

Chichester Cathedral Triduum 2019

Easter Vigil

The Resurrection at Cookham, 1924-27



Christ is risen! Alleluia!

This night we proclaim that, in his abundant mercy, God has triumphed over the powers of Sin and Death; he was won for us a new exodus; a new exodus that for the earliest Christians found its most natural language in that of a new creation. *For as in Adam all die, writes Paul, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.* The eighteenth-century poet Christopher Smart (1722-71), whose own life became something of a disaster area as a result of financial error and probable mental illness, evokes in his hymn 'Awake, Arise, Lift up your voice' precisely this sense that God has, in the resurrection, renewed all things:

*His enemies had sealed the stone
As Pilate gave them leave,
Lest dead and friendless and alone
He should their skill deceive*

*O Dead arise! O Friendless stand
By Seraphim adored!
O Solitude again command
Your host from heaven restored!*

It's a glorious hymn to our Redeemer who has delivered us from the power of sin to isolate us and damage our relationships, as much as with God as each other.

Something of this community and creativity is beautifully rendered in Stanley Spencer's enormous painting of the Resurrection (found in your orders of service). When Winston Churchill saw it, he's reputed to have said, 'if that's resurrection, then give me eternal sleep'. I think he wasn't a morning person, but I wonder how you imagine the resurrection: that day, that final day, when 'in an instant, in the twinkling of an eye...the trumpet shall sound, the dead shall be raised incorruptible and we shall be changed.' (1 Corinthians 15.52).

What Spencer paints, this spring morning in a churchyard, is rather different from the Doom paintings we can still see in some medieval churches - think of St Thomas's in Salisbury. Here, instead the dead rise amiably from their tombs, Spencer's own mother putting on his father's coat from their double grave and his fiancée, Hilda, rubbing her eyes as she awakes in her nightdress. The risen board steamers onto the Thames - what Cookham called the 'River of Life' - ferrying them to paradise.

Spencer captures here the way in which, through Christ, we are reunited with God and each other: in the tender embrace of husband and wife; in the delight of Spencer's love for Hilda; in the beauty of creation and re-creation. As the theologian Miroslav Volf has written,

'The Last Judgment is a *social* event; it happens not simply to individuals but between people. Human beings are linked by many ties to neighbours near and far, both in space and in time. We wrong each other and rightfully have cases against each other. At the Last Judgment God will settle all these 'cases' - which involve all offences against God, too, since any wrongdoing against a neighbour is also an offence against God. *Ultimately, God will right all wrongs.*'

In Spencer's painting, as in our Gospel, our minds are drawn from the shame, despair and exclusion of Eden to this new garden, in which once again, God dwells in our midst. Whereas God had walked with Adam and Eve in the 'cool of the evening breeze' - it is now a fresh morning, on the first day of the week, in which the women discover that Christ has risen: a new creation, a new beginning, a new family. By God's work on the Cross, we are found in Christ and he in us; he is now to be found in our midst by His Spirit, rejoicing over us with gladness (as Zephaniah puts it)...as, too, in Cookham where a feminine Christ sits in the church porch, his hair ruffled by the Father as he cradles resurrected infants.

God in our midst, dwelling in us by His Spirit, drawing us into the new family of the Church where God's judgment upon Sin and Death is made real. To believe

¹ Miroslav Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World* (Grand Rapids, 2006), 180; quoted in F. Rutledge, *The Crucifixion*, 600.

in the Resurrection is not to work out the mechanics but *to enter into* this new reality where the presence of Jesus can be found in the healing of old wounds, in the work of reconciliation, in raising up the fallen, and liberating us from shame and guilt to discover our true vocations as children of God. This *is* the new creation in which, with John, we might proclaim with confidence that verse, so special to Spencer: 'God is Love, and those who live in love, live in God, and God lives in them' (1 John 4.10).

May we this night step boldly into this landscape, this new creation. May we discover the freedom of the children of God, freedom from isolation, freedom from sin, freedom from death. Let us not look for the living among the dead, but fix our gaze on Him who has triumphed and invites us, his friends, to feast with him now.

Brother and sisters, Christ has risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!