****

16 November 2011

**Christian Faith and Modern Art:**

**Distinctive Individual Visions**

The Rt Revd Lord Harries

Gresham Professor of Divinity

**Distinctive Individual Visions**

**Chagall (1887-1985**)

**Self portrait with seven fingers-1012/13**

In My Life, written in Moscow when he was 35,, Chagall tells the story of what has happened to him up to that point, when he was about to leave revolutionary Russia to resettle in Paris.[[1]](#footnote-2) Though the basic facts of his life emerge, it is an impressionistic work, lyrical, emotional, expressing the feelings of a confused young man trying to find his way in the world, deliberately contradictory, full of pain and longing.

**Above the town-1917-18**

From his early childhood he was fascinated by the little town of Vitebsk where he had been brought up. “My sad, my joyful town! As a boy I would watch you from our doorstep, childlike. To a child’s eyes you were so clear. When the fence blocked my view I would climb on to a little wooden post. If I still could not see you, I would climb up on the roof…And I would gaze at you as long as I liked. There in Pokrovakaja Street, I was born for the second time.”[[2]](#footnote-3) The sights he saw as a boy, which were reinforced when he went back to Vitebsk in 1914 after a period in Paris, and they became the most fundamental images of his art.

**I and the village-1911**

 He cannot help noticing the Kosher butcher “And you, little cow, naked and crucified, you are dreaming in heaven. The glittering knife has raised you to the skies.”[[3]](#footnote-4)

**The green violinist-1923/4**

 He hears his uncle and others playing their violins “My head floats about the room on its own. Transparent ceiling. Clouds and blue stars steal in along with the smell of the fields, the stable and the birds.” [[4]](#footnote-5)

**The Praying Jew, 1914**

**The Feast of the Tabernacles, 1916**

**Elijah**

**Solitude, 1933**

Vitebsk is full of synagogues, and religion was fundamental to the life of his family, both his grandfather and father being very devout. The yearly cycle of religions feasts, like **Taberbacles** and Passover was very much living experiences. At Passover his father tells him to open the door to let **Elijah** in “ And where is Elijah and his white chariot? Is he still waiting in the courtyard, perhaps, to enter the house in the guise of a wretched old man, a hunchbacked beggar, with a pack on his back and a stick in his hand? ‘Here I am. Where is my glass of wine?’” [[5]](#footnote-6) Elijah was to be one of his central images in his later work. This closed joyous world of Hasidic Judaism was to leave Chagall with an intense mystical feel for life, together with a sense of sadness at his destruction.

**Paris through a window 1913**

Chagall’s mother bribed a teacher at the Russian School with 50 roubles to take her son, the first step out of the closed world of his childhood , and then he won a scholarship to a local art school. But the plaster casts of classical heads he was expected to copy meant nothing to him, neither did the fashionable art of the time, cubism and all formalism.[[6]](#footnote-7) From the first he was conscious of himself as being different, shy, isolated with a strong conviction of how he wanted to paint. Encouraged by some, rejected by others, struggling both with extreme poverty and as a Jew, he moved first to St Petersburg and then to Paris where he found artistic liberation in the galleries and artistic life of the city. This art was the expression of someone caught up in the ecstasy of life, always wanting to break through to something, he knew not what. “I want to stay wild, cover myself with leaves, shout, weep, pray.” [[7]](#footnote-8) “The essential thing is art, painting, a painting different from the painting everyone else does. “But what sort? Will God or someone give me the power to breathe my sigh into my canvases, the sigh of prayer and sadness, the prayer of salvation, of rebirth?” [[8]](#footnote-9)

**Over Vitebsk 1914**

Churches were prominent in Vitebsk, and one near him particularly drew him “I always enjoy painting that church and that little hill again in my pictures.” [[9]](#footnote-10) Clearly the presence of those churches, and their icons has something to do with the fact that later he was to use Christian as well as Jewish imagery in his art. He said he wanted to ask the Chief Rabbi some questions, including “what he thought about Christ, whose pale face had long been troubling me.”[[10]](#footnote-11)

Before leaving for Paris he recollects “I roamed the streets, I searched, I prayed. ‘God, Thou who hidest in the clouds, or behind the cobbler’s house, lay bare my soul, the aching soul of a stammering boy, show me my way. I do not want to be like all the others.; I want to see a new world.’ In answer the town seems to snap like the strings of a violin, and all the inhabitants begin walking above the earth, leaving their usual places. Familiar figures install themselves on the roofs and settle down there. All the colours spill out, dissolve into wine, and liquor gushes out of my canvases. I am very happy with all of you. But…Witebsk, I am forsaking you. Stay on your own with your herrings.”[[11]](#footnote-12)

