

## A reflection on Anzac Day and the Resurrection



**Anzac Day** evokes remembrance of conflict and emergencies where Australian military and emergency services personnel have served, with some giving their lives in battle. Their sacrifice and commitment touch the hearts of all of us, most especially as we remember those who died while serving their country. British artist Stanley Spencer served in Macedonia in World War 1 and was exposed to death and injury experienced by those who served alongside him. A renowned artist, including of Christian art, his painting **The Resurrection of the Soldiers** (1928-29) is in Sandham Memorial Chapel in Scotland. The description provided by the Sandham Chapel of the symbolism of this mural is provided below.

It is a rich description, worthy of contemplation and prayer.

<https://scotland.op.org/stanley-spencers-resurrection-of-soldiers/>

This huge canvas covers the entire east wall of the chapel. At the bottom you can see the altar and the sacristy doors. It honours the 'forgotten dead' whose names were not inscribed on any official memorial. Spencer served in Macedonia and much of the detail in this painting is from his memories of that time. Schooled as we are by so many scenes of the final judgement, you might wonder if the resurrection of the dead could be such mess! White crosses are scattered everywhere, like matchsticks. The artist said that they replaced the actual barbed wire of the battlefield. In the foreground just above the altar there is a whole pile of them, as if unclaimed. A great many soldiers have arisen from their graves, but now in place of a rifle, they have a white cross. At end of the war the soldier had to hand back his rifle. Now at the final resurrection he hands back his cross. Some soldiers have carried their crosses and gathered around Jesus. He is the small triangular white figure in the distance. He stands at the apex of a larger triangle littered with white crosses, two pink mules and their collapsed cart. Most of the soldiers don't seem to be aware of Jesus as yet. The young man lying at the centre on the white boards of the collapsed cart stares at his cross as if bewildered. Just in front of him the two white mules, now relieved of their burden, stare back at it. Spencer wanted the figures in the foreground to relate closely to the altar. They are disproportionately large. On the left the men shake hands like friends who haven't seen each other in a long time. Just above them a young man embraces his cross. To the right, there is a group who are still sleeping, their heads resting against their crosses which are still standing. Just in front of them a man stands winding the long piece of cloth soldiers wore as a leg support, wound from ankle to knee. **Spencer intended the white crosses to dominate, each at once a symbol of sacrifice and resurrection.** As with much of Spencer's painting, this image becomes more real as you contemplate it. It might be messy, but in its earthiness and humanity it is more like the resurrection, for which I would dare to hope. Here heaven is seen through the lens of the life we now live.