

THE
CHRISTIAN
COMMUNITY

The Gospel Readings in the Cycle of the Year

Hans-Werner Schroeder

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Behind the highlights of the festivals of the Christian Year, there is a series of readings from the gospels which are used in the Act of Consecration of Man, the Communion Service of The Christian Community. Deeper study of these readings reveals a composition which has nothing arbitrary about it. Motifs develop and grow from week to week; even the particular gospel from which a reading is taken is expressive of an aspect of the events it describes.

What emerges is a new gospel, taking its content from the other gospels, but living in time and in the rhythm of the Christian year. Hans-Werner Schroeder shows how this gospel expresses the life of Christ, which was a unique historical event, as a living reality within the course of every year.

Hans-Werner Schroeder

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in the Cycle of the Year

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Introduction

From about the fourth century it became customary to fix the gospel readings allocated to be read during church services. The passages were called 'pericopes,' which means 'excerpts' or 'readings.' During the Middle Ages the readings were brought together in (often beautifully illustrated) manuscripts called *evangelaries*. The readings of The Christian Community are based on indications by Rudolf Steiner. As is so often the case with true inspiration, his indications had antecedents. The ancient order of readings preserved in the Anglican Book of Common Prayer has many similarities with what is read in The Christian Community. Many of the indications as to what is to be read are unambiguous; at other times they are open to interpretation, or not indicated at all. The decision as to which reading to choose then rests with the local priest(s).

A fundamental element of a new understanding of the gospels is that each has its own characteristic composition. Its composition gives each gospel its unity, and joins its parts into an organic whole. Each passage of gospel has its proper place, functioning there in such a way that it could not be exchanged with another. The order in which the sections appear is not determined by chance, nor is it merely chronological. An inner formative principle is at work, which may be compared with

the principle giving rise to an organic form — for example, the human body — or to artistic designs and compositions.

There are sequences of readings in the gospels in which a particular motif undergoes an intensification; as can be seen in the sequence of parables, or in the healings. There are motifs which change and metamorphose, divide and reunite, thereby elucidating each other to allow a deeper understanding; for example, the love motif in the gospel of St John in its stages as *eros*, *philia* and *agape*,* or a sequence of settings such as sea, mountain, house, which in their succession indicate something beyond what words alone could express.

In relation to the sequence of gospel readings through the year, we might ask whether there is a similar principle of composition. At first sight this does not seem to be the case. The readings are drawn from all four gospels, and encompass a very wide range. It is sometimes hard to see any principle behind the choice. For example, the first two of the three Christmas readings — the birth of Jesus (Matt.1), the annunciation to the shepherds (Luke 2) — are clearly related to Christmas. But the third — the Words of the risen Christ (John 21) — is an Easter narrative! A similar situation arises with the Advent reading, Luke 21, which belongs chronologically to the events of the Tuesday of Holy Week. The Michaelmas reading is not, as might be expected, about the fall of the dragon as described in Revelation 12, but the parable of the royal wedding from Matthew 22, also belonging chronologically to the Tuesday of Holy Week.

What are the reasons for this? The purpose of this booklet is to show that in spite of an apparent randomness in the choice of readings, the order in which they appear is meaningful. Their choice is based on a definite composition. Were

* Rudolf Frieling, *New Testament Studies*.

it not for the fact that the expression is already in use, it would be possible to speak of a 'fifth gospel,'* one derived from the other four, but of a higher order, based on distinctly different principles, namely on the structure of the cycle of the year.

The following may make this clear. Each of the four gospels is based on particular principles which have traditionally been represented by the symbols of the Evangelists:

John, the eagle,
Luke, the (sacrificial) bull,
Mark, the lion,
Matthew, the angel-man.

These symbols can be seen to characterize one particular aspect of the all-encompassing being of Christ which each evangelist presents. Each evangelist emphasizes a different aspect.

John: the powers of consciousness and the spirit,
Luke : the powers of feeling and devotion,
Mark : the powers of the will and the deeds of Christ,
Matthew shows how these powers work together in Jesus as
a human being.

It is not hard to see the connection of these qualities with the traditional symbols.

If we turn once more to the question raised earlier: what formative principle underlies the sequence of readings? What can we learn from it? The answer must be: the life of Christ as he lives through the year. In other words, the order of the readings is a mirror of that which Christ experiences and accomplishes for and with the earth, for and with humanity,

* Rudolf Steiner used this expression for descriptions of events which augment the four gospels.

and in what he gives to the Father and to the cosmos. The Christian year is the unfolding life of Christ today.

The gospels are not simply a collection of stories. They are the 'life of Christ.' Looked at in an outward way, the gospels are a description of the life and destiny of Jesus Christ on earth. But they are more than this. The words of the gospels embody the living power of Christ. His vital power lives in them: healing, comforting, awakening, encouraging, reminding, judging, always speaking directly to human hearts and touching them.

We have seen that the four gospels present the life of Christ in four different forms. Now, in the cycle of readings in the year, it appears before us in another form. The life of Christ has a direct, real, actual presence in the cycle of the year. Christ lives with us from week to week, continuously revealing new aspects of his being to us as we pass from season to season.

We are familiar with the thought that at Christmas we meet a different aspect of the life of Christ than at Easter. At Christmas the annunciation with its grace and light, and its gifts of peace and goodness, is in the foreground. At Easter we see Christ bearing the load of the suffering of humanity, wrestling with affliction and death, and then overcoming all this. At these two points in the year we experience two very different sides of Christ's life. To this familiar thought must be added two others, if we want to approach the reality of the readings.

First, the content of the festivals is not merely a remembrance of events in the life of Jesus Christ on earth. These events become real every year anew.

Second, it is not only during the major festivals that the direct presence of Christ's deeds can be experienced. Every week, Christ's living relationship with humanity takes a further step.

One of the basic convictions of those concerned with religious renewal is that the Christian festivals are not merely memorial festivals, but are newly created events. The *hodie natus est* of the old mass, 'today he is born,' is true, because it describes an inner reality. This birth did not only happen then, two thousand years ago. Every year at Christmas Christ unites himself with the earth and humanity, being 'born' again for them, even though not as a child in a stable at Bethlehem. The magic of Christmas is based on the inner reality of this spiritual fact.

Similarly, Holy Week and Easter are not there simply to serve as days of pious remembrance of events which happened long ago. They, too, are filled with a living reality. Christ descends again into the depths of humanity, unites himself again with the burdens and darkness of earthly life, in order to plant again the seed of overcoming and resurrection. Black and red, the altar colours of The Christian Community during Passiontide and Easter, express these aspects of the ever-present life of Christ. Black for the experience of deepest darkness and pain, which Christ takes upon himself every year anew. The radiant red expresses the victory over these powers of darkness and pain, the victory over death which Christ achieves each year. To the colours are added the readings, which give these experiences their own verbal expression.

We can see the other Christian festivals in this way. But then there are often many weeks between the festivals, during which the progress, the changes in the life of Christ are not as clearly visible as the change from Christmas to Easter. Yet the reading usually changes from week to week. Does this indicate that there is a steady forward movement throughout the year? Does each new reading mark a new inner step in the life and deeds of Christ for mankind?

If this were so, we might see that the change from Christmas to Easter would not consist of a single big leap. Easter would be reached on the way from Christmas in many small steps, which we would be able to accompany, and help bring about, as we 'walk with Christ'. The path through the other times of the year could be experienced with the same wakefulness.

The aim of the next six chapters is to describe the stages along this way, and to reveal thereby the inner structure and order of the readings. On the way we will begin to discover that fifth gospel, which is made up of individual readings from the four gospels. This is the gospel of the year, which is the life of Christ as it unfolds in our midst.

1 Advent to Epiphany

Advent

The Christian year begins with Advent. Together with Christmas and Epiphany it forms the festival of the promise of redemption. Christmas is the festival of the birth of Christ for the earth and for humanity. Each year a stream of grace and love united with Christ pours out of the Godhead in overflowing abundance. The gospels speak of the light of the angels which shines over the shepherds in the fields, and of the star which appears over the kings. Light and star belong to the child who has been born on earth, and who carries the divine promise within himself. *Hodie natus est*, 'Today he has been born.' Christmas is the festival of the renewed fulfilment of the divine promise of salvation.

For this reason it can seem surprising that this festival is preceded by a reading which speaks of tremendous upheavals and destruction taking on cosmic dimensions. 'And there shall be (spiritual) signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars.' The Advent reading, Luke 21:25–36, describes the fear and helplessness to which humanity is subjected. A picture of darkness arises before us.