There is an interesting contrast with James Joyce who in Portrait of an artist as a young Man describes how he left “the pale service of the altar” to follow the “call of life”. For Chagall the mystical Judaism of his childhood is so much part of him it remains fundamental to the way he sees and feels about life and therefore for what he paints and how he paints it. Even in Paris the feelings he had in Vitebsk stayed with him. “Oh! If only I could trace my way in the sky with my arms and legs, riding on the stone Chimera of NotreDame!” [[12]](#footnote-13)

**The Birthday, 1915**

**The three candles, 1938-40**

After Paris he went back to Vitebsk intending to stay a few weeks and where he painted everything he saw, but because of the war, he turned out to be eight years. He had sometime in the army, luckily working in an office. After the revolution, he was appointed commissar of an art school in Vitebsk. However his art did not really fit what was required[[13]](#footnote-14) and this and the ensuing chaos prompted him to leave for Paris again and then the United States. However, whilst in Vitebsk he married his love, Bella, who was to be an inspiration for so many of his paintings. She was from a wealthy family who disapproved of the marriage, though one who lost everything in the revolution. “I only had to open my window, and blue air, love and flowers entered with her. Dressed all in white or all in black, she had long been flying over my canvases, guiding my art.”[[14]](#footnote-15) We see that protective, cherishing love here threatened by events in Europe.

**Lazarus 1910**

**Golgotha 1912**

**Calvary 1912**

Chagall began combing Jewish and Christian iconography early in his career, as here where a distinctively Christian figure is combined with the symbols of a Jewish burial. But it was with Golgotha (the finished sketch is called **Calvary** ) that he firmly established himself in the avant-garde, for the style is clearly related to both cubism and another movement of the time, described as “Orphism”. [[15]](#footnote-16)A very unusual depiction is shows Christ on the cross as a child. Chagall wrote “The symbolic figure of Christ had always been very familiar to me and I was determined to give form to it in the guise imagined by a young heart. I wanted to show Christ as an innocent child.”[[16]](#footnote-17) This is strengthened by the poem his friend Cendrars wrote dedicated to him, which has the lines Christ/he’s Christ himself/he passed his childhood on the cross.” The picture has been interpreted both against the background of Yiddish stories of the time and more universal symbols, indicated perhaps by the boat, which might be the ferry of charon. The man running away with the ladder has been seen as Judas.

**The White Crucifixion 1938**

“The White Crucifixion” was painted in 1938 after he had travelled in Europe and experienced the rise of Nazi brutality. In June 1938 1500 Jews were taken to Concentration Camps and in that month and in August synagogues in Munich and in Nuremberg were destroyed and pogroms carried out. The picture was originally even more specific then it is now, for before over-painting, the old man at the lower left-hand side had “Ich bin Jude “ (I am a Jew) written on the plaque which he wears round his neck. The painting shows in vivid details, in an iconic way, the destruction of the closed but joyous Jewish world he had known in Russia as a child. At the bottom of the Cross is the Menorah, the seven branch candlestick of Judaism, though here, it seem, with only six candles on it and only five alight. Then going around in an anti-clockwise direction, a mother hugs her child to her chest as she flees the destruction. Above her is Torah scroll with white light streaming from it and a figure stepping over the light. This refers to a famous Hasidic tale, when a Bishop ordered the Torah to be burnt. Rabbi Israel prayed and his prayers pierced to the palace of the Messiah. As a result the Bishop fell into a fit, which frightened those who intended to burn the scrolls. A white light from the scroll, symbolising the Word of God, spreads to the Cross and is traversed by a green clad figure carrying a bundle. This figure appears in a number of Chagall’s paintings. He has been interpreted as the Jewish wanderer of Yiddish tradition, begging because of the hardship of his people and fleeing pogroms. But there is also a more optimistic interpretation, in which the figure is seen as Elijah, who in times of tribulation brings help, appearing in all kinds of disguises. It would seem to be primarily Elijah to which Chagall is referring for in his autobiography he describes the custom of the day of the Atonement of opening the doors to let in the prophet Elijah in the words, already quoted above. Above Elijah a synagogue is being burnt by a Nazi brownshirt, whilst behind Nazi flags can be seen. The sacred furniture and books are thrown out into the street. Above the door are two lions, which often appear in Eastern European synagogues, though here there may also be a personal reference, for Chagall’s first name Marc has in Christian symbolism, the lion as his image.At the top Jewish figures lament and flee whilst on the left of the picture as we look at it, a Jewish Shetl (village) is burnt by Communist troops with red flags. Flames flare from the roofs and the homeless sit on the ground outside. Below this scene there are some trying to escape in a boat – to Palestine. At the bottom left Jewish figures clutching the sacred scrolls run from the destruction. Dominating the picture in the centre is the figure of Christ crucified. But this is very much a Jewish Christ. Over his head written in Hebrew are the words King of the Jews, whilst round his body is wrapped a Jewish prayer shawl. A great shaft of white light comes down from heaven and a ladder is propped against the Cross. The ladder, the ladder of Jacob’s vision reaching to heaven, was a favourite motif of Chagall which appears in a number of his paintings. He once wrote a poem on the subject:

Lying down like Jacob asleep

I have dreamed a dream

An angel seizes me and hoists me up on the ladder

The souls of the dead are singing.

It is truly remarkable that it is the figure of Jesus on the Cross which is at the centre of his picture. The suffering of the Jewish people is summed up in a Christian icon. The agony of Jesus is seen as the agony of all Jewish people. Chagall painted the crucified Christ in a number of his paintings, even one of the Exodus. This is startling, even shocking when we remember that for many Jews the Cross has been a symbol of Christian oppression of Jewish people. Many Jews have, quite understandably, felt very uneasy about Chagall’s paintings that incorporate the crucified one. It is also difficult to see how, in the light of the Holocaust and our greater awareness of how traditional Christian anti-Judaism prepared the way for it, any Jew today could use this symbol. But Chagall did and he was not alone amongst Jews of his time. The most important sculptor in Russia at the turn of the century was a Jew, Marc Antokolsky whose letters reveal how he struggled to reconcile a Jewish and Christian viewpoint. Antokolsky accepted Jesus in the line of Biblical prophets and welcomed the love which he believed he showed, without accepting the doctrinal tenets of the Christian religion. When Chagall was studying in St Petersburg it was hoped by his Jewish patrons that he would become a second Antokolsky. In one of his letters Antokolsky wrote:

For several weeks now I have been working on “Christ”, or as I call him,“Great Isaiah”. Jews may have renounced him, but I solemnly admit that he was and died as a Jew for truth and brotherhood …The Jews think I’m Christian and the Christians curse me for being a dirty Jew (Zhid). The Jews rebuke me: “Why did I do Christ”, and the Christians rebuke: “Why did I do Christ like that?”[[17]](#footnote-18)

What is perhaps most remarkable about this picture is the white: the white light coming from the flames of the burning Torah, mingling with the white shaft coming from heaven onto the Cross and suffusing the whole picture. From one point of view this is smoke, all part of the terrible conflagration and destruction. But it is also the white light of the Torah, the eternal Word of God which stands through all things. There is a stillness in the centre, focussed on the figure on the Cross, which the terrible scenes cannot destroy. From a Christian point of view, that figure on the Cross is God himself sharing in the agony of his people during the terrible events of the Nazi period. From Chagall’s point of view, in this incredibly brave Jewish use of Christian imagery, this is a symbol of Jewish faithfulness to the Torah even in the midst of utter destruction, a faithfulness which stands for ever, because it is founded on God’s word.

**The Crucifixion 1940**

**The Martyr 1940**

**The Martyr 1970**

**Yellow Crucifixion 1943**

**Apocalypse en lilas, capriccio, 1945**

**The painter and Christ 1951**

**In front of the picture 1968-71**

Chagall continued to paint scenes of Christ on the cross linked to Jewish suffering during the 1940’s. **Apocalypse en lilas, capriccio** is a particularly painfully felt image, depicted when the few who survived the concentration camps emerged. There are scenes of Jewish suffering on the right. The Nazi has no hand, and a tail embraced the woman. The Jewish Jesus in a shawl has hips suggestive of the wives he loved. The clock indicates the end of time. The familiar ladder appears. As mentioned above he seemed to identified the crucified Christ with humanity as a whole and with himself, and here it is made more specific. The artist, with an animals head is looking at a self portrait of the artist on the cross. But he is also looking on from the side with his beloved Bella, and behind his parents look on. His father had spent a life of hard drudgery carrying heavy herring barrels. “Everything about my father seemed sad and full of enigma. An inaccessible image.” Yet even so he would sometimes break into “a wan smile. What smile! Where did it come from?” [[18]](#footnote-19) By 1922 both his parents were dead, and he reflected then on his mother as well as his father. “A lake of suffering, hair prematurely grey, eyes-a world of tears, a soul that hardly exists, a brain that is no more. What is there then?...... “How can I beg you, beg God through you for a shred of happiness, of joy?” [[19]](#footnote-20)

