



Memorial art



Kieran Conry

Kieran Conry is the Roman Catholic Bishop of Arundel and Brighton.

On 31 August, 2011, a ceremony was performed in the Wiltshire town of Wootton Bassett to mark the end of the repatriations of the bodies of servicemen killed in action. When the first arrived in 2007, just a few members of the local British Legion were there to pay their respects, but gradually the main street began to fill with hundreds of people wishing to honour the dead and recognise their sacrifice. In all, 167 such ceremonies took place, honouring 345 servicemen. In recognition of the part it played in this public gesture of recognising personal bravery and self-sacrifice, the town was granted the title 'Royal'.

The centenary of the beginning of the First World War, or the 'Great War', will focus attention on the memorials that exist throughout the country, poignantly inscribed with the names of those who did not survive. In addition, the carefully tended war graves on the continent – mainly, of course, in France – will also see ceremonies to mark the tragic loss of so many lives. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission is assiduous in maintaining these graves with extraordinary care and ensuring that relatives of those who died know the respect that they have been accorded in the past hundred years.

The way in which a society regards its dead, and especially those who have died in battle, says much about its fundamental values, culture and tradition. In cities, town and villages, in churches and churchyards, in schools, colleges and universities, particular attention will be paid to those memorials to the fallen of 'the Great War'. The fact that the names of the dead are recorded so faithfully means, first of all, that they will

not be forgotten and, secondly, that we continue to remember the sacrifice they made.

A feature common to many of these memorials is the figure of Christ on the cross. This is a very eloquent symbol and a very powerful statement of what we are doing in remembering those who died in battle.

First of all there is a tremendous burden of responsibility on the shoulders of a society that asks its men and women to risk their lives for a principle that society regards as sufficiently important. In Shakespeare's *Henry V* the gravity of this is examined in the conversation between the king (in disguise and anonymous) and one of his soldiers, Michael Williams, on the night before the battle of Agincourt. Williams questions the validity of the cause that the king has espoused, and what its consequences are:

'But if the cause be not good,
the king himself hath a heavy reckoning to make;
when all those legs and arms and heads,
chopped off in a battle,
shall join together at the latter day,
and cry all, "We died at such a place";
some swearing, some crying for a surgeon,
some upon their wives left poor behind them,
some upon the debts they owe,
some upon their children rawly left.
I am afeard there are few die well that die in a battle;
how can they charitably dispose
of anything when blood is their argument?
Now, if these men do not die well,
it will be a black matter for the king that led them to it,

who to disobey were against all proportion of subjection.'

King Henry tries to counter his argument, but Williams' case has been stated.

We have a heavy burden of responsibility in sending men and women possibly to their deaths. It is right that we accord them the highest honour.

The recurring presence of the crucified Christ is a reminder that, not only did God come to share our human nature and its frailty, but that he suffered pain and death. It is as if that figure is there in solidarity; he knows the suffering of those who have died, because he has shared it. But the cross is there because it is a reminder of the Christian belief in the resurrection, that death is not the end. This is why the names of the dead are recorded: they are still members of our living community. Memorial is not primarily about the past; it is about the present. We remember the dead but hold their memory – and therefore them – alive.

The artist Stanley Spencer was a very religious person. Although his private life was somewhat 'complicated' his personal beliefs shine through his paintings. There is one series of works that expresses very movingly his own experience of the Great War. Spencer was too frail to enlist as a front-line soldier, and so joined the Royal Army Medical Corps. He served first of all in the Beaufort War Hospital in Fishponds, Bristol and, later on, the forgotten front of Macedonia. At the hospital Spencer tended the privates (not officers) wounded and damaged by the war. The experience of the soldiers in the hospital was not always a very positive one; they were not there to convalesce, but to be fixed as quickly as possible so that they could return to the front.

Spencer recorded his experience of the hospital and the Macedonian front in a series of paintings that were commissioned by John and Mary Behrend for the Sandham Memorial Chapel at Burghclere, near Reading. The chapel is, in fact, a war memorial, erected to honour Mary Behrend's brother, Henry Willoughby Sandham, who fought also on the Maecodonia/Salonika front, but whose name, like so many others, is not recorded on any official war memorial. He died not as a direct result of wounds suffered, but from complications after he contracted malaria on the front.