This picture becomes even more dramatic when we realize that we have here a passage from Holy Week. Luke 21

belongs to the gospel chapters describing the Tuesday of Holy Week, particularly to the apocalypse of the Mount of Olives, in which Christ foresees some of the future apocalyptic events, and describes them to his disciples. Through these images of destruction, which initially apply only to the Jewish Temple, other images of greater chaos and catastrophes appear.

But this apocalypse would not be complete if it consisted only of images of destruction. 'Apocalypse' does not mean catastrophe or ruin, as use of the word often implies today. It means a 'revelation of that which has been hidden,' and refers to the appearance of the divine world in the midst of destruction. The reading in Luke 21 goes on to describe the appearance of Christ within the upheavals, and it becomes clear that humanity may become conscious of the appearance of the Son of Man in the very midst of tribulation. A new world arises out of the destruction, which is carried by the power of Christ's words: 'Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall never pass away.' The power which is to bring about the future is woven into the destruction. Through Christ's power that overcomes all death and destruction, it is able to manifest at the very moment when the outer shell of the world becomes brittle.

'Destruction of outward appearances will be the dawn of inner soul realities' (Rudolf Steiner). This is the motto of the Advent time. In order to receive the light of Christmas in the right way, it is necessary to go through the upheavals of a crumbling world, seeking at the same time to sense the dawning of the future. Thus the advent reading is *the* basic reading of the entire year. It is the deep note that sounds beneath all the other readings, in which the words of Christ are to become truly alive.

'Heaven and earth shall pass away ...' — we feel ourselves

very much in the midst of breakdown and upheaval today. But by means of the gospel readings through the year, and by means of the sacrament, we should also feel ourselves in the sphere of activity of 'his words,' of which he said that they would 'never pass away.' As human beings on earth we take part in the destructive processes whether we want to or not. To take part in the creation of the Christ world is only possible when we want to do so. The destruction seems very real to us. We can experience the building up of Christ's world as even more real. Nature — heaven and earth — shall perish; that which comes from Christ exists, and will continue to exist.

Luke 21 may be read on all four Advent Sundays (and on the weekdays) up to and including December 24. Other readings for this time which can also be suitable are Phil.4:1–9, 1Thess.4:12–18, 1Thess.5:1–11. These readings take up the fundamental theme of Advent, emphasizing different aspects.

Christmas: the three Acts of Consecration

The apocalyptic tones of the Advent reading are followed by the great positive images of the Christmas reading. They begin at the Christmas midnight Act of Consecration with the *Birth of the child*, from Matthew 1:1–25; they continue on the morning of December 25 in the second Act of Consecration with the *Birth of the child and the annunciation to the shepherds* from Luke 2:1–20, and conclude in the third Christmas Act of Consecration on December 25 with the *Conversation of the Risen One with Peter*, John 21:15–25.

The fact that on December 25 three Acts of Consecration are celebrated within a short space of time — from midnight

to just before midday — indicates the extraordinary nature of the event which occurs during this night. The source of light, goodwill and grace is revealed, and we are able to draw from its abundance three times on this day, without exhausting it. Every year the earth and mankind receive an infusion of divine strength at Christmas.

This infusion, which is a gift — it has not yet been earned by human deeds — is indicated by the readings in the image of the birth and appearance of the child. The arrival of a child on earth can always be experienced as a gift. At Christmas it is the appearance of the *divine* child, to whom we can give all the love which has ever been bestowed upon a child.

The divine forces which are revealed through this child are of a twofold nature. Matthew's gospel describes the royal force which lives in this child. His hidden name resounds: 'Emmanuel — God with us' (1:23). That means the kingdom of God, its cosmic power and cosmic penetrating wisdom draws close to humanity, it 'dwells among us' (John 1:14). God is no longer the supersensory ruler, the Lord, but he draws near, he takes on a human countenance. The child which is carried on the arms of Raphael's *Sistine Madonna* expresses this wonderful childlike royalty in a profoundly beautiful way.

In the child in St Luke's gospel, a compassion for all beings, a sympathy for even the most human qualities of humanity, appears. It is the shepherds who receive the child as the divine promise that even the poorest and most insignificant of human natures will be taken up in the compassion and mercy of God. The divine glory is revealed in the heights; this revelation will be such that there will be 'peace on earth to men of good will.' These words form the basic tone of the second Act of Consecration on Christmas Day.

Allowing the twofold nature of the divine child to enter our hearts brings us close to the source of strength which wants to bestow its gifts upon us at Christmas. We may attempt to allow the twofold magic of this night to speak to us through the child. We may love God as we can love a child. For what arises during this night as a source of strength is in itself still very young, pure, and untouched, like a child.

It remains now to take the third step. The first two gospel readings are heard in the deepest darkness of the night as a message of light and love, and in the light of the early dawn as a proclamation of peace and mercy. Now it is day — and an Easter passage, John 21, is read at the altar. Nevertheless, it contains a Christmas note. In Christ's question to Peter, 'Do you love me?' the love motif of Christmas resounds again, but in the opposite direction, as it were. It is God who asks about the love of mankind. Something enters the Christmas message at this point which has not been emphasized in the traditions of Christmas until now. The Book of Common Prayer gives this reading for St Stephen's Day, December 26. In the Act of Consecration, it is read from Christmas morning at least until New Year. This reading confronts us with a task. The events of Christmas are not to remain merely a gift and a promise. This reading with its question introduces a motif that carries on throughout the sequence of readings. We as human beings are to take part in what is happening. We may hear the question to Peter, and the command to 'feed my sheep' which follows, as being directed to ourselves. What answer can we give?

The twelve days

In the restlessness of the present it is becoming more and more important fully to experience the twelve days of Christmas with their special spiritual qualities, and to keep them free from too much outer activity as far as this is possible. In many congregations the Act of Consecration is celebrated daily, and a growing number of people make every effort to take part every day. This time can be experienced as a source of spiritual strength for the whole of the following year. It is a unique period in the cycle of the year, one which is especially 'open' to the influences of the spiritual world.

It is usual to read John 21 during these days, thereby putting the reading which asks about the deeds of man in the foreground. Other readings are also possible, for example 1John 1:1–10, 1John 4:7–16, which both speak in a wonderful way about divine love and human love.

On New Year's day, the prologue of St John's gospel (1:1–18) can be read, as it describes the forces from which everything that is new must spring. Sometimes the 'presentation in the Temple' is read (Luke 2:21–39).

Epiphany

As we leave the holy days and nights of Christmas, we enter a new festive season, the festival of Epiphany. January 6 is a high Christian festival. The gospel reading is from Chapter 2 of St Matthew and concerns the appearance of the star and the arrival of the kings. 'Epiphany' is derived from a Greek word meaning 'appearance' or 'manifestation'. In The Christian Community we relate this word to the whole of the Epiphany

time, which is celebrated for four weeks. The traditional churches did not have such an Epiphany season. What is the nature of the manifestation we are looking at during these four weeks?

The readings during this time are as follows:

On January 6 and on the following Sunday: *The star and the kings* (Matt.2:1–12).

On the second Sunday: *The twelve-year-old Jesus in the Temple* (Luke 2:41–52).

On the third Sunday: *The marriage at Cana* (John 2:1–11) or *the centurion at Capernaum* (Matt.8:1–13).

On the fourth Sunday: *a healing*.

What is the meaning of this sequence? Its consecutive steps speak of a progressive incarnation, a penetration of earthly realities by the spirit. The images themselves indicate this.

In Matthew 2 the star appears over the house in which the child is present; a direct image that a spiritual reality, the star, is preparing to enter an earthly dwelling. It is still shining over the body of the child which has been born, as happens with every newborn human being.

The following reading indicates the next step. The star no longer shines over the child and over the house, but radiates as wisdom and love from the twelve-year-old in the Temple. The star has moved in, it has ‘incarnated’ (that is, ‘become flesh’), and enters into its surroundings as the thoughts and words of the boy.

The third stage of this incarnation is indicated by the wedding at Cana. Now the star reveals that it is actually a sun, and that it breaks through the person who carries it within himself, not only as wisdom and love, but also with sunlike powers of transformation. What the sun accomplishes in nature — the transformation of water into wine in the vine —

Christ accomplishes by virtue of his spiritual sunlike authority within humanity, represented by the guests at the wedding.

The final step is taken when a healing is read. The manifestation of the spirit within the realities of earthly life (that is, the epiphany of Christ) is intensified to become a power of healing, which not only transforms that which is healthy (Cana), but is able to heal what has become sick.

