

*Stanley Spencer's 'The Resurrection, Cookham':  
A Theological Commentary*

*Jessica Scott*

“The Resurrection, Cookham”, in its presentation of an eschatology which begins in the here and now, embeds a message which speaks of our world and our present as intimately bound with God for eternity. This conception of an eternal, connecting relationship between Creator and creation begins in Spencer’s vision of the world, which leads him to a view of God, which in turn brings him back to himself. What emerges as of ultimate significance is God’s giving of God’s self.

*Truth sees God, wisdom beholds God,  
and from these two comes a third,  
a holy wondering delight in God,  
which is love<sup>1</sup>*

It seems that Julian of Norwich’s words speak prophetically of Spencer’s artistic journey - a journey which moves from seeing, to beholding, to joy. Both express love as the essential message of their work. Julian understood her visions as making clear that for God ‘love was his meaning’. Spencer, meanwhile, described his artistic endeavour as invigorated by love, as art’s ‘essential power’. This love, for both, informs the whole of life. God, in light of the power of love, cannot be angry. Julian conceived of sin as something for which God would not blame us. Likewise, Spencer’s Day of Judgement is lacking in judgement. Humanity, in light of the power of love, should not despise itself, not even the bodily self so frequently derided. This love of self finds expression in Julian’s language – she uses ‘sensuality’ when referring to the body.<sup>2</sup> Rather than compartmentalising flesh in disregard for it, she

---

<sup>1</sup> Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, Chapter 44. (Ed.) Glasscoe, M. (1981), (Exeter, University of Exeter Press).

<sup>2</sup> Noted by Jantzen, A. M.(2000), ‘Julian of Norwich’ in Hastings, A. *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, (Oxford,Oxford University Press), 358.

describes it as ‘always grounded in God’.<sup>3</sup> Spencer’s work similarly conveys a sense of the self as whole, thus as wholly loveable. He sees himself not as consisting of fragmented components, but one: his body is as much himself as his soul, his sexuality is as crucial as his intellect. This love of Julian and Spencer’s, which overwhelms the sight of God and of the self, makes for a distinctive character in their theologies. Neither is defensive. Both are experimental, uninhibited by convention and even playful.<sup>4</sup> This simple power of love, evident within the work of both, makes Julian’s written words an insightful framework for reading Spencer’s visual image.

Beginning with *truth seeing God*, I will examine Spencer’s distinctive seeing of the sacred within the ordinary, his being attuned to a unified world in which God is not separated from humanity. From the presence of God that Spencer’s truth sees, I will turn to his *wisdom in beholding God*. In wisdom God’s ubiquity and hence God’s intimate closeness is held simultaneously with the grace facilitating that closeness, a grace so abundant that its giver is rendered infinitely beyond our understanding. Wisdom beholds immanence together with transcendence. Following this, I will turn to observe Julian’s sense of a *holy wondering delight* as expressed in Spencer’s piece: the joy which ensues from finding oneself resting in the perfect unity of nearness and otherness - a joy evident in the exultancy of this Cookham scene. Finally, I will assert the essential power *which is love*, as encountered in each movement where God and humanity are unified -seeing, beholding, and wondering delight.

**- Truth sees God -**

Spencer’s vision is one endowed with the ability to perceive within the ordinary the depths of the sacred. He views the world with hope: nothing is only as it seems, everything is imbued with ‘potential ecstasy’.<sup>5</sup> He aspires to oneness of this world with the next. In so doing he rejects dualism, which fails

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> It is striking, for instance, that both allow themselves to conceive of God as female: they are creative and unreserved.

<sup>5</sup> Hyman, T. (2001), *Stanley Spencer*, (London, Tate Gallery Publishing), 120.

to hold adequately together body and spirit. He refuses to operate in the antagonistic distinctions of reason or revelation, law or gospel, and world or church.<sup>6</sup> He contests the conception of entities as distinct, interacting only in ways which ‘preserve their separate identities’.<sup>7</sup> Rather, his world is one, not oppressed by partition, but expressing a glorious unity. He sees in the world its origin of harmony: the breathing of the *soul* into the *body* of Adam, where the two were one, where holiness was routine.<sup>8</sup> He sees himself as a whole: sexuality not separated from spirituality, nor intellect from body. It is a distinctly harmonious sense of personhood. Where dualism has imposed antagonism upon reality, Spencer’s simplicity sees undisturbed unity.

