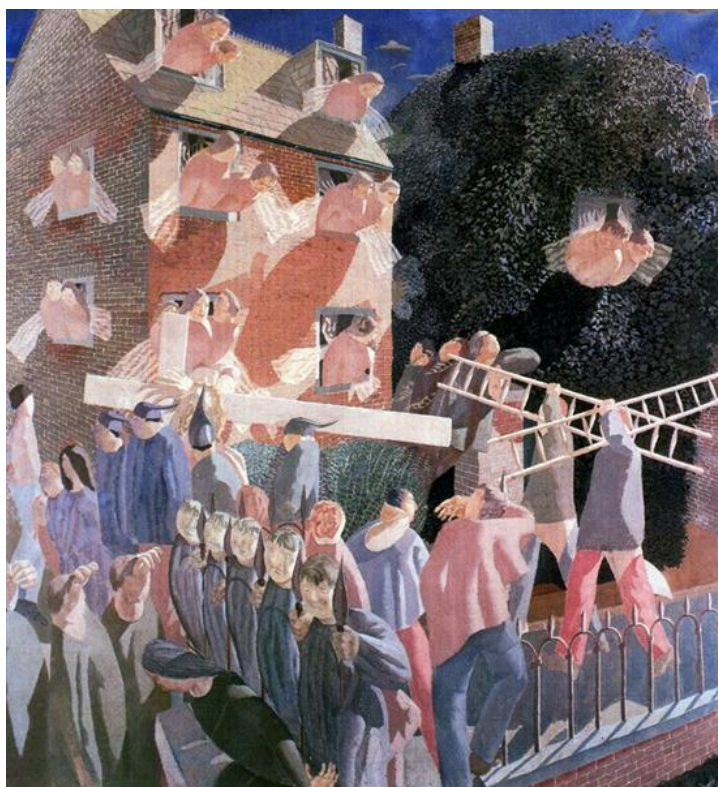


Monday 4th May



If someone said to you that the community in which you live was a 'holy suburb of heaven', I wonder what you'd think? Well this is the lens that artist Stanley Spencer will encourage us to use this week; to look at the everyday things in our homes, streets and communities, and see the as holy things.

Stanley Spencer lived last century in the village of Cookham in Berkshire. His paintings are often domestic in nature with scenes and people familiar to himself, but often infused with religious imagery.

We can see that in this first picture for today '*Christ carrying the cross*'. The scene is Cookham and at first we see a bustling village street. Men with ladders over their shoulders, perhaps ready to clean a window or mend a gutter. People gathering in the street hanging over railings or shielding their eyes from the sun. Neighbours hang out of their windows to see the street below. There is nothing much extraordinary to see... unless we look a little harder. Mirroring the shapes of the ladders, can you spot the mostly hidden Christ carrying his cross? Spencer wants to alert us to the truth that the story of Jesus is always in our midst. And once we've spotted that then we start to see other things differently. The people at the railings become guards with their spears. The billowing net curtains transform the onlookers at the windows into angelic figures. The domestic, becomes the holy, and everyone has their part to play.

Look out of your window today or take a wander around your neighbourhood – see it as a 'holy suburb of heaven'. Where might you spot the stories of God within it?

Tuesday 5th May



Today's picture, *'The Resurrection, Cookham'* (1924), is perhaps one of Stanley Spencer's best known. In it we see within his home churchyard a gentle and sleepy clambering out of graves, as people familiar to Spencer, climb from death into life once again. This is not some horrific zombie affair of the half-dead, but rather remembering Spencer's conviction that Cookham was a 'suburb of heaven', a hopeful image of life after death needing nothing more than the familiar landscape in which Spencer (and we) live. Loved ones casually greet each other, and death becomes a mere extension of life.

Spencer painted himself and his wife Hilda multiple times into this painting. We also have the figure of Christ in the church porch covered with flowers. A boat in the top left hand corner on the river Thames (or river of life as Spencer asserts) sails up steam with a joyful singers and a piano onboard. Spencer wanted this scene to be a scene of peace and happiness.

There are many different versions of this painting, of people raised from the dead in a very unextraordinary way, all asserting heaven as simply an extension of life as we know it now. Only here we see life in full blossom, as the many flowers in this picture show us, rather than the wintery times of life we might know.

