

better way of teaching the truths of Faith. For that truth which is Christ is neither as dry as mere words and statements nor as mushy as the plaster statue, it belongs to the realms of experience at a multitude of levels from the joy of the baby in his tinkling rattle, to the ecstasy of a Saint who has been carried beyond any common experience but is granted one personal to himself. The world into which we may step as heirs of Christ is a world of that freedom wherewith Christ has made us free. This is the infinite world of life in abundance, given to every Christian family in the Bible and the Liturgy.



## THE LITURGY IN A LAY COMMUNITY

GEORGE INRSON

**T**O discover the meaning it is sometimes better to walk round the city like the children of Israel round Jericho than to attack the walls directly with battering rams and force of arms. So we shall be talking about the subject rather than on it, about the growth and effect of the Liturgy in the daily life of a particular lay community and the personal experiences of some of its members.

For many years we lived our life together with no accepted religious beliefs and our background was therefore opposed to anything in the nature of a liturgical action—we believed that a gesture or a word which did not spring from our own personal need or experience was a measure of our insincerity and was to be avoided if at all possible. Yet, strangely enough, it was from this very soil that the Liturgy grew, making itself felt, in the first case, as an emptiness in our life; we wished to express something together which seemed inexpressible, like a man without legs might wish to dance or a dumb man sing.

There was also the growing need to relate ourselves in some way to the hidden sources of life beyond the narrow sphere of individual consciousness; not to an impersonal abstraction but to that which was more deeply personal. We wished to enact together our hope of wholeness, in the intuitive awareness that this would predispose us to its realization. When we met the Mass and the psalms of the Divine Office the meeting was

almost a recognition; here was a miraculous fulfilment of that which we had known by its absence.

Nine years have elapsed since that time and we have watched the liturgical life of the Church take up our life together and refashion it into a total relatedness; between our work and our prayer, between each and the other, the inner and the outer, the Community and the Church. The sung Mass on Sundays and Feast Days, the dialogue Mass in the week and the recitation in English of the Benedictine Day Hours have become the heart and bloodstream of the Community life and the yearly liturgical cycle is continually showing us the meaning of the movement of growth and change of which we are all a part.

It seems that there are three ways of understanding this pattern of change inherent in all life, the three ways corresponding in some degree to three aspects of Man; it is clear, however, that any one without the other two would lead us into a false position—they are in reality three aspects of a single movement of life.

The first is the rhythm of natural life; the seasons of Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter created by the movement of the Sun, the monthly cycles created by the Moon, the movement of each week and the rise and fall of each day. In man there is the longer growth from birth to old age and death containing the many shorter rhythms of his instinctual life.

The second is the pattern of psychological change; we respond, move and change or resist and die in each new situation. These changes also have their own laws of movement; our moods, intuitions and dreams, for instance, are not haphazard variations from a fixed and static thing we call our 'character', but the buoys indicating the hidden rocks and currents to the ship at sea.

The third is the liturgical life of the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ drawing all things to a universal communion. In the Mass, the yearly cycle of change is related to the daily act of the eternal mystery (which is unchangeable because it is Life itself); in the Divine Office there is the daily rhythm of the different Hours, the changing psalms for each day of the week and the yearly progression from the Annunciation to All Saints Day. The liturgy is a universal song or dance or praise to our Creator, a continual cry for mercy, the mysterious source of our life, the crowning fulfilment of meaning drawing our lives together into a single purpose.

In the giving of ourselves to this *Work of God*, as St Benedict calls it, we open ourselves to the creating power of grace; God works on us, in us and through us, both as individuals and as a Community. It is this experience of the Liturgy as an integral part of one's whole life that we shall now be talking about but it is necessary to emphasize that there is an important difference between the experiences of a person living under the influence and power of the Liturgy and the Liturgy itself. We shall not, in other words, be making theological statements. Also because we shall be considering primarily the longer cycle of the seasons this does not imply that it is in any way of greater significance than the daily or weekly cycles.

We do not know what is coming to us, we have been prepared for this in the ground of our being but we have not understood. We have been waiting without knowing we have been waiting and then suddenly the Angel appears bearing the Word of new life. If we can say with Mary *let it be done unto me according to thy word* there is a mysterious conceiving in the soul as the power of the Most High overshadows us. We are not aware of what has happened, only that there is a moving of new life below the daily stream of everyday life; there is a part which waits and a part which does not know.

The summer is past, the trees have shed their leaves, the cattle are in the stalls and the plough in the ground—the outflowing exuberance of long days of harvest has turned back into itself and it is then that the expectation of Advent arises within us.

Our Lady waits in silence  
With the unborn child;  
Deep in the earth we hear the heartbeat  
Of that which is to come.

