

EDWARD BURRA – THE POOL OF BETHESDA

Based on an illustrated talk given by Revd Bruce Thompson



Edward Burra, *The Pool of Bethesda*, watercolour, 1951-2, 110 cm x 152 cm

It is a great privilege for me to be given the opportunity of presenting some thoughts on one of my favourite paintings from the Methodist Modern Art Collection. It is a work that could only have been created after the horrors of the Second World War became known, when Europe had been laid waste and untold misery heaped upon so many. Edward Burra's *The Pool of Bethesda* is much more than a depiction of a Biblical event, it is the graphic portrayal of hell on earth. The war is said to have taken away Burra's lightness and *joie de vivre*. When asked why he no longer painted light-hearted satire of modern life he replied '*What can a satirist do after Auschwitz?*'

I want to divide this presentation into three elements: firstly glance at the life of Edward Burra, then briefly reflect upon the event Burra draws upon and, finally, spend some time on what I believe Burra is seeking to convey.

So, first, his early life.

For this section of the talk I was greatly helped by a wonderful documentary written and presented by the art historian and broadcaster Andrew Graham Dixon. *I Never Tell Anybody Anything – the Life and Art of Edward Burra* is available on YouTube and I can recommend it as an hour well spent.

Graham Dixon describes Burra as an enigma, '*the most intriguing artist you may never have heard of...the most elusive artist of the 20th century.*' Dixon is not wrong; apparently Burra gave only one interview to the media in his entire life. Burra is indeed an overlooked genius of British

art and the fact that one of his finest paintings has ended up in the Methodist Modern Art Collection is testimony to the eye of those responsible for its purchase from the Lefevre Gallery, when it was exhibited there, in 1963.

Burra was born in 1905 in Rye on the East Sussex coast and this was his base for the rest of his life. At the age of only five he was diagnosed with chronic arthritis which meant he was in debilitating pain thereafter until his death in 1976 at the age of 71. One of his fortunes was that his father was a wealthy lawyer, so Burra never had to earn money to live. His other fortune was his extraordinary gift of creating art, despite his badly deformed hand and wrist. Such was his disability that he couldn't sweep his wrist as many artists can but instead kept his wrist stiff, his brush or pen static and used his whole arm and shoulder to form the image.

While studying at the Chelsea College of Art, which he entered at the age of 15, Burra was introduced to the world of the cinema; the silent movie captivated him and the exaggerated drama of the scenes were somehow recreated in many of his works with close ups in the foreground and heavily made-up faces. This fascination with the cinema might give a clue as to what triggered Burra years later to paint *The Pool of Bethesda*.

After college he spent time in Paris, a city that was just beginning to recapture some of its pre-Great War atmosphere, though even the newly-established jazz clubs couldn't entirely mask the shattered bodies of the veterans begging on the streets outside. Following Paris, Burra visited Marseilles and he became fascinated with the seedy world of the dockside cafes. It was this aspect of life that Burra felt drawn to; from a privileged home in England preserved for the few he became aware of the dark and poverty-ridden world of the many.

The suffering of others, together with his life-long pain caused by his arthritis, inevitably affected Burra's world-view. Anxious to escape the greyness of post-war England he continued to travel, first to the United States where he was exposed to the vibrancy and colour of New York, in particular Harlem, and then on to Spain. His mother is said to have remarked '*I never know whether Edward has gone out for a packet of cigarettes or left for Spain again!*' It was while he was there that Burra became witness to what lay around the corner for the rest of Europe as the Spanish Civil War got underway. It was a vicious, bloody conflict. In the very first few days 50,000 were killed, many of them simply rounded up, taken out of the town or village and shot in the hills. Burra's work *War in the Sun* is a foretaste of what he went on to produce, not least our own painting *The Pool of Bethesda*.

Just a few years later Burra is restricted to his home in Rye and stood helpless as he watched the aerial combat of the Battle of Britain being waged above him.

His work *Soldiers at Rye* depicts characters wearing Venetian masks, as if they somehow cannot be themselves, they have had to don another persona in order to carry out their duties, abandoning their very selves for the cause in which they are employed.

The *Pool of Bethesda* was painted at a time when Burra was creating a number of works based on biblical events, for example the *Expulsion of the Money Lenders*, which has a feel of the *Pool of Bethesda* about it.

Then there is his painting, the *Agony in the Garden*, which really does capture the suffering. I can't help but feel that there is something of a self-portrait in there. In this work the hands are especially significant but there is also the drawn face, tortured from years of suffering.