In this vision of oneness, it is obvious to Spencer that heaven would be in Cookham – the origin of his own humanity and the setting and habitat for his creatural existence. Thus we see in this otherworldly event a world that is entirely Spencer’s. Extending across the Church’s wall are prophets, Moses is based on a photograph of Spencer’s friend’s father, Jas Wood. The figures rising are awakening as they did in life after a night’s sleep; they wear the same clothes that dressed their mortal bodies; they greet one another as they did passing in a street. Wives clean down their husbands, tenderly brushing from their shoulders the earth from their graves, as they did the unsightly fibre in their mortal lives. There is no rupture in this image, no obvious break from Spencer’s world as it is. The spiritual future is envisioned as a physical present: not impersonal, but highly meaningful, a story of Spencer’s own.

Envisioning such continuity constitutes a break with the prevailing nineteenth-century ideas of eschatology, which offered ‘the symmetrical presentation of two destinies, heaven and hell’, decided in the ‘discontinuous act of the transcendent God’<sup>9</sup> at the end of history.<sup>10</sup> Hell-fire preaching, evangelical

---

<sup>6</sup> Jenkins, D. E.(1973), ‘An Extended Introduction’ to Moltmann, J. (1973) *Theology and Joy*, (London, SCM Press), 1-24, 17.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>8</sup> Allusion to Genesis 2.7.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 207.

journals ‘populariz[ing] a religion of petty providentialism’,<sup>11</sup> and the standard reading of James Harvey’s *Meditations amongst the Tombs*<sup>12</sup> cultivated a society which understood the divine as ‘impinging ‘vertically’ on the world’,<sup>13</sup> following its sudden end. Spencer, alive to the prominence of this evangelical eschatology, proposes a historical process whereby the future unfolds from, rather than breaks with, the present. Attention is drawn to this moment rather than that to come; heaven is not a *concept* to ‘ensure moral conduct during earthly life’, but a *reality* encountered daily.<sup>14</sup>

This unified vision, conflicting so greatly with the standard vision of the end-times, sees God in all things.<sup>15</sup> It sees not ‘God *and* us’ but a ‘world within a world’: God *with* us.<sup>16</sup> ‘God with us’ denotes the holiness of all things present. It demands that we look not upwards but around, envisaging not an anonymous realm where God will be, but calling to mind our very own Cookham, where God *is*. The truth of the unity Spencer discerns sees God. The Kingdom of God is in Spencer’s midst, consigned to him and us as a gift.<sup>17</sup>

**- Wisdom beholds God -**

Spencer’s perception of himself as within the Kingdom brings forth two important disclosures of who God is. God with us divulges God’s complete presence, God’s ‘thereness’ in all of time and all of space, in contrast to the perfect grace that facilitates such a presence, a grace far beyond our

---

<sup>10</sup> Bauckham, R. (2000), ‘Eschatology’ in Hastings, A. *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press), 206.

<sup>11</sup> Rowell, G.(1974), *Hell and the Victorians*,( Oxford,Clarendon Press), 1.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>13</sup> Op.cit. Bauckham (2000), 208.

<sup>14</sup> Op. cit. Rowell (1974), 13.

<sup>15</sup> While not in the immediate scope of this essay, it would be worth noting the ecological implications of such a statement. If the world is where we locate our spiritual, as well as physical, livelihood, our responsibility to the planet quickly follows: protecting diversity becomes a matter in which God’s mystery is in the balance.

<sup>16</sup>Williams, R. (2011), ‘Happiness or Joy’ in Williams, R. (2013), *Choose Life: Christmas and Easter Sermons in Canterbury Cathedral*, (London, Bloomsbury), 191-200, 199.

<sup>17</sup> Allusion to *Luke* 17.21.

understanding.<sup>18</sup> What emerges in beholding God, seeing God's immanence and transcendence as one, is a sense of the crucial Christian revelation: that God's gift is of God's self.