Therefore, what appears in this sequence of readings is the progressive manifestation of Christ on the earth, and his growing powers of authority over earthly conditions.

Why not the Baptism on January 6?

The question is often asked, why the passage about the Baptism in the Jordan is not read in connection with Epiphany. According to tradition, January 6 is not only Three Kings Day, (and the day of the marriage at Cana), but also the day commemorating the Baptism in the Jordan; that is, the 'appearance' of Christ and the 'manifestation' of his relationship with Jesus. What has been said earlier gives us a perspective which will help to find an answer to this question. We have seen that the sequence of Epiphany readings describes a progressive incarnation. What appears in the Baptism in the Jordan as *one* tremendous image, the appearance of Christ from the spiritual world and his penetration of the body of Jesus, unfolds in *four* stages in the four Epiphany readings, thereby becoming visible as a process.

With this in mind it also becomes clear why the season of Epiphany with its four steps follows the grand revelation of Christmas. What has shone over us during Christmas in luminous splendour, now wants to descend in stages in order to become earthly reality; what at Christmas was the great, mer-

ciful promise of redemption, now wants to become a real human being, and accompany us in our daily lives.

Christmas can become for us more and more an elevated time of compassion and mercy. That it is possible today to add to it a further festive season of four weeks is one of the great gifts of the Christian renewal. It gives us the possibility of reflecting on our Christmas experiences, and to unite these with our daily lives.

Rudolf Steiner once revealed something of the mystery of the Epiphany weeks, when he said that during this time 'Christ walks beside us,'* and that this is the time when we can become more and more conscious of what has happened at Christmas, just as in the morning we are able to have an echo of what we experienced during sleep. In continuation of our contemplation of the four Epiphany readings, we could add: At Christmas, Christ appears as the light from the spiritual world. At Epiphany he unites himself more and more with the world of earthly realities, he incarnates, so that he is able to 'walk beside us' — invisible, but real; as real as he is presented in the gospels, as a human being; that is, loving, teaching, transforming, healing.

* *Cosmic and Human Metamorphoses*, lecture of February 20, 1917.

Neben uns einherwandelt — the prefix to the verb implies a stately dignity. Expositions of the deeper meanings of German words can be tedious, but it is perhaps worth pointing out that the primary meaning of *wandeln* is 'to change,' and that the noun *Wandlung* means 'transubstantiation.'

2 Between Epiphany and Passiontide

After Epiphany

With the weeks immediately following Epiphany we enter a dynamic time. The date of Shrove Sunday (Shrovetide encompasses the Sunday, Monday and Tuesday before Ash Wednesday) depends on the date of Easter, which varies from year to year. Two readings are given for the period between Epiphany and Shrove Sunday:

The parable of the labourers in the vineyard (Matt.20:1–16);

The parable of the sower (Luke 8:1–8).

In these parables Christ teaches humanity. The teachings of Christ, however, must be understood correctly. Under no circumstances should we imagine anything which may be compared to the abstract, dry instruction which passes as teaching today. In his teaching, Christ did not only speak to the understanding of those who listened to him, but he led living forces from the spiritual world into the souls of the people. This is indicated in the gospels with the words: 'For he spoke with the power of authority, and not as one of the scribes' (Matt.7:29). This must be borne in mind if we are to understand the significance of the change from Epiphany — Christ uniting himself with humanity — to what now follows.

During Epiphany the light of Christ begins to radiate from Jesus, revealing itself in love, and in the powers of transformation and healing. The people experience this revelation as something deeply affecting and changing their lives. Now they are to begin to *understand* what is happening for their sakes. For only when an experience becomes part of our understanding will it be possible for us to take it further. This is the important transition at which we find ourselves with the two parables following Epiphany.

The first parable calls upon the listener to join the work in 'God's vineyard': Whoever works in this vineyard works together with God on the great 'enterprise of humanity.' Whoever has partaken of the light of compassion from the spiritual world, and has been able to experience the progressive revelation of Christ in Jesus through Epiphany, will feel himself called upon to take up the work in the service of this divine revelation. He is promised a reward that is independent of the time he has worked. It is the same for everyone. The wage is taken from that which belongs to the master of the vineyard (Matt.20:15). Rudolf Frieling says about this:

That which is 'mine own' indicates the very 'I-substance' inherent in God. From this substance God wants to give all people their own I. This is what the single denarius symbolizes ... The I derived from God now belongs to human beings ... And it is this which in the course of the divine cosmic enterprise human beings are able to earn as 'their very own.' In the imagery of the parable: each receives his denarius, no more, no less.*

Thus the first lesson we receive when we place ourselves in the service of the Christmas and Epiphany revelation is this:

* Rudolf Frieling, *Christologische Aufsätze*, p.288.

You shall earn a wage from the treasure of the master of the vineyard. It is your own true being which you shall receive. More you will not need, because in this 'one' lies everything you shall need, the fullness of your being human.

The second parable counters a misunderstanding to which the first could easily give rise, were it taken in isolation. It could appear as if the effort individual people put into their work in the vineyard — the work they do in their life on earth — is in vain, if everyone gets the same reward in any case. The parable of the sower makes clear that for the divine seed to thrive in a person, everything depends on the inner preparation of the soul, on the ability to hear, and to unite with the Word. 'He that has ears to hear, let him hear' (Luke 8:8). If Matthew 20 makes clear that the wage is the same for everybody, Luke 8 points out that it is a person's attitude which determines the further working of the divine in the world.

The juxtaposition of these two readings contains a wonderful balance, which bears out the thesis that there is nothing arbitrary in the sequence of the readings.

This is also demonstrated when we notice that the image of the vineyard is placed next to that of the seed growing in the field. Wine and bread are placed before us in a special way. We may remember that wine has already played an important role on our path — at the wedding at Cana — and that the seed which falls into the earth and dies in order to bring forth fruit, will be a leading theme in the Passion of Christ. Following such images and motifs through the readings can be very instructive.

If there are more than two weeks between Epiphany and Shrove Sunday it is possible to extend the realm of 'healing' at the end of Epiphany by choosing further healings from the gospels. But the realm of 'teaching' may also be extended

by choosing another parable or by reading Matthew 20 and/or Luke 8 for two consecutive weeks. The course of action will depend on the needs of the congregation during any particular year. Are the forces of healing, or the forces that awaken consciousness, more needed? If there are fewer than two weeks, the 'realm of teaching' must be shortened, or overlap with Epiphany, or be omitted altogether if necessary.

Shrove Sunday as a threshold

We now move from the realm of the first to that of the second major festival. But before Passiontide begins, the readings on Shrove Sunday and the following two Sundays serve as an introduction. These readings are:

The rich ruler (Luke 18:18–34);

The temptation of Christ (Matt.4:1–11);

Transfiguration (Matt.17:1–13).

How do these three readings relate to the previous ones? We have been summoned and made ready by the teaching of Christ to make a new step now — to join him on the road which leads through Golgotha to Easter. As we have been called upon in the two parables to become co-workers and hearers of the Word, we will be allowed to experience the divine sacrifice. Christ no longer teaches, he now walks the path of sacrifice. If we have understood the previous stages we will be able to accompany him on his way. On Shrove Sunday the words resound like a clarion call: 'Behold, we go up to Jerusalem, and all things that are written by the prophets concerning the son of Man shall be fulfilled.' (Luke 18:31).

Let us look back at the way we have covered so far. We have had seven readings since Christmas, namely, the four Epiphany readings, the two parables following, and now, Luke 18.

Starting from Luke 18, there will again be seven readings to Easter, namely,

Luke 18,
the two readings following Luke 18,
the four readings for the Sundays of Passiontide.

This symmetry is surely not a coincidence. Furthermore, a detail which lit up briefly in the parable of the sower, the theme of Christ's sacrifice, is again visible in Luke 18, and in the subsequent readings. It appears when Christ speaks (in Luke 18) of going up to Jerusalem. His cross already stands before us. But did we notice that this 'cross' is already visible in the parable of the sower? Who is the seed which falls into four different types of ground, and which is trodden down, devoured, withered, choked, or springs up on the good ground? The gospel tells us that the seed is the Word. But the Word is he himself, the Logos, who comes into the world. The parable of the sower already contains a theme of suffering, but also a theme of joy.

Now, on Shrove Sunday, all this appears in a single image. This is the 'rich young man' who asks about eternal life and is told to sell everything he has, and to give it to the poor. This 'young man' — for that is how we refer to him, according to Matthew 19:22 — is certainly to be imagined as a real person who approaches Christ and questions him. But the image contains more than this. Christ may have seen his own destiny in

that of the young man. The demand which he makes on this 'rich' man applies to him as well.

