bones. This passage is clearly about the *community* of

Israel, and how the Spirit, the breath of life, is breathed into that great army, who leave their graves and stand on their feet, as one. And whatever else he is doing, Spencer paints this resurrection at Cookham as a *community* event. He himself is in the painting, contemplating the world from the bottom right hand corner; his wife Hilda is there smelling a flower; wives in the background on the left spruce up their husbands. A crowd of locals sail off on the pleasure boat. The community may even extend, through the presence of the negroes, into the universal. The second point is about *continuity*; maybe there's a seed buried, and we don't know what it's going to produce, barley or wheat or something else... so says St Paul in 1 Corinthians 15. But there's a *material continuity* between seed and growth. And these ordinary people, with their day-to-day concerns, or their intellectual skills, like the people in the right-hand background at their studies, all this is the stuff, the material, of their resurrection.

Community and Continuity. Is there a connection here with Jesus Christ, crucified and risen? Certainly for St Paul. As *in* Adam, all die, even so *in* Christ shall all be made alive. Our constriction, our mortality, is *shared*... Spencer certainly knew the reality of finality of the shared death experience in the First World War. Insofar as we experience new life, again it is *shared*, in friendship, in the mutuality of community and relationship. Jesus built a community to eat and drink with Him at His Last Supper; the Resurrection of Jesus created a *new* community not confined to the Upper Room, not confined to 32 AD or whatever the date may have been. And continuity; it was the *same* Jesus... see the wounds. It is that broken body which is glorified. In Christ... community and continuity, life restored out of the material of people who doubted, people who denied. Stanley Spencer's life, his views, his paintings do interrogate Holy Scripture; and why not? We need interrogatives as well as indicatives such as 'Christ is risen'. But there is vision too... a vision of community and a vision of continuity. For Spencer, the vision was challenged by personal sorrow, loneliness, sickness... as it so often is for us, if we hold such a vision. It is for the Christian disciple to proclaim that the Death and Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, eternal Word made flesh, is the assurance of our community and continuity, and not only ours, but those of all. As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.