

## Pluscarden Abbey: Homilies

### Christmas Day, 2010

**‘The Word was made flesh, he lived among us, and we saw his glory.’**

In the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, there’s a painting of the Adoration of the Magi we’d all recognise when we see it. It’s by Gentile da Fabriano, and it dates to 1423. It is full of people and animals and clothes and colour, and draws the eye to Mary, to the Child on her knee and the sumptuously clad King at his feet. The King in fact looks distinctly uncomfortable, ungainly, trying to prostrate. One has the feeling this isn’t something he usually does. Perhaps more commonly people prostrated to him. He is also bald. And he’s only inches from Mary’s knees, and the Child. He seems to be trying to kiss Jesus’ dangling feet. But here’s the lovely touch. Jesus the baby is leaning forward and putting his podgy little hand on the bald dome of the king. That can be taken seriously: as a blessing. But one wonders if this isn’t just humour. The baby Jesus simply can’t resist touching, feeling this bald head. And it’s hard to escape the impression that the King is disconcerted.



‘The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.’ There’s layer upon layer here. In this painting Jesus is exploring, in a baby’s way, the world he has entered. One of the famous heretics of Christian history, the 5th c. Nestorius of Constantinople, once remarked, ‘I will never accept the idea a 3 month old baby is God.’ There is the whole pride of man. Has it ever crossed our mind that the purpose of God becoming a baby could be because he wants to play with us? In the Old Testament book of Proverbs, the mysterious figure of Wisdom says this, ‘I was beside the master craftsman, [God the Creator], delighting him day after day, ever at play in his presence, at play everywhere on his earth, delighting to be with the children of men’ (Prov 8:30-31). This is the Word, the Son, through whom all things were made, ever at play in the presence of his Father, and now - the Word made flesh - wanting to play with us. Play, it’s said, is a form of rehearsal for adult life. That’s what adults would say, isn’t it? Surely, it’s something done for its own sake, out of sheer delight in things, simple joie de vivre. Lovers like to play together. It’s an overflow of the joy they have in each other. Like nonsense or teasing... Play is the victory of purposelessness, of delight over utility, enjoyment over function. If it is a rehearsal, it’s a rehearsal for eternity. And so here’s this poor old king - a good fellow, no doubt of it - looking so awkward and solemn, sprawling at Jesus’ feet, trying his best, so very us, burdened with all he has made of himself. And Jesus tickling his bald pate, wanting to play with him.

‘The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.’ This is the funny thing. It’s the biggest imaginable affirmation of us, of our dignity. As Karl Rahner said, it’s ‘God speaking his last, his deepest, his most beautiful word to the world. And that word is, “I love you, man; I love you, world”.’ And at the same time it’s subversion of all our pomposity, false dignity, strutting and posturing, dressing up in this or that, and pretending we are what we’re not. Christmas is a Child wanting to play with us. It’s a Son who wants us to share the delight he has in his Father. ‘He came to his own domain and his own people did not accept him. But to all who did accept him, he gave power to become children of God.’ Jesus comes to lighten us - to pierce our pomposity, to take us into the joy he has in his Father and in us. ‘In the beginning was the Word...and through him all things were made.’ And today the Word becomes flesh and dwells among us, God a child. He comes to be a new beginning, the source of a new creation. He comes to make a new world. When we were baptised - as children probably - we were brought into that world. We became the children of God. Christmas is an invitation to let go of our masks and pretences, and be what we really are, the carefree children of God. May Jesus lay his hand

on our baldness!

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