Spencer's knowing that heaven is not a distant world to be waited for, but imbued in the world as we know it, speaks of a God whose presence is eternal. "The Resurrection, Cookham"'s temporal location is meaningfully ambiguous. Nominally, it looks to time to come - "The Resurrection" - but this future heaven is anticipated in a past Eden. Hilda and Stanley are presented as man and woman, vibrant vegetation frames the image, with naked figures evoking within the final day that very first day. This movement between beginning and end is mediated by the simultaneous immediacy of Spencer's scene - himself pictured numerous times along with his recently made wife, Hilda. It is at once present, past, and future. Spencer refuses to abide by a particular time category. This is an ambiguity that typifies many of Spencer's paintings, their very conception being anachronistic, of biblical scenes consigned to the contemporary world. With Augustine, Spencer's time originates entirely in God, who thus is the one for whom 'today is eternity', who cannot be allotted a location within time, but who is 'before all things past and transcend[s] all things future'.<sup>19</sup>

God's today understood as eternity radically opposes the notion of this world as something we merely pass through. Rather than conceiving of our present worldly state as something 'we will cast off',<sup>20</sup> Spencer sees fullness and responsibility as possibilities for our lives now.<sup>21</sup> If the present consists of God's presence today, as creator of every moment – for whom there is no

---

<sup>18</sup> 'Thereness': A useful coinage employed by Rowan Williams in commenting upon Thomas Aquinas's naming of God as 'He Who Is' - a name which sought to express most fully the unequivocal existence of God. Williams, R. (1990), *The Wound of Knowledge*, (London, Darton Longman and Todd), 131.

<sup>19</sup> St Augustine, *Confessions*. Trans. H. Chadwick, (2008), (Oxford, Oxford University Press), 230.

<sup>20</sup> Gooder, P. (2011), *Heaven*, (London, SPCK Publishing), 103.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 104.

‘was’ or ‘will be’, but only *is* - then our metaphysics is transformed. God is liberated from his being locked in a future temporality. Humanity is liberated from the perpetual state of waiting for the present to pass, and encounters the need to respond to situations of the here and now. Time is not to be endured, because the God who gives it fills every moment with his presence, transforming the value of our existence within it. Spencer’s vision is of salvation understood as “health’...‘well-being’, ‘total integration, here as well as hereafter’”.<sup>22</sup>

In space, as in time, Spencer aspires to depict the limitless ‘thereness’ of God, expressed in the sense of the uncontainable within his paintings. He explains of his work that scenes are ‘imagined as continuing in all directions’.<sup>23</sup> This expansiveness, emphasised in ‘The Resurrection, Cookham’ by the river flowing upwards out of sight, suggests the continuation of a scene in which God’s presence rests. The geometrics employed by Spencer, diagonally moving outwards and upwards from the centre, draw the eye past the boundaries of his support. The presence of heaven in this churchyard expands to the horizon in the left hand corner; extending right past the church and meeting too the viewer who engages in the pull of these lines. Heaven comes to fill the 1910 room of Tate Britain, in this current moment of space meeting time.

God’s presence, Spencer expresses, is in all time, and all places. We inhabit God’s space, thus we inhabit heaven, which is with us, stark and immediate, not some distant and irrelevant epoch as commonly imagined. It is pressing and tangible and available to us right here and now, as those so-called ‘primitive’ people depicted in the centre grasp so clearly. ‘[E]njoying the physical pleasures of touch’ with objects in their hands, they comprehend the immediacy of heaven.

---

<sup>22</sup> White, V. (1956), *God the Unknown*, (London, Harvill), 10.

<sup>23</sup> Spencer, explaining his work in Wilenski, R. H.(1951), *Stanley Spencer: Resurrection Pictures (1945-1950)*, (London, Faber and Faber), 4 (plates 4, 5, 10).

