

Homily for the Solemnity of our Holy Founders (26 Jan 2010)

By Dom David Tomlins

Dear Brothers and Friends,

Today is a slightly crowded calendar of celebrations for us here. As a community we join with the members of our Order around the world in the Solemnity of **the Cistercian Founders**, Saints Robert of Molesme, Alberic, and Stephen Harding. As citizens we celebrate **Australia Day**, a day of a certain ambivalence, the day of the arrival of the First Fleet and the beginnings of non-indigenous settlement with the joys and sorrows which subsequent history has brought. This year we also rejoice with our **Br Samuel** and all those others who will receive **Australian citizenship** in ceremonies around the nation today.

It is **a eucharistic occasion**, an occasion to give thanks: thanks for the graces which have come to us through Robert, Alberic and Stephen and the long line of faithful monks who finally brought us the opportunity today to experience God's love in this place; thanks also for the generations who have built this nation and given us what we often call, with good cause, "a lucky country", but which is also a blessed country, blessed with rich resources, structures which have served us well, and above all a stability and peace which is the envy of so many other peoples; blessed also in the faith of so many who have served the people of this country through prayer and good works. May Mary MacKillop's canonisation make this a very special year for the Church of Australia.

While offering abundant and joyful thanks to the Trinity for all the good things which are ours in this world, let us keep our focus on "the real homeland... the better homeland... (our) **heavenly homeland**" which the second reading (*Hebrews* 11:1-2.8-19) points us to. Jesus in the gospel (Mk. 10:17-30) warns of the reverse side of the coin of living in "the lucky country", namely, the danger of having our vision and desires *narrowed* to the here and now of earthly possession, becoming too comfortable. "How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!" There is nothing amiss with creation. "God saw all that he had made, and indeed it was very good" (Gen.1:31). But our human heart is tempted to put creation in the place of the Creator, to give what is relative ultimate value. That is a terrible impoverishment.

Many of today's billionaires are not content with what they have accumulated, and perhaps have lost sight of the treasure and pearl of the kingdom (Mt.

13:44-46), the "eternal life" promised by Jesus to Peter who asks the "what about us who have left everything and followed you?" question. Jesus has taught us all, through the gospel, to sit as lightly as we can to earthly possessions. Earthly contingency - think of the Boxing Day tsunami, the bushfires of February 7 last year, and the Haiti earthquake of recent weeks - can strip us of everything, even life, in the twinkling of an eye anyhow. Jesus re-directs our hearts to the lasting, the eternal:

Do not store up treasures for yourselves on earth,
where moths and woodworms destroy them and thieves can break in
and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven,
where neither moth nor woodworms destroy them and thieves cannot
break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be
also. (Mt 6:19-21; Lk 12:33-34)

One of our early Cistercian documents speaks of Molesme, the house from which Citeaux, the first Cistercian community, was founded as blessed by God:

From its origin (we are told), God's clemency within a short while made illustrious by the gifts of his grace, and ennobled it with illustrious men; nor did he render it less ample in possessions than resplendent in virtues. (*The Exordium Cistercii*, n.3)

Possessions are named as one of the blessings from God. However, aware of the trap they can also constitute, some of the community, those who became our Cistercian founders, were on their guard. The account continues:

Still, because association of possessions with virtues is not usually long-lasting, certain men from that holy congregation - men undoubtedly wise and of deeper understanding - chose rather to be occupied with heavenly pursuits than to be entangled in earthly affairs. So it was that the lovers of the virtues soon enough began thinking upon poverty, fruitful mother of a virile stock, at the same time perceiving that, though one could live there in a holy and respectable manner, this still fell short of their desire and purpose to observe the Rule they had professed. They speak to one another about what is moving each one of them, and likewise discuss together how they may fulfil that verse, "I will pay my vows, which my lips have uttered". (*The Exordium Cistercii*, n.4-6)

This, according to *The Exordium Cistercii*, was the seed of what became our Order: **a deep and serious desire "to be occupied with heavenly pursuits"** and not "entangled in earthly affairs".

For each of us here this morning, member of the monastic community or fellow Christian and friend, this surely remains an important witness for our own journey. The gospel passage flowed on from the previous pericope (Mk. 10:17-22) in which the man ran up, knelt before Jesus and asked him, "Good master, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus directed him first to the keeping of the commandments, but then to a freedom from possessions which would allow him to seek true treasure by following Jesus: "There is one thing you lack. Go and sell everything you own and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me". The man "went away sad, for he was a man of great wealth". His wealth was an entanglement for his heart. Our Cistercian founders, on the other hand, freed their hearts of such an entanglement in order "to be occupied with heavenly pursuits".

The question for each one of us is: what concretely constitutes an entanglement for me, and what frees me to seek true treasure? There is not one single formula. The answer is important.

We sang in our Magnificat antiphon: "These are men of mercy whose godly deeds have not been forgotten; their wealth remains in their families, their holy heritage with their descendants". May we prove ourselves worthy descendants of Robert, Alberic and Stephen deeply and seriously "occupied with heavenly pursuits".