

THIS LITTLE BABE

This little Babe so few days old,
Is come to rifle Satan's fold;
All hell doth at his presence quake,
Though he himself for cold do shake;
For in this weak unarmèd wise
The gates of hell he will surprise.

With tears he fights and wins the field,
His naked breast stands for a shield;
His battering shot are babish cries,
His arrows, looks of weeping eyes,
His martial ensigns, Cold and Need,
And feeble Flesh, his warrior's steed.

His camp is pitchèd in a stall,
His bulwark but a broken wall;
The crib his trench, haystalks his stakes;
Of shepherds he his muster makes;
And thus, as sure his foe to wound,
The angels' trumps alarum sound.

My soul, with Christ join thou in fight;
Stick to the tents that he hath pight,
Within his crib is surest ward;
This little babe will be thy guard.
If thou wilt foil thy foes with joy,
Then flit not from this heavenly boy.

St Robert Southwell

[Cf. Benjamin Britten, *Op. 28, A Ceremony of Carols.*]

Robert Southwell (1561–1595) was born in Horsham St Faith's, Norfolk. He was educated by the Jesuits in Douai (France) and in Rome. He was ordained a priest in 1584 and returned to England in 1586 with Fr Henry Garnett (subsequently executed for alleged complicity in the Gunpowder plot). For six years he laboured to promote and preserve the faith amidst the persecution of Elizabeth. He became domestic chaplain in 1589 to the Countess of Arundel. He was captured at Uxendon Hall, Harrow, in 1592 when going to celebrate Mass. He was repeatedly cruelly tortured and after three years imprisonment was executed in the barbaric way characteristic of the time. He wrote many poems, most of them while he was in prison. He was beatified in 1929 by Pius XI, and canonised by Paul VI in 1970.