The hedgerows, fields and trees are blossoming all around us now. Can you imagine heaven in full bloom?

Wednesday 6th May



In 1910 Haley's comet was visible from earth and created such a light in the sky that Granny Tubb thought it was the end of the world and came out to her gate to pray. Here in this picture, painted some 13 years later Spencer depicts this scene '*Sarah Tubb and the heavenly visitors*' with the angels surrounding her and some small trinkets - 'the things she loved'. On the left we see the portly grocer, a well-known figure from Cookham's high street. His stack of postcards are on the right, with one angel gently touching (blessing?) the image of Cookham church.

It is a tender picture. Here are the tiny things in life that Granny Tubb has loved, the things others may not glance twice at, and yet heaven has gathered them as precious, because they are to her. And here is a women, eyes closed tightly in prayer, not seeing the angels who surround her.

What are the small things in life that are precious to you? Picture yourself as Sarah Tubb. Imagine your precious things (including people) gathered before you. Imagine the angels loving them too.

Thursday 7th May



“I am on the side of angels and of dirt” said Spencer and here in this picture *‘The Dustman or the Lovers’* (1934) we see just that. A dustman has returned home into the arms of his adoring wife. Comically she scoops him up and lifts him heavenwards. In the foreground three children offer him gifts from the rubbish; a teapot, a cabbage leaf and an empty tin can. The children may pay him homage, but the onlooking adults in the picture look aghast at how he is so blatantly revered by his wife.

We may look at this picture painted in 1934 with the eyes of our modern context. Whereas refuse collectors have often been an unappreciated part of society, now perhaps more than ever, their value is being acknowledged as one of the key roles that serves us all. However in Spencer’s painting there is more than this. With the gifts of the children Spencer recognizes that nothing is rubbish in the eyes of God. As part of his creation everything is loved and valued.

Friday 8th May



Today on the 75th anniversary of VE day we look at Spencer's art which came from his experience of both world wars. From 1939-1945 he was commissioned to paint civilian working life at Port Glasgow. You can see more of those pictures online. But the picture I have chosen for reflection today comes from a series of images that Spencer painted for the Sandham Memorial Chapel in Burghclere. The chapel is filled with images of Spencer's experiences during WW1 first in a hospital in Bristol and then of his posting with the Medical Corps to Macedonia. In both places Spencer witnessed the trauma and tragedy of war, yet in his paintings he was determined to redeem the horror by using his familiar religious imagery to point to God. Here we see another version of Spencer's Resurrection paintings. The mass of tumbling crosses signify the great loss of war, but beneath each cross emerges a fallen soldier as hell is transformed into heaven again. The mules, who Spencer was struck with in Macedonia, are also included in this restorative scene. The soldiers greet one another and are attentive no more to war but to the domestic tasks of polishing buttons. At the back of the picture Christ collects their crosses. 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more' *Revelation 21:3-4*

Saturday 9th May



This affectionate picture *'Hilda Welcomed'* (1953) was painted three years after the death of his first wife Hilda. Spencer married Hilda when he was 34 and two daughters, Shirin and Unity, followed. The marriage ended when Spencer struck up a relationship with Cookham resident Patricia Preece. However, over the years that followed, Spencer wrote prolifically to Hilda, sometimes expressing regret at the failure of the marriage, at other times less sensitively expressing all that she had contributed (in his eyes) to its demise. Spencer knew that love in this life was often imperfect, but still believed intensely in its beauty.

Here, in this picture, Spencer imagines a reunion with Hilda after her death. It shows an all encompassing embrace by him,

her children and those who loved her. Perhaps it is a painting that expresses regret. It is a certainly a picture that expresses love.

We are all separated in some way at present from those we love. That may be family or friends we can't see because of current restrictions. It may be someone we still deeply love but are separated from by death. If you were painting this picture for yourself who would you paint in the centre receiving your embrace? As Spencer's other resurrection pictures show, he had a deep hope for the time when people separated would come back together, both in this world and the next. Perhaps today offer a prayer of thanksgiving for the people you have been given to love – and if you have someone at home at present give them a hug!