**The Exodus 1952-66**

On the right there are scenes from Biblical history, whilst on the left are pictures of contemporary hardship, perhaps in part reflecting the founding of the state of Israel and Jews gathering to it from persecution in places like Russia. Overall, instead of Moses, who is a smaller figure on the right, there is an iconic Christ leading his people whoever they are and wherever they are.

**Nativity**

**Sacrifice of Isaac**

**Hospitality of Abraham**

**Jacob’s ladder**

Chagall did a good number of drawing and paintings on Biblical themes, some of them key images for both Jews and Christians.

**Stained glass**

**Mainz**

**Chichester Cathedral**

**Tudely**

After World War II Chagall was much in demand for stained glass in Germany, France, Switzerland, America and Jerusalem. . He was commissioned by a number of churches, including Mainz Cathedral and by Dean Hussey for Chichester Cathedral. One of the most remarkable and accessible of his works in glass is Tudely Church, not far from Tonbridge Wells. The d’Avigdor Goldsmid’s who lived there very sadly lost a daughter in a sailing accident and they commissioned Chagall to do the big East Window. It shows the girl drowning, then carried on her favourite horse past a crucifixion . When he came for the blessing of this window, he was so impressed by the space inside this church that he offered to do all the side windows free. The result is that this small church, totally unprepossessing on the outside, is a veritable heaven when you go inside.

**Cecil Collins (1908-1989)**

**Self portrait, 1944**

Collins was born in Plymouth to parents who had moved there from Cornwall. His father originally had a good job as an engineer in a laundry and Collins said his childhood was exceptionally happy. However the recession forced his father to work as a labourer on the roads. Cecil had to leave school at 15 and was sent to work as a mining engineer. He hated it and left, determined to become an artist. He was offered free drawing classes at the Plymouth School of Art and then managed to win scholarship to the Royal College of Art. There he met his wife who was to be a lifelong companion, support and muse, and it is her face which influences so many of his paintings.

**The artist and his wife, 1939**

**Head of an Angel, 1987**

**The Angel of flowing light, 1968**

Angels were a major theme of his paintings throughout his life. For him they were one of the archetypes, the primordial images which belong to all cultures and religions, and which manifest the divine to us. For him they were not just images from the collective unconscious, as Jung believed, but “the winged thoughts of the divine mind.” They are part of a universal spiritual reality, that paradise from which we have been expelled and to which we long to return.

**The Promise, 1936**

**The Joy of the world, 1937**

**Hymn, 1953**

After the Royal College Collins had critical and financial success with his own exhibition in 1935 and then as part of a surrealist exhibition. Looking at the biomorphic forms in his pictures it is easy to see why he was identified as a surrealist, but he quickly distanced himself from them as they did from him. As he put it “I do not believe in surrealism, precisely because I do believe in surreality, universal and eternal above and beyond the world of intellect and senses; but not beyond the reach of humility and the hunger of the human heart.”[[20]](#footnote-21) He felt increasingly out of sympathy not only with surrealism but with the geometric art of the time, and artistically isolated. He did however move to Buckinghamshire for a period where he made contact with Eric Gill, who introduced him to the work of Jacques Maritain, and David Jones. Although he did not share either Gills religious beliefs or his aesthetic position, he wrote that “Gill had more understanding of the desperate position of the creative mind in our time than most people in England.”[[21]](#footnote-22)

