CHRIST IN THE WILDERNESS

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Reflecting on the paintings by Stanley Spencer

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For Rebecca

I like to go beachcombing, and I like to find interestingly shaped rocks. When I really get into the groove I start finding beautiful rocks everywhere, until I discover that all the rocks on the beach are beautiful. And so I try to find beauty in even the smallest moments, because beauty is something that can grow if you let it.

Douglas Coupland, interview at the back of *Eleanor Rigby*,
Harper Perennial, 2005, p. 8

I was disturbed by feelings of everything being meaningless. But quite suddenly I became aware that everything was full of special meaning and this made everything holy.

Stanley Spencer, *Sermons by Artists*,
Golden Cockerel Press, 1934, p. 50

Contents

Illustrations

Acknowledgements

Most of the reflections in this book come from my own meditations on the pictures themselves. Although a lot has been written about Stanley Spencer, not that much has been written about these particular paintings. I am, however, very grateful to Richard Harries, one-time Bishop of Oxford, for letting me see and quote the notes that he prepared on these paintings. I worked with Richard for a few years when I was Bishop of Reading and I learned of his love for Stanley Spencer and his great knowledge of Spencer's paintings. I am also grateful for the support of the Stanley Spencer Gallery in Cookham. I spent a happy day looking through their archive, where I was able to unearth various bits and pieces which have helped flesh out this book, not least my discovery of the sermon Stanley Spencer himself wrote, which was published in 1934, and then of Richard Harries' sermon preached on the 100th anniversary of Spencer's birth. Ann Danks, the archivist in Cookham, very kindly sent me copies of the notes about the paintings that Spencer dictated to his niece, Daphne, in 1950, and the photographs of the paintings in Cookham church. She and others at the gallery, where I had the great privilege of preaching at the service to mark its 50th anniversary in 2012, have enthusiastically supported the writing of this book. Charles Miller, the Rector of Abingdon, has also written frequently with notes and encouragement.

As I say in the book, I have spoken about these paintings on numerous occasions. I therefore wish to thank the many individuals whose own observations and insights given in the course of a hundred presentations have contributed to this book, not least much loved colleagues Angela Butler, Martin Cavender, James Lawrence, Robert Warren and Alison White, who have heard me speak about them many, many times. I particularly remember clergy conferences, travelling schools, retreats and parish weekends with churches from Todmorden, Cholsey and Saffron Walden; a families camp at Hilfield Friary; a retreat at Los Olivos, near Granada in southern Spain; and lectures given in Reading and at the Sandham Memorial Chapel in Burghclere, where Amanda Findlay, the curator, offered fantastic support for this project.

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Introduction

Stanley Spencer and me

I only got three O levels. At my school – a not very high-flying boys' secondary modern in Essex – you needed five to swap to the grammar school, where they had a proper sixth form so you could take A levels and try for university. The choice at my school was either leave and get a job, or stay another year, sit some more O levels and maybe get a slightly better job. But there was not much expectation of anything else.

Inside, I knew I was capable of more, but I had dreamed, played and misbehaved my way through the previous five years, so I wasn't sure what I needed to do to make something else happen.

Next door to the boys' school was at the time a much better girls' school. Every school, whatever its label, is only as good as its teachers, and the girls, with excellent teachers and high expectations, were achieving much more than we were.

I can't remember who hatched the scheme, but one of my friends came up with the idea that we might join the sixth form in the girls' school and take some A levels there. Somehow this was agreed to, and each morning three of us registered in the boys' school and then joined the girls next door for all our lessons. Late in the day, my education had begun.

No human being can thrive without affirmation – this is one of the truths that the paintings in this book, and the Scriptures that lie behind them, reveal. In the sixth form at the girls' school I found teachers who believed in me. They did not think that education was about pouring knowledge in; rather, it was about drawing potential out. They opened my mind to many things, and opened doors to new learning and new possibilities. But most of all it was the affirmation they gave me, and the expectation that I could do well, which changed me.

I did three A levels, in the same subjects that I had got at O level previously – art, English and history. My English teacher, Mrs Bareham, spotted something in me and encouraged me to write. (Actually, I was already writing a huge amount; it was just that nobody had shown much interest before.) My art teacher was Rosemary Murray. She was a wonderfully zestful, disciplined, good-humoured radical. She sent us to life drawing classes at the local art college. She took us to galleries in London. She bought prints by contemporary artists to hang in the school (which must be worth quite a bit of money now; I hope the school knows what's under its nose!). And she introduced me to painters and artists I have come to love. One of them was Stanley Spencer.

I remember in one of our first lessons she showed us a copy of Spencer's early painting, *Swan Upping at Cookham*. I liked it immediately, though I didn't know why.

The paintings that we are looking at in this book are all by Stanley Spencer. He made his name around the time of the First World War. If you want to see some of the most remarkable examples of his paintings, go to the Sandham Memorial Chapel[1] at Burghclere, just off the A34, south of Newbury. It is an English Sistine chapel – only more glorious! The panels on either side of the chapel tell the story of Spencer's war experiences as an orderly, a stretcher bearer and, latterly, as an infantryman with the Berkshire Rifles. At the east end of the chapel is one of the most astonishing paintings of the twentieth century: *Resurrection of the Soldiers*, the first of several vast paintings where Spencer portrays the great Christian promise of the resurrection.