The sap returns to itself,  
The exuberance of summer's growth  
Dies back exhausted  
Into the enveloping winter.

Seed in the ground,  
Plough in the furrows,  
The birds flown;  
The trees the sleeping evidence of hidden life.

Be glad, O daughter of Sion,  
 Rejoice, O daughter of Jerusalem;  
 The earth will be opened  
 And bud forth the Saviour.

In that day our earth shall yield her fruit,  
 The mountains shall flow with sweetness,  
 The hills with milk and honey,  
 Ourselves with light.

Thirsting for the waters  
 We seek the place of our Lady's waiting;  
 The work conceived by the Spirit  
 Is completed in the silence.

Out of the silence breaks forth the joy of the birth, the Word is  
 made flesh; unique in time yet continually with us.

For years it seemed, it had been like this,  
 Driven across the face of the land  
 Driven by the dead hearts of men,  
 The unleashed lust of death  
 The hunger and the cold.

Through the land barren of hope they walked  
 To the cities of despair,  
 The streets worn smooth and hard  
 By dull respectable feet  
 Moving aimlessly over the sealed earth.

Her time was near at hand;  
 Anxiously he knocked at closed forbidding doors,  
 Praying to a distant God for rest and shelter.  
 But all was silent  
 Under the night sky.

In their last extremity  
 A heart opened:  
 A door opened:  
 In a backyard shed the Virgin brought forth the Child  
 And a burning light sprang up to heaven.

O heart, exult with joy!  
For a love is born within us which will burst the bars of iron;  
Waters have broken out in the desert  
And the cry of the newborn Child  
Has brought to light the hidden things of darkness.

But we do not stay here; the new life within us begins to grow  
and in the growing meets the hard obstructions of our fallen  
nature. We are in the lonely separated crisis of consciousness; it  
is a time of struggle, prayer, choice and suffering—the joy of  
Christmas is far away in a distant forgotten land. The Crucifixion.  
The dereliction and the end.

He could see them coming,  
The crowds that would surround him,  
Surge over his soul in waves of darkness  
Driven from the extremities of time  
And the far corners of the earth.

He asked in anguish,  
To fly from this bitter choice  
To the silence of the Father;  
But the silence turned his face  
Back to the valley of men.

The crowd was at the gates  
Armed with the staves of darkness  
To destroy the light;  
His brother with unseeing eyes  
Betrayed him with a kiss.

The others had slept or fled,  
Unable to meet the choice;  
One only followed him from afar  
But he warmed his hands by the fire  
And in fear denied him.

Angry voices rose and fell about him  
Trying to put out the light within  
By destroying light itself;  
Suffering unmoved with head bowed to love  
He left them free to choose.

They chose their death in his death  
Mocked his head with a crown of thorns  
And his back with a cross;  
    But the women wept  
    And his heart was breaking.

They stripped him of his garments  
And nailed him to the wood,  
Raising it upon a hill;  
    Those he loved stood sorrowing,  
    The soldiers dived in waiting.

In the last agony of loneliness  
And an infinity of separation  
He bound himself to the suffering;  
    To the man alone with despair  
    To the woman left with child in the wake of battle.

It has been achieved;  
The gates of hell had been cast down  
By the power of love;  
    He hung his head and returned his spirit  
    To the silence of the Father.

It is cold and dark in the tomb  
And the anger of men far distant  
Like the faintly remembered echo of a dream.  
It is over;  
There is no way and no need of a way,  
No need for before and after,  
Only the empty silence.  
There are no choices now,  
Between the accepting and the turning away,  
The seeing and the rejecting,  
The communion and the hatred;  
All has been dissolved  
Into the stillness of an absence.  
A turned in waiting  
Where there is no thing to be waited for,  
An emptiness without beginning or end  
The other side of God.

There is no doubt in our hearts or minds but that this is the end and our soul is weary with grief, making her way to the tomb on Easter morning; but the tomb is empty and the Church cries out her Alleluia of deliverance. He has risen! It is a miracle so far beyond our comprehension that it is only the Church that is able to take us up into its mystery and to teach our bewildered minds to bow in adoration.

We have tried to fight the mastery which things of this world have over us, to see through the barriers of ignorance to that which is real, to the source of life. And then through the power of Christ we are taken to the Cross—our weakness recoils from the suffering but his power takes us in our weakness and nails us to the wood—to the extent to which he has prepared us. We are taken into the tomb and the things of this world no longer have mastery because they are no longer there, we are held in a suspension of understanding, seeing, feeling and hearing so that we hardly know what we are or what is happening to us. Mysteriously out of this darkness, he rises within us and we are born again—by water and blood through the power of the Spirit—but this new life that has been born is so hidden to our normal sight that we are aware of it only by inference and by the subtle changes which begin to take place in our spiritual constitution. We do not rejoice in the world of the senses, as at Christmas, but in the innermost sanctuary, in the upper room—our outer senses are mystified, at sea, bewildered, because the soul has retired within, waiting for the Bridegroom, for the marriage of Pentecost. So we wait in the upper room, our eyes fixed on the vision of the resurrected Christ, our body tethered outside so that it will not wander off too far in search of the sweet grasses.