For he is prepared to sacrifice far greater riches. He will surrender the entire treasure of his divine being. And the youthfulness of the young man also applies to him. In Christ, in the divine Son, lives the creative principle which rejuvenates all that has become old.

In the image of the rich youth we may see Christ himself and his earthly destiny, which will be fulfilled on the way of the great sacrifice. In this sense, Shrove Sunday represents an important threshold. The images of the readings before this threshold express the increasing closeness of Christ to humanity. Beyond this threshold it becomes clear that a great sacrifice is bound up with this growing closeness. The sacrifice of his divine being will be fulfilled down to the bitterest suffering.

In the light of this divine willingness to sacrifice we may feel ourselves moved to a readiness for sacrifice as well. We may hear the words directed at the rich young man spoken to ourselves; '... and come, follow me,' and deep within ourselves we will feel called upon to do so. It is on Shrove Sunday that this call may reach us.

The theme of sacrifice continues in the next reading. The temptation that Christ faces is precisely the possibility which he has of avoiding the cross and death, of retaining his divine nature, and establishing an external dominion over humanity and the earth. For one moment he is faced with the possibility of misusing his divine power to perform earthly miracles, by turning stones into bread, or by throwing himself from the pinnacle of the temple. This would have proved his divinity beyond all doubt, but in an external way.

He does not succumb to the temptation. He sacrifices his divine power and chooses the course which is to end at the cross. His powerlessness on the cross is the counterpart of the

omnipotence which the tempter tried to trick into external view.

At this time of year we read and hear that reading in the awareness that Christ overcomes the temptations every year. The adversary powers are again thwarted, and they will not be able to work unopposed. Although their might has not been entirely broken, this reading before the beginning of Passiontide shows that another step in the overcoming of evil has been accomplished.

In the final reading before Passiontide the theme of sacrifice appears to be absent. Christ, radiant as the sun on the mountain of the transfiguration — this is a tremendously positive image. It makes visible the divine power which works on earth through Christ, and which has reached the stage of being able to transform the forces of life itself.

Before the actual darkness of Passiontide begins, we are allowed to take in this radiant image, and to build up the strength we shall need for the further journey. But even here the mood of Passion forms a dark background. Christ does not remain on the heights of the mountain. He lays no claim to the radiance which he has achieved, but immediately sacrifices it for the sake of humanity. As he descends there sound again the words of the suffering and death of the Son of Man. And the transfiguration is immediately followed in the gospel by the confrontation with the sickness of humanity which is waiting for the healing which only Christ can bring. Against this dark background the image of the transfiguration shines even more radiantly, and luminously unfolds its activity, so that we enter the darkness of Passiontide prepared and equipped.

Passiontide

In The Christian Community Passiontide begins four weeks before Easter. The readings during these four weeks are:

On the first Sunday, Christ casts out a demon (Luke 11:14–36);

On the second Sunday, John 6 (the whole chapter, or selected passages);

On the third Sunday, John 8 (the whole chapter, or selected passages);

Palm Sunday, Christ's entry into Jerusalem (Matt.21:1–11).

The first reading concerns Christ driving out a demon, and the subsequent accusation by the people that Christ was able to do this only with the help of the devil. It is impossible to imagine a greater misunderstanding of the good. In the confused and clouded consciousness of mankind the ability to discern between good and evil is lost, and each is taken for its opposite.

That is why a sign from heaven is demanded of him. Once again, this is a temptation to misuse his divine powers, and to lead humanity in a wrong direction. Then Christ speaks of the 'sign of Jonah'. This is the sign of the three days Christ must rest in the earth, as Jonah was in the belly of the great 'fish,' an image of initiation into the secrets of the earth.

On this Sunday we have on the one hand the confrontation of Christ with the demons and the darkened consciousness of humanity, and on the other hand an indication of the Passion which is to lead into the darkest depths of earth, but through which the resurrection will be prepared.

On the second Sunday of Lent, passages from John 6 are read. Here we have the feeding of the five thousand, followed

by the first 'I-am' word, 'I am the bread of life.' This expresses that the life forces which work through Christ are shared amongst a humanity hungering for the spirit. He himself becomes the bread, he gives himself for the further existence of earthly humanity. Again, Christ's deepest sacrificial will comes to expression.

Following upon Luke 11, John 6 appears in a special light. Christ resting in the grave — the sign of Jonah — is like the grain of wheat that rests in the earth, from which much fruit, the bread of life, will spring up. The bread of life, which Christ is to become for humanity, springs up out of earthly death. Christ, who has passed through death on earth, becomes the source of higher life. The feeding of the five thousand is a prophetic image of this.

John 8 tells the story of the woman taken in adultery, and the 'I-am' word immediately following, 'I am the light of the world.' It becomes clear that Christ is prepared to take the sins of humanity upon himself.

The positive image of John 6, Christ giving himself to humanity as a life-bestowing force, now becomes visible from its tragic side. It is not enough to feed mankind; that is, to still their hunger for existence in the right way with the bread of life. The accumulated guilt which makes mankind a debtor to the earth, must be redeemed. That is why the earth is mentioned here. When the guilt of the adulteress stands before him, Christ writes in the earth. His deed of sacrifice now includes taking upon himself humanity's guilt towards the earth. What would otherwise crush humanity with its great weight — how clearly the image of *stoning* expresses this — is taken up by Christ. As the 'Lamb of God' (John 1:36), he begins to carry the sins of the world.

Contemplating these facts fills us with a deep feeling of gratitude. Again, we should bear in mind that the readings do

not merely describe something which happened in the past. It is accomplished each year anew, when Christ unites himself with the darkness and the depths of human life on earth. He takes them, unites them with his own divine-human being, and wards off the death-bringing consequences of the 'sickness of sin.' The human soul need not be crushed by the load of earthly sin, when it feels united with Christ, a renewed call to a devout contemplation of the deed of Christ, the love of Christ.

So far we have taken three steps through the first three Sundays of Lent:

the luminous, transfigured body,
the higher life,
the 'neutralized' guilt.

Body, life, and soul are touched in these events of Passion.

Palm Sunday

This is the first day of Holy Week. Our experiences of the past three Sundays now enter a decisive stage. For now death appears on the horizon, and will become the focal point on Good Friday.

The images which arise in the reading of the entry into Jerusalem are images of the earthly world (the city), and of the physical body of man (the ass, the temple). They indicate that Christ is now seeking the place where he will 'find death.' This does not only mean to die, but implies an active seeking. Christ seeks the 'being' of death, and finds it on earth. His sacrifice leads to the confrontation with death, the death on the cross, and then through the confrontation to the overcoming of death.

The entry into Jerusalem is not the entry into just any city. It is the entry into the 'city of death,' his own death. Christ enters the realm in which death holds sway, where he will find death and transform it. Hence the images of the earth and the earthly body, in which death rules.

We shall only be able to accompany the mystery of transformation, which is to be acted out before us, with a holy reverence. We enter Holy Week in a mood of deepest veneration as we accompany Christ on his way into death.

4 Holy Week to Whitsun

Holy Week: the way into death

Our considerations have led us to the threshold of Holy Week. Many congregations of The Christian Community try to live in this week as consciously as possible. The daily celebration of the Act of Consecration, and the communal pause for reflection each evening, can lead us ever deeper into the life-death mysteries of the cross. Like the twelve days of Christmas, these seven days mark a very significant time of the year. To experience these days fully is not merely to remember past events, but to allow something which is happening in this very week to knock at the door of our hearts: Christ offers himself anew each year. To feel this is the real content and task of Holy Week and the events unfolding within it.

Readings have been given for only three of these days:

Maundy Thursday: Christ is sentenced before Pilate (Luke 23:13–23);

Good Friday: Christ before Pilate (John 19:1–15);

Saturday: Christ's crucifixion, death and burial (John 19:16–42).

It is remarkable that our attention is drawn to the cross on all three days. On Maundy Thursday we might have expected

a very different reading. Instead we hear the mob shout 'Crucify him! Crucify him!' On Good Friday the shouting of the mob is intensified and their will becomes irrevocable: 'Crucify him!' and 'We have no king but Caesar!' Finally, on Saturday, we experience Christ's crucifixion and death on the cross.