Spencer is probably best remembered for the many paintings in which he relocated the Christian story to his beloved village of Cookham. This picturesque Thames-side village in Berkshire was where Spencer was born, where he lived for the great majority of his life, and where he died. His most famous painting, which can sometimes be seen in Tate Britain in London, is again of the resurrection, but this time it is taking place in Cookham churchyard.

There are paintings of Christ carrying his cross up Cookham High Street, sharing a last supper in Cookham malthouse, and preaching at Cookham regatta. There is a marvellous little gem

of a gallery in Cookham where his paintings and other memorabilia connected with his life can be seen.[2] He is, without doubt, one of the most important figures in twentieth-century English painting.

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Of course, I didn't know any of this, nor the intense spiritual reality that Spencer located in everyday events, like swans being carried up the High Street, when, aged about 16, I saw the painting of swan upping for the first time. What appealed to me about it was its boldness, and the strange and satisfying patterns that Spencer saw between the outstretched necks of the swans and the arms of the men carrying the boats. I liked the way we looked down upon the scene. I was intrigued by a woman who stood on the bridge over the river, looking away from the action into a distance that we couldn't see. So began a life-long love of Spencer's paintings. Having seen them 'in the flesh' at the Tate Gallery, from then I started looking around for opportunities to see some more.

Thus it was that in 1991 – the centenary of Spencer's birth – I went to the impressive retrospective exhibition of Spencer's work at the Barbican Gallery in London, entitled *The Apotheosis of Love*. This celebration of his work tried to bring together as many of Spencer's religious paintings as possible in an attempt to create a display that echoed the various plans that Spencer

drew up for what he called his 'Church House'. Having completed his work at the Sandham Memorial Chapel and enjoyed the enormous critical acclaim that followed, Spencer now began to conceive other grand and ambitious plans. Throughout his life he cherished in particular a dream of one great architectural scheme where all his paintings were brought together. Jane Alison observes:

> The Church-House dream fuses all of Spencer's preoccupations in an attempt to find a meaningful synthesis of the numinous and the secular, the desiring body and spiritual yearning. Spencer hoped that through the Church-House innocence and experience would be bridged; redemption and spiritual harmony attained.[3]

He imagined a building of many different rooms, with each one devoted to a particular subject, some specifically Christian, such as the Last Day (for Spencer not a day of judgement, but of joyful resurrection), and others, while still spiritual, more obviously human, such as a room focusing on the love mothers have for their children. The plan of the building was both like a church, with a nave and sanctuary and side aisles, and also like Cookham, reflecting the topography of the village. The nave would also be the High Street, with the transepts representing the crossroads at the top of the village; some of the chapels would be the homes of individuals he knew and loved; a side aisle would correspond to the river, and so on.

Spencer never found a patron for this grand project. Consequently landscapes and commissioned portraits became the bread-and-butter paintings that kept body and soul together. He referred to these disparagingly as his 'pot boilers'. Actually, the landscapes are beautiful evocations of the ordered beauty of the English countryside. And because he believed that even the tiniest little thing could bear the imprint of God and therefore the majesty of the whole, each petal of each daisy is lovingly rendered. As Alexandra Harris observes, 'he wanted to paint it all with the worshipful attentiveness of the Pre-Raphaelite, recording every fallen leaf and every blade of grass'.[4] Nevertheless, throughout his life he held on to the hope that this Church House project might one day come into being. It never did.

The genius of the Barbican exhibition was that as far as possible it arranged the paintings within the gallery according to the plans that Spencer himself had envisaged.

One of the rooms contained eight astonishing paintings. It was the Christ in the Wilderness room. Each one was a portrait of Christ: there was Christ praying in the morning, Christ delighting in the flowers of the field, and Christ observing the animals he encounters. None of them appeared to relate directly to the biblical account of the devil tempting Jesus in the wilderness. But they seemed to be describing all the other days that led up to this. 'He was with the wild beasts,' says St Mark's Gospel (Mark 1.13). I found myself encountering a sometimes solitary,

sometimes mournful, sometimes inquisitive Jesus, at home in the wilderness – which in some of the pictures is lushly fertile – yet at the same time far from home in a wilderness that can be stark and forbidding.

Spencer's great biographer Kenneth Pople makes the observation that 'Stanley's Christ is a workmanlike figure fashioned in the image of the medieval master-masons he so admired . . . a powerful stubble bearded Christ quite unlike the conventional Victorian "pale Galilean".'[5] He concludes that Spencer has the ability, one which is so strange to the modern way of looking at things, of 'metamorphosing intense spiritual feeling into galaxies of associations which are given expression in direct and lucid images'.[6] This is certainly true of these pictures, which are some of Spencer's greatest paintings, and among the most important images of Christ produced in the last century.

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Spencer's intentions for how the paintings should be viewed are a little confused. Speaking to his niece Daphne in 1950, he says how he often used to look up at the square panels in the ceiling of the chancel of Cookham church and wish that he could fill them all in some way.[7] He goes on:

> I suddenly seemed to tumble to the idea of trying to do the life of Christ in the Wilderness. I felt that because

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