Spencer painted 16 canvases that adorn the chapel walls. While most artists of the Great War depict its horrors – such as John Singer Sargent's painting *Cassed*, which is displayed in the Imperial War Museum – Spencer imbues his paintings with a tremendous sense of hope and faith, faith above all in the resurrection of the dead, even though the paintings are mainly of the mundane and banal routine of the hospital day. They depict scenes of bed-making and the cleaning of tea-urns and the washing of floors. But many of the paintings have conscious religious elements. In the painting entitled *Bedmaking* a hospital orderly is painted with his back to the observer. The orderly is stretching a sheet and has his arms outstretched, which is a clear reference to the arms of Christ on the cross. And in the painting

Frostbite the orderly is carrying buckets with his arms looped through the handles; they look like the wings of angels.

The most explicit religious image is *The Resurrection of the Soldiers with Altar*. It depicts a jumble of crosses,

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some of which are being handed to Christ in the background. Spencer himself said that he had found his 'heaven in a hell of war' when 'he had buried so many people and saw so many dead bodies that he felt that death could not be the end of everything'.

It is both fascinating and moving to visit the memorial at Thiepval, near the Somme. It is the largest British war memorial in the world, and records the names of 72,000 soldiers who have no known grave. Occasionally still a body is found, and if it is identified the name on the memorial is filled in and so removed. Grandchildren and great-grandchildren come to visit the site and leave small wooden crosses with the name of the fallen.¹

The cross is undoubtedly the most powerful Christian religious symbol and, like all symbols, it expresses things that cannot always be put easily into words. The question that must go always through anybody serving in the armed forces is 'Why?' and at some stage it must become a much bigger question than simply orders of loyalty. It is said that there are no atheists in a trench, but that might be presumptuous. Much of the iconography and poetry (in the broadest sense) round our memorials is explicitly religious and Christian.

The poet Rudyard Kipling had encouraged his son, John, to enlist, but poor eyesight meant that it took personal favours to get John into the Irish Guards. John was killed at the battle of Loos in September 1915 and Kipling must have felt a great sense of responsibility. He joined what later became the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and was responsible for some of the words on the gleaming white tombstones. He selected words from the deuterocanonical books of Ecclesiasticus 44.14: 'Their name liveth for evermore' and the inscription on the grave of an un-named person, 'Known to God'.

The Christian religion, so much part of British life in the early part of the 1900s, had to become part of the death of British society. Instinctively, that is what many Britons chose to do. To make some sense of the sacrifice of so many young men, many people had to turn to the sacrifice of the cross. The symbol of the cross is so appropriate. Jesus is a young man who sacrifices himself for others, who does not see the outcome clearly, who goes into it with fear and even terror: 'My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me' (Matthew 26.39).

This sign becomes the Christian symbol of hope and example. Different traditions within the Christian Church regard the dead in slightly different ways. For

NOTES

1. The Thiepval Memorial was originally built using French bricks from Lille, but, very poignantly, it was refaced in 1973 with Accrington brick. The 'Accrington Pals' (11th East Lancashire Regiment) was one of the regiments virtually annihilated at the Battle of the Somme. Some northern towns lost almost a whole generation, and the decision was taken not to form Pals Battalions again.

2. R King, *Leonardo and the Last Supper* (London: Bond Street Books, 2012).

example, members of the Roman Catholic Church, with its doctrines of Purgatory and Indulgences, pray for the dead. These teachings were explicitly rejected by the Protestant Reformers so many denominations do not practice prayer for the deceased.

All Christian Churches do, however, share a belief in the Resurrection and its consequences for us, that through the death and rising to life of Christ, our sins are forgiven and we rise to new life with Christ. But this does not enable us to escape the pain and sorrow of physical death, whether it is our own (and the fear of it) or the death of loved

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ones, even if they are people we did not really know. So it is difficult not to be moved by the sight of rows of white headstones in the cemeteries of the two wars.