It can become clear that the Acts of Consecration on these three days form a unity which is expressed in the three successive experiences of the cross. As the celebrating priest makes three crosses over the bread and wine in each Act of Consecration, so the imprint of the three crosses of Holy Week is made on the entire year: a sign of the great transubstantiation as Easter approaches.

It is not necessary to add anything by way of explanation to these three readings. They express their full depth and drama in reading them, and hearing them.

Breakthrough to the Resurrection

It is a remarkable fact that there has not yet been a single reading from Mark's gospel; the other three gospels are represented in almost equal proportions. But now Mark, whose gospel has remained in the background, begins to speak, and Chapter 16 of Mark becomes *the* Easter reading. With its dynamic, potent, even impulsive use of language, Mark's gospel is the 'cosmic' gospel. It is this cosmic dimension which enables it to represent Easter. For at Easter the breakthrough into cosmic dimensions, the transcending by Christ of all that is of the earth, is to be revealed. 'You seek Jesus of Nazareth, he is not here' (Mark 16:6).

Mark's gospel is particularly well suited to describe this dynamic ascent. It is the only Easter narrative which mentions

the rising sun. On Easter morning the three women leave the city walls and enter the garden where the grave is, 'just as the sun was rising.' This is more than a coincidence or pretty image. The sun, rising out of the dark earth over the empty grave, remains the distinctive feature during the whole of Eastertide, and also in the remaining Easter readings. In the increasing light we see before us the cosmic power of Christ, overcoming and transforming all earthly darkness.

We have seen how Christmas can be experienced as a real event which happens anew each year. Easter too, is an event which happens every year again. The movement towards the earth which Christ begins at Christmas, uniting himself with the earth and humanity, now changes direction, and strives to return to the widths of cosmic space. As the seed which must 'fall into the ground and die' (John 12:24) is a real image for the passion of Christ, so the seedling which breaks through the hard earth and strives towards the light of the sun is a real image of the resurrection events. Christ has united himself with the earth. Now he breaks through its limitations, enabling the earth's forces to be taken up by those of the cosmos — a movement which will find its fulfilment and real image in the Ascension.

In the following seven weeks the readings are drawn only from John's gospel. The whole of Chapters 15, 16 and 14 are read during the service. A tremendous 'stream of words' is poured into Eastertide, which as a result has a completely different character from anything we have experienced so far. This 'stream of words,' which is filled inwardly with the pure light of Christ, flows in the same direction; it has the same powers of uplifting and enlightening as the rising Easter sun: bearing that which is of the earth into a cosmic dimension, towards the Father. 'I go to the Father' (John 16:28) is the leit-motif of these seven readings.

What Christ has experienced in his newly established connection with humanity and the earth, he carries back to the Father in the weeks following Easter. By returning to the Father he lays the seed which will enable the earth and humanity to regain their cosmic dimension.

There are two readings from John which precede the great stream of words which begins on the third Sunday after Easter:

The risen Christ meets the disciples and Thomas (John 20:10–29);

The good shepherd, ‘I am the door’ (John 10:1–21).

John 20 gives us the certainty that the presence of the risen Christ is not a transient phenomenon. He appears ‘bodily,’ even though in a completely spiritualized body. He reveals the wounds, the signs of earthly pain, even though he had only just spoken the words ‘Peace unto you’ to the disciples. And he allows Thomas to touch the wounds in order to let him experience the permanent physical reality of his being.

The reading on the following Sunday takes this theme further. Christ appears as the shepherd leading the human soul ‘in and out.’ He is the true leader of human souls, making it possible for them to have the right relation to both the material and the spiritual world. It is in this sense that Christ is ‘the door,’ allowing the threshold to be crossed in both directions.

The way to the Father

The three great readings from John, Chapters 15, 16 and 14 have as their theme the earth’s cosmic future, which at Eastertide may be experienced as the germinating seed of a future reality.

In Chapter 15 it is above all the image of the vine, transporting earthly substances beyond what the earth is able to give, and uniting them with the forces of the sun, which stands before us — a true picture of Easter's leitmotif. Like the vine, Christ grows beyond the purely material sphere, carrying material substances to the Father and transforming them. A humanity which is united with Christ is drawn into this movement: 'You are the branches,' and 'I have chosen you out of the world' (15:5, 19).

In Chapter 16 the theme of the Way appears: 'I go my way to him that sent me' (16:5). 'If I do not go, the Comforter will not come to you' (16:7). The ascent to the Father, to the cosmic dimension of being, is related to the mission of the Comforter, of the spirit who transcends all earthly being. 'When I go, I shall send him to you' (16:7). The other themes of this chapter are closely related to the main theme which is again clearly stated at the end. 'I came forth from the Father and came into the world: again I leave the world and go to the Father' (16:28).

It is remarkable that the reading sequence now goes to John 14, an earlier chapter. But Chapter 14 leads us to a further development of the Easter theme, so that its rightful place is at the end of the Easter sequence, immediately before Ascension.

The chapter opens with 'In my Father's house are many dwelling places ... I go to prepare a place for you' (14:2). The theme also appears as an 'I am' word, 'I am the way, the truth and the life, no-one comes to the Father but by me' (14:6). Twice in the middle of the chapter there is a summing up: 'I in the Father, and the Father in me' (14:11), and 'I in the Father, you in me, and I in you' (14:20). The reader will have no difficulty in finding other verses which augment the Easter theme from many different sides.

The reading of these three chapters represents a summit in the sequence of readings — the stream of life, which during Eastertide flows from Christ to the Father, takes us up.

Ascension

During Ascension we do not have a reading which describes the event itself (which may be found in Acts 1), but a repetition of the closing part of John 16 (24–33). The *image* of the ascension, which reveals Christ in his cosmic dimension on his way to the Father does not stand before us. Instead, the event is revealed to us from another side: Christ disappears from the physical view of his disciples, but because of this is able to appear in a higher dimension. (Rudolf Steiner's indication for this reading was: John 16, 'Ask from the heart.')

What has already become clear from the story of Thomas (John 20), is emphasized here, namely that the elevation of Christ into a heavenly sphere does not mean that he is lost to earthly reality. This fact speaks from the Ascension reading: 'Ask from your hearts, and your hearts will receive' (16:24). In other words, Christ, who is expanding into the cosmos, remains united with the disciples. Asking in the name of Christ is not an empty phrase. Such asking only has reality when it happens out of the strength of his existence.

'For the Father himself loves you' (16:27). The stream of love flows from the realm of the Father to humanity. Human beings can again experience the love of the Father which had been lost to them. It is not only Christ who is ascending, human beings may follow him. Even though the possibility of this is still in the distant future, preparations are made for it every year at Ascension, and in this way it takes on a first reality.

This reality may take on form as a force for peace within

us. 'These things have I spoken to you that you may have peace' (16:33). Christ's powers of peace remain active for the disciples. Peace is not a gift of the world. It only becomes a reality for us after an experience of a higher dimension.

The process which began at Easter now finds its conclusion. 'In the world you shall have tribulation' (16:33). The Greek word *thlipsis* can mean tribulation, oppression, fear, any experience in which the narrowness of material existence becomes overwhelming. This fearful experience of an overwhelming pressure has been overcome by Christ. The strength of Ascension and the Ascension reading is that it allows people to share in the uplifting experience. 'Take courage, I have overcome the world.'

Ascension lasts for ten days. An old tradition has it that during this time Christ rose through the nine hierarchies. As if on a ladder he climbed a step every day, until he arrived in the realm of the Father on the tenth day. From there he sent the Holy Spirit, so that the event of Whitsun could take place.

Whitsun

As with the Ascension reading, it is not the event itself which the reading places before us. Whitsun is revealed from a different side, again by repeating a reading from an Easter reading, (John 14:23–31). The experience of Whitsun is to be found not in the description given in Acts 2, but in the words of John.

Now that a way has been opened up to overcome fear, the seventh reading after Easter speaks of love. Normally translated as: 'If a man truly loves me, he will keep my word,' Rudolf Steiner once translated verse 23 as: 'He who truly loves me reveals my spirit.' To these words is added a tremendous promise: 'and my Father will love him, and we will come to

him and abide in him.' The Godhead seeks to live in human beings; not only Christ, but also the Father God. This is an amazing statement, expressing a goal in the distant future, which far exceeds all our present experiences. Yet, as the highest promise, it is already part of Whitsun today.

The human being as bearer of the Godhead! An image of this promise appears in the fiery tongues which descend upon the heads of the disciples. But the presence of God in individual human beings does not mean the extinction of that which is truly human. For when the Father loves humanity, his abiding in them must mean at the same time their elevation in his love to themselves, and to their highest creative powers. The tongues of fire therefore signify not only the presence of the divine spirit, but also the lighting up of true individuality in the light of God. It is this event which enables the disciples to become co-workers with God, and bearers of divine activity.