*O world invisible, we view thee,  
O world intangible, we touch thee,  
O world unknowable, we know thee,  
Inapprehensible, we clutch thee!*<sup>24</sup>

The utter nearness of God, in Spencer's beholding, is met with God's transcendence: a God who is as other in abundant grace as He is near in the presence filling our world. Crucial to "The Resurrection, Cookham" is this grace, the wholeness of which is such that its source could never be comprehended. The gift is so great that its giver is utterly beyond our understanding. Spencer conveys this transcendent grace by depicting God in such a way that his giving is clearly rendered continual. In turn, he depicts the receiving of this grace as a free, restful bestowal requiring no action or endeavour.

Spencer's depiction of a concealed God speaks of God's quiet but continual giving. God is shrouded, ambiguous, preoccupied in God's own unity. Spencer does not desperately draw us to acknowledge this God as though God's giving would cease if we were not to see it, for abundance does not rely on acknowledgement. The nature of plentiful giving is that it continues regardless of recognition. A parallel can be drawn here with Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*. It is a work which foregrounds moral and philosophical subjects, seeing those subjects as as much the occasion of 'Gods gracious activity' as the Incarnation itself. Grace is considered by Aquinas as not given 'only to those actually conscious of the work of Christ', but rather possessing a freedom attributing it an omnipresence which permeates the whole of life.<sup>25</sup> We do not need to be consciously discussing Christ, Aquinas says, to encounter his grace. Likewise for Spencer, the power of grace annuls our need to seek God out. God's free grace has already sought us. Hence his depiction is

---

<sup>24</sup> An extract from Francis Thompson's poem "The Kingdom of God" (1-4).

<sup>25</sup> Williams, R. (1990), *The Wound of Knowledge*, (London, Darton Longman and Todd), 126.

of a God who does not insist that we stare at him in majesty, but who is simply there. The Immaculate Conception, as implied through Spencer's imagery of an enclosed church garden - the church wall and left-hand gate evoking the untouched and pure entry of Christ into the world through Mary - insinuates Christ's presence all the while subtle and understated, lacking with Aquinas the explicit thrusting of what is considered important for us compulsorily to take in. The power and freedom of grace is understood by both as meaning that God *is* regardless of us.

Meanwhile, Spencer's representations of those receiving this grace express its gratuity. They exude a crucial restfulness: emancipated from the need to strive, they do not hurry or struggle. This is not a gift which has been earned in any human-sense. Hilda smells a flower, while Stanley looks on; their friends' forms lounge under a tranquil mellow light. They are liberated from any sense of endeavour. Their only action is to receive fearlessly 'the water of life without price', submitting effortlessly to this overwhelming of grace, unlike any human gift received.<sup>26</sup>

Spencer, in his ability to behold these two aspects of God at once, makes clear the crucial connection of God's presence and God's grace. "The Resurrection, Cookham" speaks of a God who is completely there, across all of time and space which allows us to know God personally, whilst retaining the sense of an abundant grace, the plenitude of which confounds us, grace which renders the giver so *beyond* our knowing. In the unity these aspects are accorded through Spencer's upholding of them both, the central enunciation of God's action is uttered: that God's gift is the gift of God's self. God's abundant grace, so beyond our comprehension, allows God's presence to be with us. The nearness of Spencer's heaven, the presence of God with him, is only so because of God's otherness which entails God's giving without our knowing it.

---

<sup>26</sup> NIV, *Revelation* 22.17.



Affirming this, Spencer recalls in his imagery the perfect expressions in history of God's giving of God's self: Creation and the crucifixion. We see the moment of Creation as the various types of people emerge, testifying to the diversity in that creative moment. Bordering the divine coupling in the church porch, black figures make love, their action articulating the forming of life and the sharing of delight. God is undoubtedly Creator God, consisting of woman and man, embracing one another, cradling offspring, encased in a cascade of white flowers gesturing new-life. God is God's own existence, and depends on nothing for it: as female and male, God creates God's self.

According to this creative autonomy that makes God first cause, 'we are bound to conclude', as Aquinas says, 'that everything that is at all real is from Him': Because He Is, We Are, since God is not *a* being, God is being itself.<sup>27</sup> His existence is intertwined with ours from the point of our origin. God's gift is of God's self: our life is because of God's life. "The Resurrection, Cookham" makes this gift explicit in presenting God's creative autonomy in which all life originates.