The cross is one of the most popular images of Christ, along with images from the infancy narrative – the Annunciation, the birth of the Christ-child and the visits of the angels and Magi. On the one hand there are quite straightforward reasons for this; there is a narrative and a particular historical moment. They tell a story that people would have been very familiar with, but perhaps less so today. The visit of the angel Gabriel to Mary is not only a beautiful and touching scene, but it would introduce a narrative that people could then carry forward themselves. Likewise with scenes from the Last Supper and the rest of the Passion story. They might capture just a moment in that story, but the rest of the story could be filled in by the observer.

The Last Supper provides a particularly interesting topic for study. Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper* in the refectory of the Dominican convent attached to the Church of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan is perhaps one of the best-known paintings in the world (even though it is one of the least well preserved). The art historian Kenneth Clark called it 'the keystone of European art' and it is the topic of an excellent book by Ross King.² Not only does King go into the history of the commissioning of the painting (and others that Leonardo notoriously failed to deliver on time), as well as the disastrous experiments with materials that lead to its deterioration, he also examines the history of its interpretation.

King rejects the theories of those who followed the German poet Goethe in seeing in the painting the depiction of the moment that Jesus announces that one of the twelve will betray him. This theory gained a great deal of popularity in the USA in the early twentieth century, and it sees the painting as an observation of the psychological drama that was unfolding at the table of the Last Supper – Jesus being betrayed by someone closest to him. But King indicates the way Jesus is holding his hands, clearly pointing to the bread and wine, the elements of the Eucharist. This is a painting about the references to the bread and wine as Jesus' body and blood, a profoundly spiritual expression of

the painter's own faith. This is all the more logical given its location in the Dominican refectory. While this debate is not really relevant to the commemoration of the Great War, it does say a lot about how people interpret memorial art. After all, the institution of the Eucharist is the supreme memorial narrative, 'do this in remembrance of me' (Luke 22.19)

And so we can interpret graveyard and cemetery memorials in a variety of ways. Indeed, even the names we give to these spaces are significant; the 'graveyard' is the place where we have dug holes to bury the dead (the modern German *graben*). This is the necropolis, the 'city of the dead', whereas the 'cemetery', like the 'necropolis', also goes back to its Greek origin, being a place where the dead are merely sleeping, awaiting their awakening from sleep at the trumpet call on the Last Day. Thus the imagery of angels, common in many cemeteries, is that of someone watching over the dead until the moment of resurrection. Likewise the image of the crucified Christ is not so much one of solidarity – he himself suffered the agony of death – but the promise of resurrection. His death on the cross was not the end, and its depiction would make no sense unless we were confident that he rose from the dead.

The commemoration of the Great War might be a useful moment for the nation to reflect on the concept of death and what it means. Is it simply the final moment in a biological process, or can we possibly read something more into it? The sacrifice of so many young lives suggests that it would be callous to state that it is just a physical/biological moment. It is heart-rending to visit the Commonwealth War Graves near places like Beaumont-Hamel and read the dates on the headstones, and to see how many state 1st July, 1916.

Perhaps we have lost much of our sense of the symbolic. What seems most popular on television is the 'reality' of the soap opera. What seems most gripping in the cinema is the plot-less action of the so-called 'blockbuster', filled with sound and fury, but ultimately signifying nothing. However, we are surrounded by ritual and symbol. The day before I am writing this I watched the final moment of the FA Cup on TV. The single most important ritual of the day was the Arsenal captain holding the FA Cup high. Does anyone wonder why a cup and not a shield? Have we lost that sense of sharing a moment of joy and victory, that the cup was something that was filled with wine and that everyone drank from? Likewise, how much importance do we attach to the pageantry around the royal family? The crowds around even the changing of the guard are quite astonishing, given that it does not have any explicit royal content. Crowds flock to see the two impassive guardsmen and their mounts on Whitehall at the back of Horse Guards Parade in London. Even if we are not aware of it, we have a profound need of and instinctive awareness of the symbolic as something that expresses truths that cannot easily be put into words.

And the most difficult but important truth to put into words is often the truth around death.