

Sense in worship

The artist Stanley Spencer used paint to draw our attention both to the energy and emotion of the Christian narrative, and to the intricate life of the people and places of his home village of Cookham, in Buckinghamshire.

What is extraordinary about his work, however, is that he superimposes one vision on to the other, so that his paintings reflect his ability to see a theological narrative working itself out in the daily life of ordinary villagers. Faith and life are not separate, but intertwined. If Jesus carries his cross down Cookham High Street, then of course, local women are peering out at him from behind their curtains. If Jesus is crucified in a Cookham street, then it is the local carpenters and joiners who are found driving in the nails (who else?). Where else is Jesus if not preaching from a boat on the river Thames, or discovered again crucified as a scarecrow in a local allotment? Although Spencer also painted scenes showing life inside his local

parish church, he simply saw, found and painted Christ in action *everywhere*. His village life was for him simply running over with the life and energy of Christ.

What would it take for us to notice and pay attention to the Christ-infused life of our own rural life? Every moment of our lives, our intricate and amazing God-given senses feed us experience and information. But in the business of every day living we have to filter out much of it to concentrate on the things we have to get done. The trouble is that we end up filtering out so much of our everyday experience, so that much of the magic and mystery of God's work all around us gets lost. We never stop to give something a second glance, or to listen for our surroundings' song of praise. So we don't notice either the beauty of God's work in the natural world, or the scenes of death and dying as Christ hangs crucified on our streets. The evangelist Brian Green, asked to preach on a hot summer day in the splendid church of a

market town, climbed to the pulpit, looked down at the packed congregation and told them all off for coming. He said that it was the most glorious day of the year, so why weren't they all out there praising God for it? He argued that we can use our faith as an excuse not to engage with God's world, praise God's creation, witness to others. It is true.

And if we did start paying more attention, bringing our senses to bear on our daily lives inside and outside Church, what effect would it have on our worship? In the first instance we would have to think more carefully about what people see of our Christ-filled lives inside and outside Church. How do we get to recognise that Christ is here among us walking our own streets, living and dying in country lanes? How then, do we represent the life of the community in our churches – along with the visual narratives of stained glass windows and Christian symbols, and superimpose one on another? Where are the things that people recognise as being of

this place and consecrated to God? In some churches there are monuments and exhibitions to groups in the community such as lifeboat crews, or war dead, but in other churches the only reminder of the lives of the parish might be at Harvest Festival. What of country trades and crafts that are dying out – where is that life being celebrated in churches? Pictures, photos, examples of community life can all be displayed inside and outside church as information, a stimulus for prayer or



Christ's Entry into Jerusalem, 1921. © Estate of Stanley Spencer 2005. All rights reserved, DACS.



The Resurrection, Cookham, 1924-7. © Tate, London 2005.

to provide a context for visitors and tourists.

What about what we hear? Spencer's vision included Jesus preaching from a boat on the river Thames during the regatta, when villagers and tourists alike were flocking around. The voice of Christ permeated the village. How can we make our worship have a power beyond a few half hearted voices singing "All things bright and beautiful"? The traditions of carolling and wassail grew out of country traditions. They remind us that the most powerful forms of telling our faith story drew on familiar rural themes and the mysterious beauty of the natural world to enable others to start to think about what God has done in Christ. So all kinds of music making have a potential for mission, whether it's a few voices at Evensong, an organ recital or children singing carols on the doorstep. What matters is that we remember what people may feel when they hear it and give them a place to share those often powerful feelings and experiences.

Hearing nothing is also important. Nearly all rural visitors' books talk about the opportunity for peace, a chance to stop and reflect. Can we ensure that our churches are havens of peace and find ways to encourage people to use the sense of peace to encounter God. What other forms of rest and refreshment can be added to this?

We should not forget the other senses either. A flower festival is not just a visual feast, but can be one of scent that can evoke powerful memories and spiritual experience. So, what scent experiences do people have within worship, and are they conducive to experiencing the living God; or does the smell of damp, musty books make people think of long dead exhibits in a museum?

There are ways of getting people to use all their senses in and outside Church, so that they come to think more about what it means to encounter God. A simple labyrinth, with waystations for prayer can be constructed inside or outside a church, with maybe a window to contemplate, a quiet tape of

songs or psalmody, a pot of herbs, a Christian object or symbol to touch or hold. But even if this is difficult to set up or maintain, it should not stop us from remembering that the sacraments, or any liturgy at all, can be a pilgrimage drawing us into an overwhelming encounter with God and through which the senses can be fully engaged. What is needed is the space and the invitation within our worship to make that happen.

One of Stanley Spencer's most famous paintings is of the general resurrection taking place in his local churchyard. The graves are broken open and people emerge, filling the country church with renewed life, wonderful reunions, joy, flocking towards Christ in wonder and amazement; a whole community united around the parish church. So if redemption comes with colour, love, dancing, what would it take for our rural worship to make that vision accessible to people today and every day? ■

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