The Easter narrative too in its expression of this same gifting of God's self is recollected within the scene. It is remembered by the stone bay Spencer's God figure occupies, in some moments resembling Christ's tomb. Death, indicated by graves, coexists with life communicated in vegetation. The lighting is anomalous, weak on the left and stark on the right, evoking the abnormality of the crucifixion darkness, coming 'over the whole earth until three in the afternoon'.<sup>28</sup> The decisive *gift* of God's *presence* in the incarnate Son is brought to bear; transcendent grace meets immanent intimacy in the cross, implicitly present in this scene that unifies.

---

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* Volume 1a.44. Trans. H. McCabe, (1964), (Manchester, Blackfriars).

<sup>28</sup> NIV, *Luke* 23:44-45.

Spencer sees God's presence and God's grace as together disclosing the pivotal statement of Christianity: that God gives God's self, and accordingly, that God's essence as giver is the same as God's action in giving. In this, Spencer expresses something of the trinity understood in Barth's sense: God as revealer, identical to God's act of revealing, identical to what is revealed.<sup>29</sup> If God's being is an act, that act is happening in all times and places. As Spencer sees, it is happening in Cookham, as much as in the midst of the creation of the world, as much as it was in the death of Christ on the cross: God's giving and our receiving, always and everywhere.

- *and from these two comes a third,  
a holy wondering delight in God -*

In Spencer's encounter of this union of gift and giver there is Julian's sense of 'a holy wondering delight in God', conferred upon his figures who are 'peacefully, blissfully happy'.<sup>30</sup> This joy is presented as the natural effect of natural union. If the world is not divided into sacred and profane, if everything is imbued with heaven and the world is one, our fullness in God is also a fullness of God, our delight in God is to the delight of God. As Julian put it, while 'our in-born will is to have God', God's 'good-will is to have us'.<sup>31</sup> It is from this reciprocity, at the heart of Spencer's unified vision, that the exultance of his painting is derived. Spencer lets everything with breath praise the Lord in its being.<sup>32</sup> Flowers burst up, enjoyed by the people sharing in their vitality who look around, not chastened by the gaze of the viewer, or the presence of God in their midst, but unselfconsciously enjoying their being as and where they are. Figures are rounded, their curved softness implying the tenderness of joy. The playfulness of the scene extinguishes any suggestion of harsh

---

<sup>29</sup> Discussion found in Barth, K. *Church Dogmatics* I.i., 'The Doctrine of the Word of God'

<sup>30</sup> Stanley Spencer, quoted in a lecture by Richard Harries 9/10/2013. (Transcript available 06/04/2014 <http://www.gresham.ac.uk/lectures-and-events/modern-art-enemy-or-friend-of-religious-art>).

<sup>31</sup> Op. cit. Julian of Norwich, Chapter 6.

<sup>32</sup> Allusion to *Psalms* 150.6.

reverence: jumbled grave stones call to mind childish disorder as opposed to pristine cultivation; people do not levitate from their graves in a state of ethereal holiness, they tumble and topple; and once resurrected, they read their own grave stones- an image of human absurdity in contrast to the severity expected from the final-day.<sup>33</sup>

His figures act entirely as themselves. There is no eccentric warping of their behaviour, no transformed conception of what it is to be human. Spencer's vision of this 'wondering delight' calls to mind Joseph Butler's: for whom "following nature" was the basis of encountering joy.<sup>34</sup> The only obstruction to this flourishing is the 'singular failure to act naturally'.<sup>35</sup> Spencer's vision is of innate compatibility with God, corresponding with the Augustinian reflection that 'our heart is restless until it comes to rest in You'.<sup>36</sup>

Spencer's presentation of joy is a distinctly individual homecoming. He presents himself as naked: concealing nothing, portrayed carefree, absorbed in a sense of who he is. He speaks of an attempt at 'recovering my lost self' following the war, which personally took him away from himself and his innocence, as well as his home of Cookham. He writes about the loss of 'that confiding nature I had before the war [...] that serenity of spirit'.<sup>37</sup> Life, for Spencer, is about a return to the basic union where joy exists, as he terms it, 'progress of the soul'.<sup>38</sup> Thus at the end of time he finds himself where time began.