We have reached the climax of the movement which began at Easter, and have at the same time received an indication of how Christ's life in the cycle of the year is to continue.

4 From Whitsun to the end of St John's Tide

In the previous chapter we looked at the readings associated with the weeks following Easter, culminating in the festival of Whitsun. Christ has accomplished his Ascension to the Father. He has reached these spiritual heights without losing touch with the reality of earthly life. From there he is able to work for the earth and humanity with increased powers of blessing. This is described at the end of the Gospel of Saint Luke gospel. 'And he lifted up his hands and blessed them. And it came to pass, while he blessed them he was parted from them, and was carried into heaven.' (Luke 24:50f).

At Whitsun, it is revealed that the Ascension of Christ also 'feeds back' upon mankind. The fiery flames are an indication that the higher self of each individual person is able to light up by virtue of its participation in Christ's deeds, and at the same time become capable of acting in community, with a tendency to experience not only itself, but also others.

The readings after Whitsun

The weeks between Whitsun and St John's Tide make up the second interim period without an actual festival. During the

year there are four such periods between the festivals. The first is from the end of Epiphany to the beginning of Passiontide. The third encompasses the ten weeks from the end of St John's Tide to Michaelmas (see Chapter 6), and the fourth is from the end of Michaelmas to the beginning of Advent.

There are no fixed readings for the interim period between Whitsun and St John. The length of this period varies according to the date of Easter. When Easter, and hence Whitsun, is especially early, an unusual situation occurs. Between Whitsunday and the first Sunday of St John there are five Sundays for which there are no fixed readings. In years in which Easter is later the number is reduced, and sometimes the interim period falls away altogether.

It is usual to repeat the Whitsun reading on Whitmonday and the following Tuesday, the three days of the Whitsun festival. On the Wednesday after Whitsun and on subsequent Sundays it is usual to select readings which speak about the working of the spirit in human beings. For example:

The conversation of Nicodemus about rebirth from the spirit
(John 3:1–21).

The conversation with the woman of Samaria about the living spirit and about the worship of God from the spirit
(John 4:1–26).

At this point it is appropriate to mention an important detail in the calendar of The Christian Community. In Christian tradition the Sunday following Whitsunday is known as Trinity Sunday, a festive Sunday dedicated to the Holy Trinity. This festival does not exist in The Christian Community. Instead, during the times in which there are no specific festivals, attention is drawn to the Trinity by means of the 'trinitarian epistle', which speaks in depth about the being

of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Awareness of the Trinity accompanies us throughout the year, and need not be specifically mentioned on one particular Sunday. The epistles of the festivals may then be seen as modulations of this fundamental note, which make audible particular variations out of the whole.

The St John's Tide readings

St John's tide begins on June 24 and continues for four Sundays. Again, there are no fixed readings for this time. The only guideline is that the readings should be about John the Baptist: scenes from his ministry as described in Matthew 3, Mark 1, or Luke 3, including the baptism of Christ; or the scenes from John 1:19–28, and 29–34 (the testimony of John), John 3:22–36 (He must increase ...), John 5:31–47 (Christ's testimony of John), Matthew 11:2–15 (John's question to Christ), and the death of John, from Matthew 14 for example. It is not possible to read all of these during the four weeks in question, and in many congregations there is a different selection each year. This is decided by the local priest.

We have passed the turning point of the year, and the formation of the reading sequence for the second half of the year seems to obey quite different laws. We begin to see a first result of that which was announced at Whitsun. The activity of Christ is no longer at the centre of the readings, but a human being — John the Baptist — appears before us with his words and his deeds. He is the first co-worker of God, and it is the work done by human beings for the divine kingdom about which the readings now begin to speak. John describes himself as the friend of the bridegroom. He prepares the way for Christ. He stands before us as a herald and an example, not

only exhorting us to change our own thinking, but actually having done so himself. As human beings we now feel ourselves part of the further development of the Christian year. As the entry of Christ into the earthly sphere was not possible without John the Baptist, so now our own deeds begin to be of significance for the future development of the divine kingdom. We are called upon to make a contribution.

Christ's movement between Christmas and Easter was characterized by an increasing connection with the destinies of the earth and of humanity. After Easter it was the resurrection from the grave of the earth, the ascent into the cosmos, and the way to the Father which determined the direction of his movement. Now the direction again changes. Christ begins to return to earth from cosmic heights. John expresses this by saying, 'He that comes from above is above all' (John 3:31), and it appears as an image in the Baptism, when Christ begins to unite himself with Jesus.

We have already noted that the image of the Baptism was missing from the Epiphany readings. We mentioned that this event, the full union of Christ with a human being, was contained in the four Epiphany readings as a dynamic, ongoing occurrence. It now finds its rightful place during the time of St John. Christ, who has ascended into cosmic heights, begins to descend again. From cosmic heights a divine being descends upon a human being who has prepared himself to receive him.

From the heights, his gaze now falls on humanity living on earth, on everything which in spite of the events which took place during the first half of the year has remained unchanged. All this must now be prepared in order to receive Christ who wants to return to earth. That a repentance, a change in thinking, is essential here, becomes a reality every year again. The Baptist points it out to us, at the same time

showing us the way to achieve it. The time of John is only correctly understood when we not only think of it as commemorating a historical figure — the first co-worker of God — but as containing his real presence, inwardly, within ourselves. The power of sacrifice and of facilitation which lived in him then, shines each year anew, and it is possible to call upon him as he works directly with us during the celebration of the Act of Consecration at this time of year.

5 The path to Michaelmas

The readings after St John

Towards the end of July a cycle of ten Sundays begins which leads towards Michaelmas. The stations along the way are not easy to discover, and the relations between them might well appear obscure. Even regular participants in the Act of Consecration during the months of August and September might find it difficult to see the 'way' presented by these readings.

The sequence of readings on these days describes a path which leads us in a meaningful way to experience the festival of the Archangel. Before Easter we found Christ on a path which brought healing to mankind. The characteristic of the second half of the year is that we now find ourselves on a path which is to prepare us for the festival of Michael. We have heard the call to change our thinking. We now see before us the stages of an inner path on which we can accomplish the changes that were asked of us, to become capable co-workers, co-warriors of God in the battle for the world.

Occasionally there are only nine Sundays from the last St John's Sunday to the first Sunday of Michaelmas. When this happens it is possible either to leave out one of the stages

along the way, or to begin the journey on the fourth Sunday of St John. Let us see the readings as a whole.

1. Peter's confession (Mark 8:27–38)
2. From the Sermon on the Mount (Matt.7:1–14)
3. The lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son (Luke 15:3–32)
4. The twelve disciples are sent out (Luke 9:1–17).
5. The healing of the blind man (Luke 18:35–43).
6. The healing of the deaf-mute (Mark 7:31–37).
7. The seventy disciples sent out (Luke 10:1–20).
8. Faith, gratitude, certainty (Luke 17:5–37)
9. From the Sermon on the Mount (Matt.6:19–34).
10. The raising of the young man of Nain (Luke 7:11–17)

The correspondences between the fifth and the sixth, the fourth and the seventh, and the second and the ninth readings are evident. Also, the start of the journey with Peter's confession, and its ending with the raising of the young man can be seen to have a correspondence.

1. Peter's confession

The sequence begins with the confession of Peter. A human being recognizes Christ and becomes a witness to the reality of his being. This is the first station of our journey. Everything which we have recognized and experienced during the first half of the year must needs to become a confession, that is, everything about our relation to Christ which has become important, must become part of our everyday lives and perceptions. Our challenge is to fill our everyday life with this witnessing.

How difficult this is immediately becomes apparent, when Christ begins to speak about the suffering he is to endure. Peter wants to prevent this, and is rebuked by Christ — almost immediately after his confession. Our confession can

all too easily be a 'Sunday confession,' which finds no place in our everyday lives. The test is whether we are prepared to take on pain and suffering as part of our lives. Only then are we able to accomplish the first station of being witnesses to the full reality of Christ's being and path.

We should note that Peter's confession itself took place 'on the way' (Mark 8:27).

2. Sermon on the Mount

The second station is presented by Matthew 7:1–14, a reading from the Sermon on the Mount. The inner laws which apply to the journey are rigorously spelled out. This rigour however, is balanced by a promise: 'Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.' Could there be a more magnificent encouragement to get us moving?