So, secondly, and very briefly, let us consider the event that was recorded *only* by the writer of John's account of the Gospel (John 5.1-18).

Jesus and his disciples are visiting Jerusalem for one of the three pilgrimage festivals: 'Passover' (Pesach), 'Weeks' (Shavuot) or 'Tabernacles' (Sukkot). They are at the pool near the Sheep Gate which is a gate to the Temple precinct. The writer tells us that it is called Beth-zatha, or Bethesda, the House of Mercy or House of Compassion and that it has five porticoes. There was some dispute regarding the exact location of the Pool of Bethesda but in the last century an archaeological excavation, near to where the Sheep Gate would have been, uncovered a pool complex complete with five porticoes. It is very close to what is the Crusader Church of St Anne, the reputed home of Mary's parents, Anna and Joachim, in other words the maternal grandparents of Jesus.

If that is so then the scene would have been well known to Jesus; indeed the writer tells us that Jesus knew that the man had been lying there a long time. According to the writer the man had actually been there 38 years, just two short of the symbolic figure of 40, the number of years the people of Israel wandered in the wilderness. Jesus instructs the man to stand up and walk, which he does.

Time does not permit us to explore further interpretation of the event, or the dispute that follows, except to say that it is yet another example of John's anti-Jewish narrative. Constantly he refers to those who are in dispute with Jesus as '*the Jews*' when actually everyone present and involved were Jews. But John, as he so often does, reserves the term 'Jews' for only those who were in conflict with Jesus, it's the method he would adopt later in his account to lay the blame for the death of Jesus at the door of the Jews rather than the Romans.

So, finally we move on to consider Burra's work *The Pool of Bethesda*.

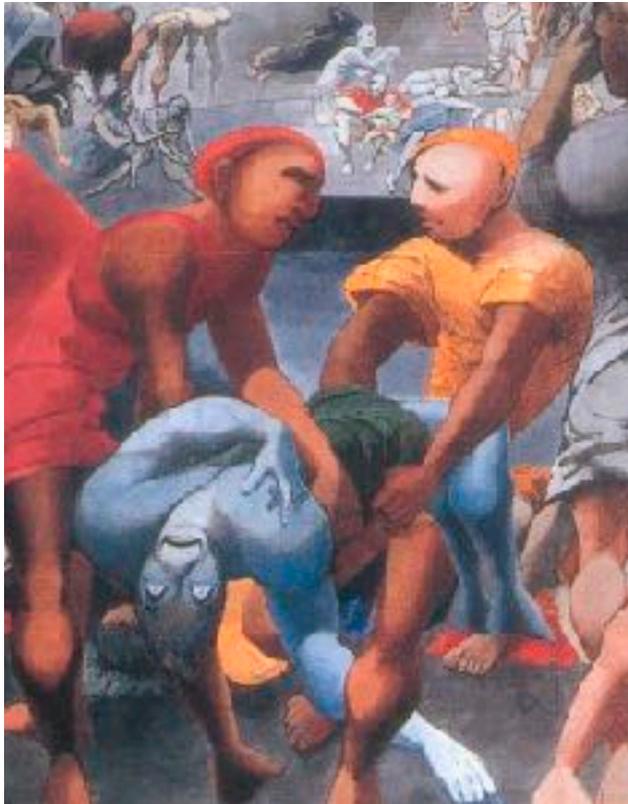
It is a profoundly disturbing and chaotic work. Burra uses his tried and tested palette to depict what looks like a vision of hell. Though the

foreground is filled with bright colours, the blues and greys elsewhere create a nightmarish scene. And the eyes of Jesus? What are they about? For a pool that is named a 'House of Mercy or Compassion' it seems anything but. There is something deeply ironic about the whole scene. The clue, I believe, lies in the response Burra gave to the question put to him about no longer painting light-hearted satire of modern life. He answered, 'What can a satirist do after Auschwitz?' The shock those who study the Holocaust still feel, seventy years after the liberation of the camps, can disempower the creativity of many, while it could also act as a catalyst for others in their attempts to portray pain and suffering.

It is my belief that in *The Pool of Bethesda*, Burra draws upon the horror of the longest and darkest night to present an image that is stark in its portrayal of pain and suffering.

This is a man who knows what pain can do. He has suffered pain all his life from his debilitating arthritis. By being present in Spain at the outset of the Civil War, Burra was also a witness to the first stages of Europe's descent into hell. No doubt he will have visited one of his favourite haunts, the cinema, and watched the newsreels of Belsen with Richard Dimbleby's solemn voice describing the scene.

