

**Nunc Dimittis** - Desmond Alban SSF, Freeland, 31<sup>st</sup> January 2014

Again he treads the well-worn path,  
Faith an old remembered habit,  
The dim recall of some ancient hope  
Almost gone in weary, wearing, whittled away repetition.  
Each year, each day, each footfall a greater burden:  
Tired feet, worn-out limbs, stooping back, failing eyes, fading vision,  
The ritual of the daily pilgrimage,  
A quarter of a Sabbath day's journey,  
A whispered recollection.  
And the voice of the wind a compulsion,  
To tread the path at least this one more time,  
That today is not the day for capitulation.

Once, there had been confidence, youth, vitality,  
Like that of the woman on her wedding day;  
The prelude to seven years of joy,  
And eighty-four of holding on,  
The relentless onslaught of diminishment and decay,  
The awful ordinariness of the human condition.  
There she will be, this day, like every day,  
Always at her station  
Disturbed – disturbing – unsettling,  
In her Divine-mad utterances, her strange conviction.

He crosses the threshold.  
The stones, unlike the man and woman, not ancient,  
At least as stones go:  
A new-hewn architecture,  
Of a vassal-tyrant's vanity.  
Seventy more years  
And not one shall be left upon another,  
Yet carrying already embedded echoes,  
Ancient hopes, ancient fears,  
Joyful cymbals and stringed instruments,  
The singing of the Sons of Levi,  
The gore and odour of slashing and burning,  
Of daily covenanting in fire and blood,  
And all to no avail, except to keep alive that whisper of an ancient hope  
That God is with his people.

And today, more blood, more burning:  
'A pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.'  
Concession to the poor: two beaked-and-feathered lives  
Redeem the neck of a first-born son.  
The old man's arms find long-forgotten strength,  
Taking up the forty-day-infant.  
Here too finding what he never sought,  
An uninvited insight,  
The foretaste of bloody sacrifice,  
Fear, suffering, pain,  
A fire to engulf even the mother,  
'A sword will pierce your own soul too.'  
But in the child, as in the temple, mingled hope,  
The new glow of a light to flood the world,  
First ray of some scarcely dreamed-of dawn,  
A presence in the darkness and the fear.  
It is enough.

'My eyes have seen your salvation. Now Lord, you let your servant go in peace.'