We are again reminded of the way when Christ describes the 'narrow way' and the 'straight gate.'

3. Lost sheep, lost coin, lost son

The gentleness of Luke's gospel is now placed alongside the severity of the gospel of St Matthew. Three parables bring this gentleness to expression, namely the parables of the lost sheep, the lost piece of silver, and the lost son. Every person on a journey is in danger of going astray. The deeply consoling message of these stories is that the Godhead does not reject, but accepts completely those who have been lost. This message must be placed beside the strict expectations of the Sermon on the Mount. 'More joy shall be in heaven over one sinner who repents [changes his thinking], than over ninety-nine just people who need no repentance' (Luke 15:7).

4. The twelve disciples set out

Now a new element appears. Those who are on the path receive tasks, they are 'sent out.' The twelve disciples are sent out by Christ to help others find the path, to heal them, and finally to help bring it about that many people are able to find spiritual nourishment. The feeding of the five thousand follows directly after the disciples have been sent out. That the disciples are not merely passive recipients at this meal but play an active part in it — 'Give them to eat,' 'he gave to the disciples to give to the multitude' — is an important element of this reading. A first contribution by human beings to the kingdom of God becomes visible.

5. Healing of the blind man

The healing of the blind man outside Jericho indicates a first result along the path. Even after having completed the earlier stages, there is still something in us which sits blindly at the wayside and begs. Who has not experienced such blindness for the essentials as painful? This healing shows that it is possible to obtain a new worldview. We learn to see the world differently. In a certain sense we only begin to see truly when we begin to ask about the spirit, when we turn towards Christ.

6. Healing of the deaf-mute

The healing of the deaf and mute person points to an awakening of a deeper sense of hearing — for example, in hearing the words at the altar — and how a new 'word' is able to follow from new hearing. We become aware that our normal talking says nothing to the world of the spirit, and that we are able to

gain access to the true word when Christ begins to speak 'the word' in us.

The fifth and sixth stages form the centre of the sequence. They make clear that the path leads to an inner transformation and healing, and finally, with Luke 7, to an awakening of the inner person.

7. Seventy disciples set out

From the task of the twelve disciples, we now reach the task of seventy disciples. We have reached a human stage — the number seventy indicates this. The other themes of this reading also indicate that progress has been made: 'He that hears you hears me, he that despises you, despises me' (Luke 10:16). Such words are only comprehensible and acceptable, when we are able to take seriously that the fifth and sixth stages have been completed. The awakening of the word by means of the power of Christ in the healing of the deaf-mute justifies this declaration.

8. Faith, gratitude, certainty

Luke 17:5–37 contains a whole series of themes which are characteristic of the eighth stage: faith, gratitude, certainty in the midst of turmoil. To take only the first theme; 'Lord, strengthen our faith.' Those progressing along the path always need to strengthen their inner resources. Christ's answer to this plea is at first sight strange. He speaks about the servant who, having worked all day long, first has to look after the needs of his master before he is able to sit down to eat. This indicates that we too, after our daily work, must 'serve our master' — in prayer, in inner concentration, in dedication to the spirit. It is faithfulness in this domain

which will bring about a strengthening of the powers of faith.

9. From the Sermon on the Mount

With Matthew 6:19–34, we have almost reached the end of the path. Once more we hear the inexorable words of the Sermon on the Mount — this time as a final admonition. Even those who have proceeded a long way down the path are subject to dangers and temptations, possibly stronger than before. ‘No-one can serve two masters’ — this relates to the servant who serves another master after a full day’s work. ‘Take no thought’ (that is, do not worry) — worry is the biggest and strongest enemy of spiritual development, which gains in strength especially when one has to look not just after one’s own needs, but also after the needs of others. But here too, it must be overcome.

10. Raising the young man of Nain

Luke 7:11–17, the raising from the dead of the young man, speaks for itself. The goal of the path is the raising of the future human being within us. The risen young man of Nain becomes a fellow-warrior of Michael.

6 Michaelmas to Advent

Michaelmas

On September 29 we cross the threshold into the season of Michaelmas. From the first Sunday in Michaelmas, this festival lasts for four weeks. In the previous chapter it became clear that the ten readings preceding Michaelmas represent a journey which culminates in the festival of the archangel, and prepares us for the crossing of this threshold.

The royal wedding

And so it is a threshold which lies before us in the first Michaelmas reading which describes the marriage of the king's son (Matt.22). This is a reading which belongs to the part of the gospel describing the events of Holy Week, to the disputes of the Tuesday of that week. In the dramatic dialogues of this day Christ indicates the earnestness of the decisions which make up a part of mankind's relation with the spiritual world. Human beings are called to the wedding, to the union with the divine world. But they must really follow this call, otherwise they forfeit their calling, and will find themselves cut off from further development. If they kill the forces of the spiritual world within themselves — as the king's

messengers in the parable are killed — they must expect a grievous destiny as a result.

Having crossed the threshold which leads into the hall where the wedding is held, they must be prepared to *receive* that which is offered them — garments suitable for each one individually. The guests must clothe themselves with the 'wedding garment' which is offered them as they enter the hall, in order that they may participate in the feast in a worthy manner. (In ancient times it was customary to lend a festive garment to the guests as they arrived at an important feast.)

In these images we see the fundamental motif of Michaelmas. We *ourselves* must follow the call, *we* are expected at the wedding feast, in the first instance as guests. But — who is the bride in the parable? She is not mentioned. Is it perhaps, as in other biblical images, our own soul? Then we would not only be invited as guests, but also in order to unite ourselves in a deeper way with the 'groom'.

This is the calling about which Matthew speaks. It is deeply moving to experience in the course of the parable, that without the presence of the guests, the wedding is unable to take place at all; that the divine world — the 'king' — has the greatest possible interest in our participation. It cannot happen without us — that is the sound of the Michaelic call in the readings at this time of year. Human beings are needed, if the world is to continue. They must find the strength and courage to make their contribution to the progress of the world, one which only they can make.

But because this is so, it follows by inner necessity that the second, the counter-gesture, must also be made: human beings must also be prepared to *receive* from the spiritual world that which makes them worthy to attend the wedding. The activity which we are called upon to summon up should not deceive us into believing that we are able to do it alone; we

need divine grace. Both courage and humility are Michaelic virtues. We need humility towards the spiritual world which must strengthen us in all our spiritual striving, otherwise our courage threatens to become arrogance.

The armour of God

There are three other readings during the time of Michaelmas (although Matt.22 may be read throughout the four weeks).

Michael's Battle (Rev.12),

The Rider on the White Horse (Rev.19),

The Armour of God (Eph.6).

The order and the length of time for which each reading is read is not fixed.

With Ephesians 6 a special element appears in the reading sequence. It is the only reading from the epistles of the New Testament specifically indicated for the reading sequence. (Extracts from the epistles may be read during Advent and Christmas, but strictly speaking, they do not belong to the sequence, as their inclusion is optional.)

In this reading mention is again made of a garment, which humanity must put on. Indeed, in the armour of God we may see a metamorphosis of the garment of the king's wedding. Each image throws light on the other. The garment itself is an image of the caring support which streams to us from the spiritual world. When divine forces lovingly surround us, we are protected as by a garment. If we reject the garment, we cannot enter into a relation with this world. It can also be experienced as a protection against adverse powers. When we actively take up the loving proximity of the divine world, and mould it into the strength of the Christian virtues, we make the borrowed garment our own. It becomes our armour, breastplate, helmet,

shield and shoe, which provide us with protection and a firm footing in our soul struggles.

The armour of God consists mainly of those parts which afford protection to the warrior. The only weapon mentioned is the sword. But it is the sword of the Word which is meant here. It is the sword which Christ uses on the Tuesday of Holy Week, in the battle against his opponents. To the other sword, the words of Matthew apply: 'those who take the sword shall perish by the sword' (26:52).

This reading shows us even more clearly than the parable of the royal wedding that we are expected to take up our positions in battle. It is not outer battles that are meant — today less so than ever before — but inner battles in which we shall have plenty to do, if we are to experience the proximity of the divine world, and learn to apply the strength originating there. In this way we are enabled to make our own necessary contribution to the great spiritual battles which are being fought out in the world today.

Our battle — Michael's battle

It is this last motif which we find presented in the two other Michaelmas readings in a special way: in the battle of Michael against the dragon, and in the appearance of the rider on the white horse.

It is a source of continuing astonishment that Michael does not kill the dragon, but that he casts it down to earth. It is specifically mentioned that the activity of the dragon against those united with God continues on the earth. It is as a direct result of Michael's victory in heaven that we on earth are called to battle. Even though it is not explicitly stated, we may be certain of the archangel's constant support.