Teach us, O Lord, to wait with patience, to keep in the upper room, to prevent our eyes from straying from thee.

I who was born in the depths of winter's silence,  
Struggled to come to life,  
Lost and was born again in the dying;  
Like one who listens for the longed-for footstep  
Wait the fulfilment of the Promise;  
The scales cover my eyes,  
I am separated from the green of the leaf  
And the blue of the sky.

I wait with hope and no hope  
For the Promise of breaking the stubbornness  
Bestowing gladness, dispelling fear,  
Cleansing the heart with dew.

The sky greys,  
The note hesitates, unsure of where to find its complement;  
I face unlimited choice without the possibility of choice;  
There is only the waiting  
With the eye fixed to the Promise.

I expected and did not expect the heavens to open;  
But the marriage was not like this;  
He came in the closed room,  
The waiting hidden room,  
The Fire  
Entered the womb.

I was bewildered and did not know  
But there was that in me which knew  
And that which was known.  
Let not your heart be troubled nor afraid,  
He will teach you all things,  
Alleluia.

I was fed with the fat of wheat,  
Filled with honey out of the rock;  
The Lord thundered from the heavens,  
The Highest gave his voice;  
In the arid waste  
The fountains of water appeared.

Out of the door,  
Through the door of the sheepfold  
Led to life,  
Life abundant and flowing over;  
The doors of heaven were opened  
And we ate the bread of angels.

Into the market place,  
Into the field and workshop;



Here is the testing  
The fashioning and the wroughting,  
The problem set brought to completion.  
What has been sown  
Grows to fruition,  
The new seed set and harvested.

Now we follow the outer dance—  
No longer the struggle to reach a foothold,  
Explore the unknown uninhabited land,  
Establish a camp on the mountainside—  
Now we are turned to the world of men,  
To the healing and the harvesting,  
The joy and the sorrow;  
The floors shall be filled with wheat,  
The presses overflow with wine and oil.

The Spirit breatheth where he will;  
Thou hearest his voice  
But knowest not whence nor whither—  
The pattern of the days unfolding  
Holds us to the dance  
Shows us the step but not the shape.

The body of Christ  
Lives in the dance  
Dances in the love of each for the other  
The love which overflows from an opened heart  
Holds yet does not hold,  
Forgives and does not judge;  
Reaches over the isolation  
Free as the bird in a cloudless sky  
Possessing nothing;  
The love which builds  
The new Jerusalem.

And so begins the long season of Pentecost, the time of working out and building, of bringing to fruition, of harvesting that which has been sown, of the dying back and completion of All Souls and All Saints. It is the time when the stage has been set and we are

called to a common action together after the long preparation of waiting, of solitary struggle and mysterious vision.

Perhaps 'common action' may give us a clue to the fuller and more living experience of the liturgical life of the Church. A liturgical 'movement' by itself is somehow a sterile counterfeit of a living organism, only too likely to lead to the pride and bickerings of an esoteric perfectionism. When we meet round the altar to receive the bread of life we are by this act committing ourselves to each other as members of a single Mystical Body and the Liturgy is thus both the source and the flowering of this giving of ourselves. To give and to open with the whole man—with our heart and body as well as our mind—is this where we begin?



## BIBLE READING<sup>1</sup>

NICOLETE GRAY

**T**HE Bible reading which I want to write about, is that which I have practised, the Bible reading of parents and children together; which is indeed the only way in which I have read the Bible—apart from the experience of listening to the lessons in the Church of England as a child, and some rather unsuccessful attempts to read parts to myself in later years. As a family we have read it daily, in principle—though in practice there have been a good many gaps—for ten years or more—that is, from earliest childhood in the case of the youngest, to manhood in the case of the eldest child. In this paper I want to offer some reflections on our experience in the hope that they may be useful to others. Our main experience, that constant Bible reading from childhood is overwhelmingly a good thing, is something which surely goes without saying. I propose discussing practical questions of how it is best done; and suggesting also the ways in which I believe that we have particularly profited. I would like to stress that in doing this I am talking about things which are almost total unknowns to me, so that I wish to make my points in a very tentative way. Firstly, the Bible itself is an unknown; after one or even two or three readings of a book or parts of a

A paper read at THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT Conference, September 1957.