---

<sup>33</sup> We note the disjuncture of Spencer's playfulness with the solemnity of nineteenth-century thinking about the afterlife. The cheerfulness of his scene stands in stark contrast with, for instance, James Harvey's *Meditations amongst the Tombs*.

<sup>34</sup> A theme persisting throughout Joseph Butler's 'Fifteen Sermons' preached at the Rolls Chapel in 1729, in which he presented a moral philosophy proposing benevolence as the primary principle of action at work within humans, in doing so criticizing egoistic theories of human nature associated with thinkers such as Hobbes and Mandeville.

<sup>35</sup> Charry, E. (2010), *God and the Art of Happiness*, (Cambridge, Eerdmans), 137.

<sup>36</sup> Op. cit. St Augustine, 1.

<sup>37</sup> Spencer, S. 733.3.5, 38 of Tate Gallery Archive of Spencer's letters and writings

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 825.22.

This is the great purpose of life: as far as possible to *remain* in unity with God as was established through our creation within God, to remain in that place where ‘we could be our self’.<sup>39</sup> This aspiration of his did not, in life, find fulfilment. Uncomfortable regarding the loss of virginity-‘sex feelings’, Spencer said, almost made his earliest feelings of religion and Cookham ‘die out’<sup>40</sup> -and marked by the images of war which stayed with him- suffering in his own words from ‘war depression’<sup>41</sup> -his desire to return to something remained unachieved. Yet in acknowledging the restlessness that responded to that desire, Spencer does all that can, in human terms, be done. He realises his need for return and his personal incapacity for achieving that return. In so doing he finds himself articulating a very Christian sentiment: Spencer, in his painting, asks for something he cannot do for himself in life. As in prayer, where Christians ask to be able to pray – asking for asking; as in love, where Christians plea for the ability to love from God who ‘is love’;<sup>42</sup> as in forgiveness, expressing a desire to forgive to “the One who forgives all your sins”,<sup>43</sup> Spencer sees that to desire to do something is, on earth, all that can be done by us, the rest is achieved by the gift of God. Once again, Spencer’s recognition of a God who is giver powerfully comes forth in this painting which articulates what God can do, indeed does, which Spencer cannot. In seeing that the first and only step to be made is personal acknowledgement of incapacity, Spencer hence unapologetically celebrates the subjective. He claims no impartiality, no detached position, utterly unconcerned as he is with the modernist’s ‘development of perceptual language in order to be ‘objective’.<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 733.1.1663.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 733.1.1649.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 733.3.5, 38.

<sup>42</sup> NIV *John* 4.16.

<sup>43</sup> NIV *Psalms* 103.3.

<sup>44</sup> Gormley, A. (1992), ‘Cookham’s Present’ in Nesbitt, J. (1992) *Stanley Spencer: A sort of Heaven*, (Liverpool, Tate Gallery), 7.

Yet the joy which ensues from the intimate and liberating disclosure of incapacity finds communal expression. As Spencer says of his piece, ‘*everyone* shares the joy of the resurrection’.<sup>45</sup> He surrounds himself with friends and family, with Richard Carline, his new brother-in-law, with wife Hilda, with Cookham’s councillors too. The imagery of a Church garden conveys a sense of a community containing itself, their togetherness as marked out, from Adam and Eve together in Eden, to the representations of the blessed together in paradise. There is no isolation in this painting. People coexist and interact; their resting in God meets the resting in God of others. Spencer’s sentiment seems akin to Rowan Williams’: ‘[w]hen I encounter another, I encounter one who is called to such a unique joy, my relation to them is part of God’s purpose’.<sup>46</sup>

Spencer’s vision of *a holy wondering delight in God* is hence radically at odds with the prevailing cultural norms of his context, and of ours today too. Whereas the sophisticated society of the interwar years fought their battles of anxiety with technological progression, Spencer’s answer to the soul’s restlessness is to turn inwards, to desire a homecoming. Where our world initiates national reports into wellbeing, frantically striving to locate ‘happiness’, Spencer proposes a joy which is freely given and utterly natural. Where man’s meaning in life has been to ‘be useful and used’, to operate ‘as labourers and consumers’,<sup>47</sup> necessarily valueless in the face of illness, unemployment, or poverty, Spencer’s man *and* woman have meaning in their very act of existing in a world where God is.<sup>48</sup> Whereas in secular discourse the Church is characterised as a dominating authoritarian structure, Spencer sees a community who rest together in God and share one another’s joy. To

---

<sup>45</sup> Op. cit. Spencer, 733.3.1.