**The sleeping fool, 1943**

**Head of a fool, 1974**

**The pilgrim fool, 1942**

**Fool and flower, 1944**

In 1935, artistically isolated, he made the most important move of his life, to Dartington Hall in Devon. First of all he lived nearby, sharing its life, but then during the war, when he took over the teaching of art, into the hall itself. The teaching was important, because he found he had a natural talent for it in a way that developed the innate creativity of his students and which later when he moved back to London, made him one of the most popular and revered teachers at the Royal College of Art. Secondly as he has written, it was there “that I painted and drew many of my best works. This period..was one of the most fruitful of my creative life, not only in writing for I was also writing a lot, clarifying my thoughts.”[[22]](#footnote-23) It was his wife Elizabeth who first drew a fool, but thereafter it became one of his most fundamental images. The clown or fool had of course been a central image for Roualt, and the idea was in the air at the time. As has been written, “It was in the summer of 1939 that he came to see that what he most valued in himself was his childlike heart, and that the true purpose of his keen analytical mind was the defend his heart, not to betray it.”[[23]](#footnote-24) As Collins himself wrote “The Fool is the poetic imagination of life, as inexplicable as the essence of life itself. This poetic life, born in all human beings, lives in them while they are children, but it is killed in them when they grow up by the abstract mechanization of contemporary society.”[[24]](#footnote-25) Not surprisingly Collins was drawn to the teaching of Jesus that to enter the Kingdom of Heaven we must become as little children with their openness and capacity for simple wonder at the world around us.

**The Agony in the Garden**

**Christ before the judge**

**The crucifixion**

**Resurrection**

**Angel paying homage to Christ**

**The resurrection of the Dead**

After the war, with no fixed home for a period, Collins had some commercial success in London but the artistic climate was becoming colder for his type of painting. It was during this difficult time from 1952-6 that Collins turned to more traditional Christian images. He had, however, and not unexpectedly, already written “The greatest fool in history was Christ. The great fool was crucified by the commercial Pharisees, by the authority of the respectable, and by the mediocre official culture of the philistines. And has not the church crucified Christ more deeply and subtly by its hypocrisy than any pagan? This divine fool, whose immortal compassion and holy folly placed a light in the dark hands of the world.[[25]](#footnote-26) In **The Agony in the Garden** Christ has the same half moon face seen in **The Sleeping Fool.** The Chalice is not just the cup of suffering of traditional iconography for it appears in that unusual shape in an early picture of the artist and his wife where it clearly stands for the cup of inspiration and love running over. That shape is reiterated in the shape of the bodies of Christ and his disciples. Collins painted two versions of **Christ before the judge.** In the first, done in 1954, Christ is meek and submissive. In the second, done two years later, the figure of Pilate has become much fiercer, now with bared teeth and reflecting Aztec and African sources. He represents the mechanism of law against Christ, now stratiated by the flagellation, and wearing a large crown of thorns. But Christ’s eyes are wide open, revealing a strong, serene and eternal order that remains untouched by the harshness.

**The crucifixion of Christ** contrasts the jagged cruel lines on the right as we look, with the fools and jongleurs of God dancing on the left, on whom Christ looks with sweet favour. Collins had been earlier struck by a remark of Goethe that it was a disaster to have an image such as that of the crucifixion at the heart of a civilisation. Perhaps most striking of all is his image of R**esurrection**, where Christ as fool soars upward like a *tourbillon* of light, the crown of thorns transformed into a crown of glory. During this time he also introduced a theme of his own with

**Angel paying homage to Christ** as well as an amazing **Resurrection of the Dead.** It was resurrection that was important to him, resurrection to new consciousness, life in the eternal even now.

**The Icon of Divine Light, 1973**

**The Mystery of the Holy Spirit, 1985**

Collins was a highly popular teacher but his art was out of kilter with the prevailing taste for American abstractionism. He was quite clear that art ought to have a theme, a content and could not consist simply of pure form. However, there were those who responded to his work, and it gradually obtained some recognition. A high point for him was when he was commissioned by Walter Hussey, the Dean of Chichester (who had commissioned Graham Sutherland and Henry Moore when he was Vicar of St Matthew’s, Northampton, and had already commissioned Sutherland for Chichester). At first Collins was unwilling to undertake the commission but soon saw it as a challenge to move beyond a purely personal vision of God to one which would engage a wide variety of the public. On the frame of the altar are the words from Revelation “Behold, I make all things new”. It was an image that nicely brought together traditional Christian themes about God as light, with his own neo-Platonic understanding. One of the canons of the Cathedral at the time was Keith Walker, who when he became Vicar of St Michael and All Angel’s, Basingstoke, commissioned Collins to do windows for his church. The great west window shows God as Holy Spirit, again with a familiar light and sun imagery. More distinctive are the side windows on the theme of The Eye of the Heart. At the dedication service for these in 1985 Collins said that he had drawn on a Sufi tradition that in all our hearts there is an eye. “We are sleep-walkers, walking in the nightmare of the world. All real culture and real education are concerned with the existential knowledge of the opening of the Eye of the Heart-the one great basic need of our education and civilisation….It is the Eye that sees the world of angels, for like sees like, like attracts like.[[26]](#footnote-27)