There is clearly something of Belsen in the painting: the liberators carrying the corpses of the victims; the attempts to clear up the aftermath and the incredulity of the onlooker.



Photographs from Belsen taken shortly after liberation bear strong similarities to the images that Burra includes in his work. And what about the shafts of light?



Why aren't they penetrating the scene at the same angle? They would do if they were from the same source ie the sun; but they aren't. Are they searchlights from lookout towers? And what of those eyes of Jesus? What are they conveying?



The father of a good friend of mine, the late Rabbi Isaac Levy, was the Senior Jewish Chaplain to the British Liberation Army and at Belsen participated in the burial of tens of thousands of dead. His memoir *Witness to Evil - Bergen Belsen, 1945* recalls the horror of the camp; the chaos, the desperation, the sheer enormity of the task. Like the man at the Bethesda pool, the survivors had suffered long and hard, they had been overlooked, they had been cast out and their captors had dehumanised them. Is this the dehumanisation that Burra depicts? A mad house?

The impact this appalling scene had upon the liberators was great indeed. One of the soldiers present on the day of liberation was known to me when I was minister in a Manchester church 20 years ago. After fifty

years of silence, and refusing to tell his wife what exactly his nightmares were about, he finally confided in her. It had taken him five decades to own up to being there. His reaction was not unique. Rabbi Levy was the first Jewish rabbi to volunteer for active service as a chaplain in 1939. He had witnessed many horrors. His son once told me that his father lost some of his pre-war humour at Belsen and it never returned.

What Burra captures in the eyes of Jesus is the strain, the sheer exhaustion brought on by helping someone in utterly desperate circumstances. Anyone who has worked in places of extreme suffering will identify with these eyes. There is a compulsion to meeting need, and unchecked it can become an obsession that leads to deterioration of health, mental as well as physical. Burra knows this and he captures it as well as anyone.

It is interesting to compare Burra's images with Jean Lamb's controversial work *Stations of the Holocaust*. The stations have, in recent times, been on display in Norwich, Winchester and Coventry Cathedrals. It is a collection of elm wood carvings depicting the traditional key points in the last hours of the life of Jesus but set alongside images of the Holocaust.

In Station 13 when Jesus is taken down from the cross Lamb places to his right an image of Jews on the edge of a pit full of bodies and about to be shot. She states that the stations were produced in deepest love for, and respect of, the Jewish People, work greatly influenced by her own visit to Auschwitz in 1997.

I have talked to Jean about her work and I know how committed she is to recognising the pain inflicted upon the Jewish communities of Europe over the centuries, not least during the Holocaust. Her mother incidentally was German, born in 1926 and lived in Berlin from 1935 to 1948 surviving the Allied bombings and Soviet occupation.

But putting Jesus in a Nazi death camp remains difficult to stomach for many, and understandably so. The problem is of course that the vast majority of the perpetrators of the Holocaust were baptised Christians whose hatred of Jews had been passed on from generation to generation, not least at Good Friday services when Christians commemorated the last hours of Jesus and blamed 'the Jews'. So, by extension, in the minds of many victims of anti-Judaism and antisemitism, Jesus is the root cause of so much suffering. But I believe Burra, in his painting, isn't placing Jesus in a Nazi death camp, he is somehow bringing the victims into the frame, reminding us of the agony they experienced and the depravity heaped upon them. He is highlighting the horror each of us can all inflict upon one another when the moral compass is broken. Burra has Jesus appearing to be as horrified as anyone at what he is witnessing.

Burra had himself suffered. His own disability prevented him from participating in the defeat of the greatest evil to stalk our planet. He could only gaze on what was being inflicted upon others. All that

frustration comes out in this one work. He had painted warmongers in Spain, the poor in France and the outcast in New York. Now, probably having sat through newsreel footage of Belsen, in a cinema where once he had laughed and been captivated by silent movies, he would produce, what, for me, is this extraordinary work. If ever humanity needed to see what it can do to one another then one only need look on this image.

Today the longest hatred is finding new expression. Jewish shops and businesses are boycotted. Jewish MPs are targeted by the far right through social media and armed guards are posted at Jewish schools and synagogues. In 2005, on the sixtieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, the then Prime Minister Tony Blair said that the Holocaust began not with gas chambers but broken windows.

We know where boycotts lead. This painting stands testimony to the depravity of humanity and its descent to hell when arrogance and prejudice go unchecked.

Revd Bruce Thompson

Details from the painting, and the reproduction of 'The Pool at Bethesda', come from the 'Creative Spirit' study resource based on the Methodist Modern Art Collection, copyright Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes 2010.