

Now is our darkest hour - and we could present a whole litany of horrors at this point, but you well know what they are - we seek and find hope in the promise of the coming of the light, the turning of the year, represented not firstly in a litany of joys but in the birth of a child and the paradox of helplessness, for a child at this stage can only receive and yet becomes a gift to us of great joy. Ironically the giving and receiving of gifts has become a diversion from this essential dynamic of helplessness – a form of barter in which we think we find joy but which will ultimately fail us. So presents have their place – and the rest of this homily will be based on two such presents – but it's the presence of the Christ- child which is ultimately fulfilling – of the God become flesh (as we later realise) who gifts us hope through helplessness.

This is what I think I mean. The first story comes from a delightful but disturbing book by Robin Wall Kimmerer, a professor of botany, of Potawatami heritage and the title and theme of the book is ' Gathering Mosses' which she does in a very restrained way in order to further her study but on one occasion finds herself hired by an immensely rich landowner, whom she never gets to know or meet, in order to advise him through his agents, on how to re -create an original landscape complete with all its original mosses in the garden of his new ecologically aware house. She eventually advises that this is not really possible – these sorts of mosses grow best and indeed only over many, many years as the forest itself grows. But the owner has already transplanted many ancient trees to his garden and wants the moss as well so that it looks entirely natural, and can't wait the for the many years that this might take – so she finds herself no longer required. A year or so later however she's given the chance to return and is amazed to find the house surrounded by a completely natural rock face with all its trees and mosses in place – until she realises that what the owner has done is simply transplanted a complete rock face, rocks, mosses, trees and all, from its original site a few miles away which now of course shares the devastation of so much of the surrounding fully logged forest. And it will be a landscape that will eventually fail – so subtle and time- consuming is the work of creation. What the owner hasn't understood is his own helplessness.

And at the risk of not doing it justice for the sake of brevity the other book was The Hare with Amber Eyes by Edmund De Waal – the story of his immensely rich and cultured forebears who lost everything in the Nazi Holocaust – especially when Hitler took Austria under his wing in 1938. Except that is for the fine series of small carved Japanese figures known as Netsuke including the Hare with The Amber Eyes – hidden in a mattress by a maid and returned to the family at the end of the war and a reminder then of their ' helplessness '. I haven't finished the book yet but have been struck so far by the failure of the immense wealth and attempts at cultural assimilation of this Jewish family to save them from disaster. So perhaps it isn't about that after all – in the same way as Christmas isn't simply about bartering presents.

We don't find our hope in the Christmas tree but in the impossibility of God becoming flesh – a helpless child in a helpless world – and yet through that very helplessness – ending after all on a cross – giving creation it's true and only meaning, including us, there to receive and in our turn to become channels of God's gift, of God's power of recreation, of God's love.