**Fool and angel entering city, 1969**

**Wounded Angel, 1967**

**The music of Dawn, 1988**

After this section on the more explicitly Christian imagery in Collins work, it is important to note what was even more fundamental for him, which for short hand can be called neo-Platonism. Platonism is based on the conviction that there is an eternal order to which we can have access through the three great absolutes of goodness, truth and beauty. There is a sense that in this world we are trapped or fallen, and our task is to recover our lost paradise through union with this spiritual dimension to life. It is not surprising that from the earliest days of Christianity Platonism in one form or another has been seen as a friend and ally of the Christian faith and has often been taken into and merged with it. It is this which lies behind Collin’s paintings of fools, angels, sunrises and so on. For both Collins and his wife this view imparted a lightness, a joy and optimism about life. Once asked to sum up his attitude to life and his art he replied “My face is set towards the dawn.” [[27]](#footnote-28)

**Stanley Spencer, 1891-1959**

**Self portrait**

Spencer trained at the Slade at a time when drawing and clarity of line was emphasised. His cosy, secure childhood reflected in his paintings. Made his living by selling paintings of scenes round Cookham. Increasingly appreciated. He saw beauty in unusual places. This beauty usually had a strong sensual element.

 He also saw the Holy there, as in Sarah Tubb and the Heavenly visitors. Sarah Tubb saw Haley’s comet and taking it to be a sign of the end of the world knelt to pray.

**Villagers and Saints, 1933, University of Hull Art Collection**

In Cookham High Street the children play marbles or sprawl around. An old man looks at his bag of empty beer bottles. Interspersed between them are angels, also observing the marbles, or the beer bottles or just sitting around in the sun. Heaven is on earth and earth is taken up into heaven. Angels and men dancing together is a theme of Botticelli’s nativity. But here, as in so many of Stanley Spencer’s paintings, the earthly is earthly indeed. It is the ordinary, everyday, mundane aspects of life which for him radiated with the divine. Stanley once wrote

*When I lived in Cookham I was disturbed by a feeling of everything being meaningless. Quite suddenly I became aware that everything was full of special meaning, and this made everything holy. The instinct of Moses to take his shoes off when he saw the burning bush was very similar to my feelings. I saw many burning bushes in Cookham. I observed the scared quality in the most unexpected quarters.*

He painted Biblical scenes throughout his life, but again with a strong sensual element.

### Christ Preaching at Cookham Regatta, 1959, Cookham

Here all is crowds and jollity. The man in the front is carrying mops and assorted boat gear, practical tasks to be done, which were always important to Stanley. Christ sits in a wicker chair on the ferry a little way off shore. Behind the ferry is a row of punts. It is a picture based on the scene in Mark Chapter 4 where it is recorded that the crowds were so great that Christ got into a boat where he sat and from which he talked. The crowd gathered at the water’s edge. Here Christ has bare feet, a long coat and hat, like a chasidim but sitting in a basket chair, leaning forward with such excitement that he has to hold himself in his chair to stop himself going forward. Children and little people are in the ferry. The scene took him back to his youth when literally thousands of people came down from London to join locals in the exuberance of the regatta. To Stanley the regatta was a symbol for the fulfillment of everyone’s wishes.

*If it is carnal wishes, they will be fulfilled; if it is creative wishes, they will be fulfilled. If it is sexual desires or picture making inspiration that is to be satisfied, then Christ will heave the capstan round . . . all will be met. Everything will be fulfilled in the symbol of the regatta. The complete worshipfulness and loveableness of* ***everything*** *to do with love is meant in this regatta scene. In that marvelous atmosphere nothing can go wrong.*

The children on the ferry are, he said “like little frogs which have jumped accidentally into punts from the riverbank”. We are reminded of the words of Jesus that we must become like little children and that the babes and sucklings cry out in praise.

Many scenes of Holy Week, this one of Last Supper set in plain Cookham building..

