

Homily for Christmas Midnight Mass 2009

By Dom David Tomlins OCSO

Dear Brothers and Friends,

I begin this reflection with an incident related by the former Master General of the Dominicans, Fr. Timothy Radcliffe. It is not immediately and obviously a Christmas story. I hope its relevance will become clear. He writes:

In 1999 a statue of the 'Ecce Homo', the naked Christ, was placed on a plinth in Trafalgar Square, London. It was of a slim young man, who looked incredibly vulnerable. Unlike all the statues of the great and the good around him, and even the lions, he was just our size. A passer-by is reported to have said, 'If that's Jesus Christ, it's a bloody miracle. You couldn't put your faith in someone like that, he's as weak as a kitten' (Neil MacGregor with Eriak Langmuir, *Seeing Salvation, Images of Christ in Art*, London, 2000, p. 115; used by Timothy Radcliffe in *What Is The Point Of Being A Christian?*, p. 66).

Let us recall that St. John witnesses: "The Word was made flesh and lived among us" (John 1:14). This is the mystery we know as **the Incarnation**, the Son of God becoming one of us, "completely like his brothers", as the *Letter to the Hebrews* (2:17) expresses it. The 'Ecce Homo' **artist**, it seems to me, has got it right: Jesus of Nazareth was indeed "just our size". He was "incredibly vulnerable" - look at the figure on the cross behind me. If you like, he was "as weak as a kitten". The Trafalgar Square **passer-by** has failed to appreciate the mystery. Can this "incredibly vulnerable" person be God, can we "put our faith in someone like that"? Mark tells us of the response of someone on the spot at the crucifixion: "The centurion, who was standing in front of him, had seen how he died, and he said, 'In truth this man was a son of God'" (Mk. 15:39). He had seen how he died, he saw the incredible vulnerability; and *nevertheless* he knew that Jesus was one in whom you could put your trust. This is the **paradox** of the Word made flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. Millions, in the footsteps of the centurion, have put their faith in this incredibly vulnerable one.

I now turn to a significant Australian poet, **Francis Webb**, who died in 1973, aged forty-eight. Francis was a very vulnerable person. He suffered from chronic schizophrenia and spent a large part of his adult life in psychiatric care. On a visit to England he fell apart and had himself admitted to the rather crude public wards of Hellesdon Hospital in an outlying suburb of Norwich. His confinement dragged on for some years. Francis, like the psalmist, lamented that he could not sing his songs in a foreign land. Two of the medical super-intendants, however, found out that he had something of a poetic reputation in his home country and sought to encourage him to use his gift. One of them, Dr. Francis Napier, invited Webb to his home to see his five day old son, Christopher John. This visit pressed the button which released his pent-up creative energy. The immediate result was his best known poem, "Five Days Old". Hopefully you might have come across it. Its meaning moves on a number of levels. It starts out from the vulnerable five day old Christopher John, but moves to the mystery of "Christ in the stable". Webb begins:

Christmas is in the air.
You are given into my hands
Out of quietest, loneliest lands.
My trembling is all my prayer.
To blown straw was given
All the fullness of heaven.

His encounter with this baby, Christopher John, becomes an epiphany, a revelation for him. It is a star that leads him like the Magi to the manger and his confession of the Saviour. **Wonder**, not scandal, is Webb's response: "**My trembling is all my prayer**". He is receptive to God's chosen approach to his people in love.

The tiny, not the immense,
Will teach our groping eyes.
So the absorbed skies
Bleed stars of innocence.
So cloud-voice in war and trouble
Is at last Christ in the stable.

"**The tiny, not the immense**" opens Francis' eyes, and he, now one of the Magi, recognises in the fragility, the vulnerability of the five day old child "all

the fullness of heaven... given into my hands". Isaiah, in the first reading (Is. 9:1-7), announced: "there is a child born for us, a son given to us". In John's Gospel Jesus himself says: "God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son" (John 3:16). This fulfilment and its unexpected form has been announced tonight to the shepherds and to us by the angel (Lk. 2:1-14): "I bring you news of great joy, a joy to be shared by the whole people. Today in the town of David a saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. And here is a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger". Francis, holding Christopher John, confesses the mystery of the son given to our race in Bethlehem: "**all the fullness of heaven... given into my hands**", given to each one of us. "All flesh is grass", the psalmist said of our fragility. Webb surely has us in mind, as well as the manger, when he writes: "To blown straw was given all the fullness of heaven".

With Christopher John in his hands Francis contemplates "the mystery of creation":

Now wonderingly engrossed
In your fearless delicacies,
I am launched upon sacred seas,
Humbly and utterly lost
In the mystery of creation,
Bells, bells of ocean.

Too pure for my tongue to praise,
The sober, exquisite yawn
Or the gradual, generous dawn
At an eyelid, maker of days...

I have probably used enough of Francis Webb to suggest to you something of the wonder that he found in **God's chosen vulnerability** in the Child of Bethlehem, in Jesus of Nazareth who would always be "just our size". "The tiny, not the immense, will teach our groping eyes". So let us accept Francis' invitation to come "out here by the manger" and

In the sleeping, weeping weather
We shall all kneel down together.

Words are unnecessary. Let our “trembling” be “all (our) prayer”.

On behalf of the monastic community, I wish you all the blessings of the Son who is given to us.