<sup>46</sup> Williams, R. (2007), ‘The Marriage of Heaven and Earth’ in Williams, R. (2013), *Choose Life: Christmas and Easter Sermons in Canterbury Cathedral*, (London, Bloomsbury), 49-59, 56.

<sup>47</sup> Op. cit. Jenkins. (1973), 11.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

our individualised society, his vision of communal delight is devastatingly unfamiliar.

The joy which flows from encountering God's gift of God's self is presented by Spencer, in keeping with his whole vision, as something conferred upon us. We are granted a glimpse of God's ways through no work of our own. In its directing of attention inwards, to the self, we see the potential for such joy as primordial as opposed to evolutionary, affirming the sense that joy is not at all something we may actively pursue, but which is mysteriously bestowed.

**- which is love -**

The joy Spencer depicts, flowing from a truth which sees God, and wisdom which beholds God, is the result of a journey possible only through God's being and action of grace. Grace is the means by which God is active in the world: it is the continual giving of God's self that constitutes God's essence. What Spencer captures so clearly, is the relationality of this grace. He sees beyond the transactional conferring of God's presence to a people, mere giving and receiving, perceiving more deeply the intense intimacy within this movement, *which is love*. It is 'divine love in human life', Spencer sees, which constitutes grace, which renders it relational.<sup>49</sup> Grace is God's principle of action, and this action is relational because of love.

Love is 'the force that both connects and redeems, which 'emanates towards things and joins them together'.<sup>50</sup> Grace permits God's presence in the world. Love unites God with the world. Grace allows for nearness as well as otherness. Love unifies them both and invites us to dwell between them. Grace creates a joy which is inherent, natural, given. Love renders that joy reciprocal and shared. The unity Spencer understands grace to possess, which sees Cookham imbued with heaven, which sees transcendence collide with

---

<sup>49</sup>A phrase employed throughout Watson, P. S. (1959), *The Concept of Grace*, (London, Camelot Press)

<sup>50</sup>Op. cit. Gormley. (1992), 7.

immanence, which sees the joy of God as conferred to humanity, is love. Grace relies on God's free *love* to perfect 'God's communion with creation'.<sup>51</sup> Thus grace is more than some epistemic concern, whereby we can know that God comes to us in spite of sin; more than a silent cancelling of our wrongdoing to maintain some cosmic balance. It is imbued with intimacy, as George Herbert, with Spencer, understood: the action of grace is divine Love in our world, in our Cookham.

***You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:***

***So I did sit and eat.***<sup>52</sup>

"The Resurrection, Cookham" sees God cradling children, in the very porch of Spencer's church: God is Love who 'bade me welcome', who 'drew nearer', who 'took my hand', who comes with the desire for fellowship. This is grace powerfully infused with love, a grace which invites.<sup>53</sup>

"The Resurrection, Cookham" asserts the unification of our banal present with the sacred and eternal God, who in God's presence with us consecrates our being in the present. For us, Spencer says, the Kingdom is here, already given amongst and within us. Thus imploring that kingdom is beautifully effortless, for it consists in only consenting to what already occurs: God's gracious and unfailing giving. Spencer, knowing this, grasps the reality of The Resurrection as a continuation of life, not a break from it. In turn, he signals to us the possibility of living in light, proclaiming St Symeon the New Theologian's sense that

***For those who have become the children of light, and sons of the day which is to come, for those who walk at all times in the light,***

---

<sup>51</sup> Schwöbel, C. (2000), 'Grace' in Hastings, A. *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press), 276-278, 276.