**Christ Carrying the Cross**

This picture, painted in 1920 is in the Tate Gallery. The light seems to come from high up on the right as we look. The men on the bottom left are shielding their faces from it. The light casts strong shadows on the houses from the people. The light seems pale, almost unearthly. The sky is not bright blue, is it moonlight, or early morning light? The colours too are interesting with their subdued, pastel shades.The people are looking out of windows, the net curtains are blowing out rather like angels' wings as the people look all about. The presence of the ladders derives from what actually happened when Stanley Spencer was working on this composition. He saw workmen carrying ladders across the houses and this provided, as he put it "the reality of everyday life" and enabled him to locate the **via crucis** in Cookham high street. The ladders are a visual echo of the shape of the cross. Women with doll-like faces are by the railings, which are in the shape of sharp spears suggesting violence.Christ himself is hidden under the cross whilst men with caps, perhaps bricklayers with hods, and a slight sense of Klu Klux Klan menace. Overall there is a sense of people being out and about and busy, with the procession to the crucifixion hardly noticed, lost amidst ordinary, everyday things. Yet it is the light that indicates something strange taking place, perhaps it is one of those shafts of light that you get sometimes just before or after a storm.

The Tate Gallery originally mistitled this picture “Christ **Bearing** his Cross” which intensely irritated Stanley Spencer. As he said, the false title implied

*A sense of suffering which was not my intention. I particularly wished to convey the relationship between the carpenters behind him carrying the ladders and Christ in front carrying the cross. Each doing their job of work and doing it just like workmen . . . Christ was not doing* ***a*** *job or* ***his*** *job, but* ***the*** *job.*

Again, when Stanley Spencer’s dealer thought of cataloguing the painting as “Christ Carrying **His** Cross” Stanley was furious. The cross was for him universal. We all have to carry the cross.

**The Crucifixion**

This was the last major painting by Stanley Spencer before his death in 1959. It was painted for the chapel of a school funded by brewers, hence the brewers cap on the men nailing Christ to the cross. The painting caused a public outcry and when Stanley Spencer went down to talk to the school about the meaning of the painting his remarks would hardly have helped. He told the boys "It is your governors and you who are still nailing Christ to the cross".In this painting we stand as spectators on a pile of rubbish in Cookham high street, with other spectators looking out of their windows. Mary is spread-eagled on the ground as though thrown by a wave. A schoolboy ties the legs and there is a grotesque abuse from one thief. The brewers men are using all the force they can muster to bang home the nails. Storm clouds gather above and Christ looks up, accepting of his fate.

It is all about the “fresh realisation of the possibilities of heaven in this life”.

**World War I**

After a long period of agonizing he joined the RAMC serving first as a hospital orderly, then in Macedonia and then with the Royal Berkshires. **The Resurrection of Soldiers, painted between 1927 and 1932, Sandham Memorial Chapel**

The Sandham Memorial Chapel was commissioned by Mr and Mrs Behrend in memory of their son who died in Macedonia. It is reminiscent of the Arena Chapel in Padua by Giotto. There are however major differences. The central Christ has been replaced by two resurrecting mules turning their heads, perhaps reminiscent of childhood memories of horses in the Vale of Health in Hampstead. Christ is not there as judge but as compassionate receiver of the soldiers’ crosses. In the memorial chapel at Burghclere, based on his experiences as a wartime hospital orderly, we have scenes of scrubbing floors, serving tea, making beds and washing furniture. Each activity is evoked in a way which is at once affectionate and affirmative. In this resurrection Kenneth Pople maintains that the soldier on the right lower side polishing brasses corresponds to Giotto’s depiction of hell at the same place. But there is no place for hell in Spencer’s scheme of things. Furthermore, ordinary physical tasks, however mundane, were for him part of the glory of things, provided their spiritual meaning can be discerned. As he put it, referring to his time in the hospital “I did not despise any job I was set to do, and did not mind doing anything so long as I could recognise in it some sort of integral connection with the spiritual meaning that demanded to be clarified”. He was much influenced in his attitude to work by some words of St Augustine about God being always at work and always at rest, which he thought of as God always fetching and carrying but with an inner serenity.In this picture the driver wakes between two mules, a scene perhaps based upon Stanley waking after the nightmares and taken to sleep between his parents. A little Christ is receiving the crosses of the soldiers. Below him a small Stanley gazes at a cross flattened wagon.