On the other hand, the text contains a remarkable contradiction which is seldom noticed. There is mention of those people who have overcome the dragon 'by the blood of the lamb, and by the word of their testimony' (Rev.12:11). But was it not Michael who conquered the dragon? This apparent contradiction makes clear that Michael's battle in the spiritual world and our own soul battles on earth are intimately related. What comes about on the earth as a result of our actions also has meaning and relevance in the spiritual world.

In a similar way the importance of human cooperation is made visible in Rev.19. The 'armies' which follow the horseman play an active role in the cosmic battle; they wear white garments — a further metamorphosis of the image of the wedding garment and the armour.

The austere, earnest, and challenging tone of these readings has become sufficiently clear. The journey we have made before Michaelmas was intended to make us capable of crossing the threshold, to hear this tone and take it in. After Michaelmas we ourselves are placed more and more into the cosmic battle.

Between Michaelmas and Advent

The Michaelic tone, the call of the spiritual world, continues to sound in the final readings of the Christian year. In fact it goes through a further intensification, in that people are called upon to cooperate not only in the development of their own existence, but in the further progress of the whole world — in the building of the New Jerusalem.

The readings of this time of year are not fixed, it is only stated that further extracts from the Revelation to St John are to be read. (It is also possible to choose parables of the second

coming from the Gospels, for example the parable of the wise and foolish maidens in Matt.25.) The readings are usually chosen from the following:

The appearance of the Son of Man (Rev.1),
The epistle to Sardis or the epistle to Laodicea (Rev.3),
The innumerable multitude of those united with the divine world (Rev.7),
The harvest of the world (Rev.14),
The new Jerusalem (Rev.21),
Promise of the second coming (Rev.22).

Depending on the number of Sundays, four or five of these are normally read. They have in common situations in which decisions must be made.

Son of Man and New Jerusalem

The activity of de-ciding (that is, to cut, and thereby to separate) already appears in Chapter 1 of the Book of Revelation — in the appearance of the Son of Man. That the image of Man as he is to appear in the future (hence the name *Son of Man*) is the bearer of the revelation of Christ, is in itself remarkable. As so often in the Bible, we experience the harmony between the Old and the New Testaments. At the beginning of the Old Testament we learn that Man was made in the image of God. At the end of the New Testament, God appears in the form of the future human being. We perceive the Godhead in the image of Man.

Both revelations together express no less than this: the Godhead has prepared a place for Man in the creation, into which he is destined gradually to grow, and in the Apocalypse the Godhead appears in person as the prototype of this process. Once again, we hear the motif, even though in

another key: 'It is not possible without Man.' God unites his being with the process of human evolution. He wants human beings to be able to participate in the process of world evolution.

It can be deeply moving to follow this motif, which we encountered already at Whitsun, through the Apocalypse. (We also indicated something of it when discussing Chapters 12 and 19.) With the New Jerusalem the great goal of world evolution appears before us: the image of an intimate community of life between the Godhead and humanity. 'I will be his God, and he shall be my son' (Rev.21:7). The human being, we could say, is taken up into the 'divine family,' the word 'son' also containing within it the 'Son of God,' Christ. When mankind is lifted into the ranks of sons, they appear next to *the* son of the Father. The image of the Son of Man appearing in Chapter 1 is transformed into a higher octave at the end: Man appears as the Son of God.

The circle closes. But not yet. The tremendous struggle of bringing these future goals about still lies before us.

Sardis and Laodicea

The epistles to the angels of the seven churches sent by Christ presuppose two facts. First, human communities have an *angel*. Spiritual beings unite with human activities on earth, inspiring them and penetrating them. But that is not all. It appears that such cooperation can lead down false paths. Thus the epistles to the community angels contain not only words of encouragement, but also words of warning to remain on the right path, or to find it again.

This is an apocalyptic note which is still relevant today, and which helps to determine the mood of the November readings: our religious life should not become a rest cure! The

warning to remain wakeful and to overcome obstacles needs to be taken up anew every day. Spiritual impulses which we have taken into our souls 'grow old' surprisingly fast today, indeed they sometimes die so quickly that we don't even notice it. When we discover the positive side of this, we notice an apocalyptic element in ourselves. Decisions which we once made, no matter how deeply we were moved by them at the time, need to be worked with and strengthened daily.

Besides the encouragements and the warnings, the epistles also contain the great promises: 'I will confess his name before my Father, and before His angels.' (Rev.3:5); and 'To those who overcome will I grant to sit with me on my throne.' (Rev.3:21). Further promises appear in the other epistles.

In simple but far-reaching words and images the inclusion of Man in world evolution is emphasized. For the expressions 'I shall confess his name' and 'he shall sit on my throne' indicate the uplifting of mankind by Christ. Sitting on the throne of Christ indicates the part humanity is to play in the future rulership of the world.

The hundred and forty-four thousand and the harvest

In the Apocalypse there now follow the tremendous upheavals which lead to a more and more clearly defined crisis, that is, a *decision*. Not all people unite themselves with the goals of the future and are prepared to make the sacrifices necessary along the way. It becomes necessary to 'harvest' the earth, in order to allow the forces of humanity working for the future to break through.

The Michaelic and apocalyptic earnestness, which appeared already in the parable of the royal wedding, appears before us in final clarity. The personal decision of all individuals, to place themselves on the side of Christ, without regard

to personal comfort and benefit, demanding sacrifice, this decision becomes the basis of the separation of the 'sheep and the goats' (Matt.25:32). In our Creed the same decision is addressed where it speaks of the 'bearing' which allows Christ to wrest human souls from the 'death of matter'.

At the end of our journey through the readings we meet a cosmic gravity, and it is in this mood that we make the transition to Advent, to the images of destruction in Luke 21 from which the future of the world — in the reappearance of Christ — is born. But against this mood of deepest earnestness there is also a mood of cosmic hope, as presented by the large number of those who follow Christ and are enabled thereby to contribute to the evolution of future worlds.

Overview and transition

Spiritual knowledge allows us gradually to understand the activity of Christ, and thereby freely and consciously, and with a feeling of responsibility, to unite ourselves with it. It is through this deed that we become true 'co-workers of God,' whereas previously we had perhaps been 'pupils and disciples of Christ.' The working of the Spirit in Man has as goal his full cooperation and co-responsibility. That is why in some places in the gospels humanity appears 'in place of' the Spirit — for example in the well-known Trinitarian statement: 'I in the Father, you in me, and I in you' (John 14:20). It appears as if the Father and the Son are working here without the Spirit; in truth, though, the Spirit is contained in the 'you'.

That is also why the whole of the second half of the Christian year must be dedicated to the Spirit. Although the theme of the 'cooperation of mankind' continues right through until Advent, it is continuously receiving its driving

impulses from the activity of the Spirit, which in turn is activated by Christ. In this sense St John's Tide and Michaelmas may also be dedicated to the Holy Spirit.

It has become clear that the point of view from which we have considered the second half of the year can be divided into several stages:

At Whitsun we meet the revelation of the Spirit in mankind as the fruit of Christian love which has ripened during the first half of the year in 'walking with Christ.' With the presence of God in Man the goal of human evolution is brought to our awareness.

During St John's Tide it becomes clear that this goal is not to be achieved in a single move. The frailty and indeed the sinful nature of Man must be recognized and overcome, in order to begin to approach the goal.

After St John the path which is to be followed becomes visible. At Michaelmas the path leads to a threshold beyond which lies the task of becoming a 'fighter' in the service of higher powers.

After Michaelmas the readings bring to our attention how humanity's existence is to be included in the cosmic existence of the future.

The sequence of readings has reached a conclusion which is at the same time a new beginning. The Advent reading (Luke 21), known as the 'little apocalypse' or the 'Mount of Olives apocalypse,' contains the essence and the crowning of the apocalyptic texts of October and November. Advent is also the beginning of the new Christian year, and so its reading sounds a fundamental note which not only takes up the dynamic of the previous readings but also continues to sound right through the following year.

We have followed the reading sequence through the year with long strides. Much could also have been seen from a different point of view, and different themes could have been emphasized. No attempt was made at completeness.

But perhaps it has become clear that the readings are a meaningful sequence, an organism which in its organization constitutes its own gospel. This is a new gospel which is made up from the other four gospels, the epistles, and the Revelation to St John, an *evangeliary*, a message from the angelic worlds, to accompany us through the Christian year.