<sup>52</sup> Lines from George Herbert's Poem: "*Love III*", (16-17).

<sup>53</sup> Quotations Ibid. (1), (5), (11).

*the day of the Lord will never come, for they are always with God and in God.*<sup>54</sup>

Since it is a grace permeated with love which carries God's eternity into our present, which sees God's gift of God's self given, Spencer's vision is one founded upon the notion of receiving. Living in Cookham as though it were heaven, existing now in the knowledge of an eternal bond with God is thus, before anything else, living as one who receives.

## **Bibliography**

### ***Scripture***

New International Version (NIV).

### ***Other Works Cited***

Aquinas, Thomas, *Summa Theologica* Volume 1a. Trans. H. McCabe (1964), (Manchester, Blackfriars).

Bauckham, R. (2000), 'Eschatology' in Hastings, A. *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press).

Barth, K. (1956), *Church Dogmatics* Vol. 1, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, (Ed.), Bromiley, G. W, Torrance, T.F. Trans: G.T. Thomson, H. Knight (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark).

Charry, E. (2010), *God and the Art of Happiness*, (Cambridge, Eerdmans).

Gooder, P. (2011), *Heaven*, (London, SPCK Publishing).

Harries, R. (2013), 'Modern Art - enemy or friend of Religious Art', (Transcript available 06/04/2014 <http://www.gresham.ac.uk/lectures-and-events/modern-art-enemy-or-friend-of-religious-art>).

---

<sup>54</sup> St Symeon the New Theologian, *Homily LVII*, 2 (Russian ed. Of Mt. Athos, pt. II, 37). This particular quote is translated by V. Lossky, (1973), in *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, (Cambridge, James Clarke & Co. Ltd), 230.



- Herbert, G. (1633) “*Love III*”, in (Ed.), Pasternak-Slater, A. (1995) *George Herbert: The Complete English Works*, London, Random House.
- Hyman, T. (2001), *Stanley Spencer*, (London, Tate Gallery Publishing).
- Jantzen, A. M.(2000), ‘Julian of Norwich’ in Hastings, A. *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press).
- Jenkins, D. E.(1973), ‘An Extended Introduction’ to Moltmann, J. (1973) *Theology and Joy*, (London, SCM Press).
- Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, Chapter 44. (Ed.), Glasscoe, M. (1981), (Exeter, University of Exeter Press).
- V. Lossky, (1973), *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*,(Cambridge, James Clarke & Co. Ltd).
- Rowell, G. (1974), *Hell and the Victorians*,( Oxford, Clarendon Press).
- Stanley Spencer, letters to Hilda, in Glew, A. (2001) *Stanley Spencer: Letters and Writings*. (London, Tate Gallery).
- Saint Augustine, *Confessions*. Trans. H. Chadwick,(2008), (Oxford, Oxford University Press).
- Schwöbel, C. (2000), ‘Grace’ in Hastings, A. *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press).
- Symeon the New Theologian, *The Discourses*, Trans: C. J. deCatanzaro, (1980), (New York, Paulist Press).
- Thompson, F. (1913), *Collected poetry of Francis Thompson*, London, Hodder & Stoughton.
- Herbert, G. (1633) “*Love III*”, in (Ed.), Pasternak-Slater, A. (1995) *George Herbert: The Complete English Works*, (London, Random House).
- Watson, P. S. (1959), *The Concept of Grace*, (London, Camelot Press).
- White, V. (1956), *God the Unknown*, (London, Harvill).
- Wilenski, R. H. (1951), *Stanley Spencer: Resurrection Pictures (1945-1950)*, (London, Faber and Faber).
- Williams, R. (1990), *The Wound of Knowledge*, (London, Darton Longman and Todd).

Williams, R.(2007), 'The Marriage of Heaven and Earth' in Williams, R. (2013), *Choose Life: Christmas and Easter Sermons in Canterbury Cathedral*, (London, Bloomsbury).

Williams, R. (2011), 'Happiness or Joy' in Williams, R.(2013), *Choose Life: Christmas and Easter Sermons in Canterbury Cathedral*, (London, Bloomsbury).