**World War II**

Spencer went as a War artist to Port Glasgow on the Clyde, 15 miles down river from Glasgow itself. He was fascinated by the communal life of the city. “ I liked it here being lost in the jungle of human beings, a rabbit in a vast rabbit warren.” Also, the process of production. “I was as disinclined to disturb them as I would disturb a service in church”. Did preliminary sketches on a roll of toilet paper, “The roll”. These fabulous paitings of shipbuilders at work finished off in studio in Epsom. Well received in London and New York. (**Three restored ones can be seen this summer in the Stanley Spencer Gallery in Cookham)**

**The Port Glasgow Resurrection Series**

After describing the vivid life of the city he wrote that it

*Seemed to me full of some inward surging meaning, a kind of joy, that I longed to get closer to and understand to in some way fulfil; and I felt that all this life and meaning was somehow grouped round and in some way led up to the cemetery on the hill outside the town…and I began to see the Post Glasgow Resurrection that I have drawn and painted in the last five years.*

*I seemed to see that it rose in the midst of a great place and that all in the plain were resurrecting and moving towards it…I knew that the resurrection would be directed from the hill.*

Winston Churchill “If this is the resurrection give me eternal sleep”. Spencer *The contemplation of resurrection brings out what I love in ordinary life and vica versa.*

*All things are redeemable and I paint them in their redeemed state.*

………………………………………………………………………

The intensity of Stanley Spencer’s feelings can be gauged by a remark he once made, perhaps about his friends the Slessors.

*I remember having some friends I was always meeting in the evenings and did not see anything special about them until one day I went to have breakfast with them, and seeing them at breakfast gave me wonderful feelings about them. I was so overcome that I could not eat my breakfast, not even bread and butter.*

#### For Stanley Spencer this feeling was above all that of love about which he once said

*Love is the essential power in the creation of art and love is not a talent. Love reveals and more accurately describes the nature and meaning of things than any mere lecture on technique can do. And it establishes once and for all time the final and perfect* ***identity*** *of every created thing.*

This love not only establishes the identity of every created thing but raises that thing into a harmonious relationship with all other things and people. If we believe with Thomas Aquinas that grace does not destroy but fulfill nature then in Stanley Spencer’s paintings we see grace at work on our disfigured world, transforming human relationships into a holy communion of the divine and the human, the divine expressed in and through the human, the spiritual in and through the physical, the holy in and through the mundane, the beautiful in and through what sometimes strikes us in his pictures as the ungainly or ugly. For all was embraced in his vision and raised into a heaven of here and now.

**Christ in the Wilderness Series**

Some of the painting in this series painted in 1939/40, a time of great personal unhappiness when he lived on his own in Swiss Cottage. But it was also a time of great spiritual awareness. “I felt there was something wonderful in the life I was living. I loved it all because it was God and me all the time.” These great paintings now in the Gallery of Western Australia in Perth.

For those who want to see Spencer’s paintings two places not to be missed are the Stanley Spencer Gallery in Cookham and the Sandham Memorial Chapel, at Burghclere, just South of Newbury. (Daylight hours only, no electric light)

©Lord Harries, Gresham College 2011

1. Marc Chagall, My Life, Peter Owen, 1965. pback 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. *Ibid.*p.11 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. *ibid.* p.20 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. *ibid.* p.25 and 118 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. *ibid.* p.45 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. My life p.69 and 111 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. *ibid.* p.54 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. *ibid*. p.69 and 111 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. *ibid.* p.79 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. *ibid.* p.126 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. My Iife, p.95 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. *ibid.* p.114 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. *ibid.* p.137 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. *ibid.* p.121 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Susan Compton, Chagall, Royal Academy of Arts, 1985. p.19, 174/5 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. Quoted by Jackie Wullschlager, Chagall:love and exile Allen Lane, 2008, p.166 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Royal Academy of Arts, London, 1985 Exhibition catalogue, **Chagall**, p16-19, 214 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. My life p.12 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. *ibid* p.16 andp.27 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. Cecil Collins, The Vision of the Fool,(1974) p.26 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. Gill, 1947, p.15 n.1 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. Cecil Collins, The Dartington Years, 1936-43, Dartington Hall Trust, 1997, p.7 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. William Anderson, Cecil Collins: the quest for the great happiness, Barrie and Jenkins, 1988, p.51, [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. Cecil Collins, The Vision of the Fool, 1947, reprinted 1981, Anthony Kedros, p.17 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. *ibid.* p.18 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. Quoted by Anderson from Collins’ manuscript. P.109 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. Anderson, p.110 [↑](#footnote-ref-28)