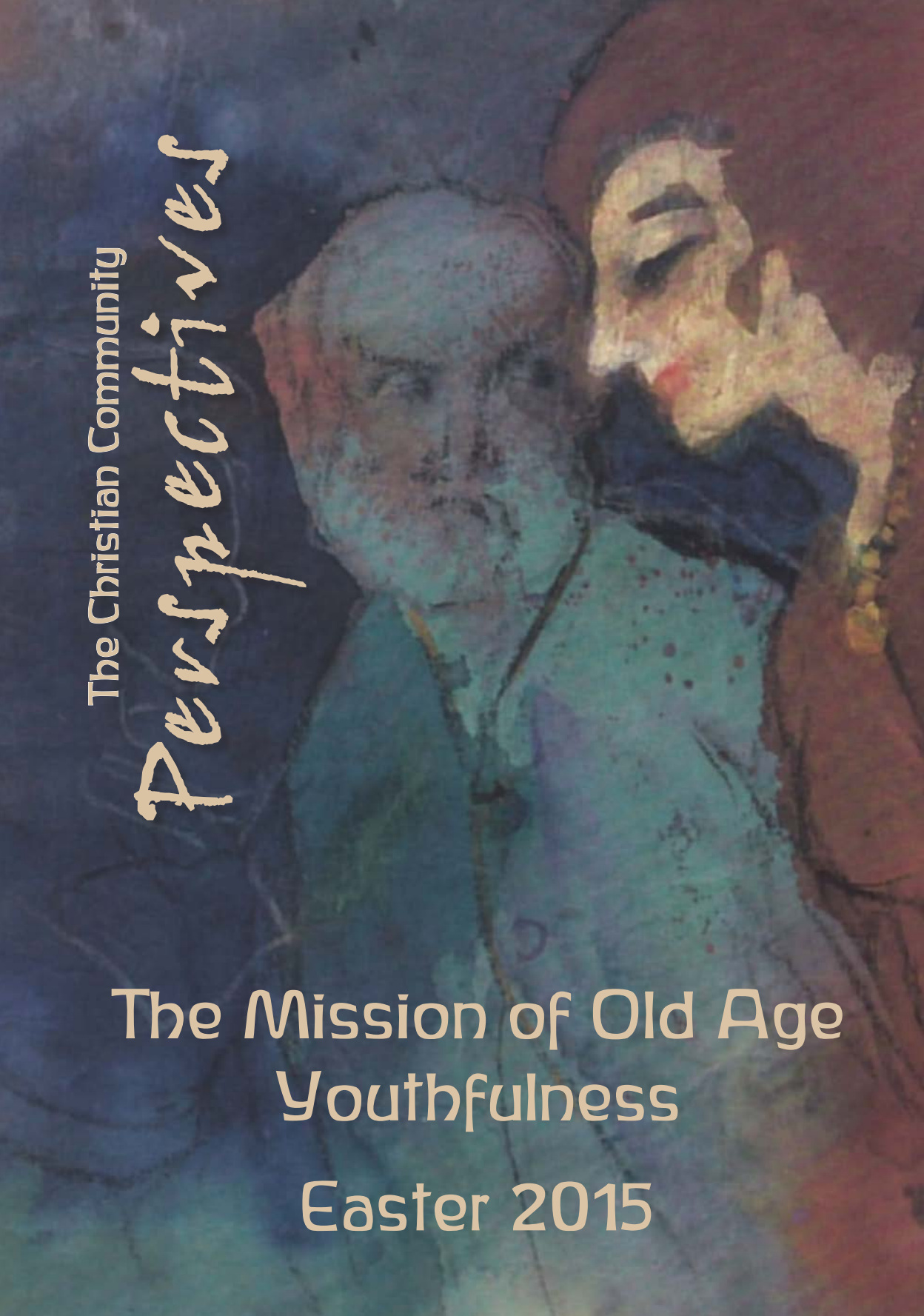

The Christian Community

Perspectives

The Mission of Old Age
Youthfulness

Easter 2015

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In the northern hemisphere, the early months lead us into spring, when we experience new life in the natural world. At Michaelmas we enter autumn, the dying time of the year. There is another stream of experience which runs counter to the natural one, which we can experience at the altars of The Christian Community. Just as life is beginning to stir in spring, we experience the black of Passiontide and Holy Week. And in the autumn, the colours of the Michaelmas festival are not sombre ones to reflect the decreasing length of the days, nor do we see the russet red of the falling leaves. Rather, we see the gentlest pink and green, colours that might remind us of the tender buds of spring. Becoming aware of this second flow can help us to feel the reality of the festivals, which embraces the whole earth, with its northern and southern hemispheres and equatorial areas.

In our lives we also experience two flows of time. We die with every stage of life that we complete, and we can find the same forces of openness to re-create ourselves as we start every new phase. Each little death asks us to embrace a kind of nothingness and relinquish what we have achieved. This attitude can make old age a time of discovery and new life.

Tom Ravetz

Belonging

Christ became entirely human.

— And there is no suffering he does not know;
And no place of darkness he has not been.

— And every morning we say:
Yes!—no matter what comes.
Yes!—the path of my inner development is
laid down before me by my weaknesses.
Yes!—to each one is entrusted his share
of the Fall—to bear and raise up—
slowly and carefully.

— And as we raise ourselves,
so too do we raise the world around us.
And His Passion becomes our Passion,
And His Easter becomes our Easter,

And there is nothing that does not belong.

Aaron Mirkin

Who is who?

Bastiaan Baan

When we are confronted with death we usually are confronted also with ourselves, even if it is the death of someone else. To stand at a deathbed often means more than just thinking of the person who is dying. We cannot avoid thinking, 'What will happen with me when my hour has come?'

'Momento mori'—'Remember that you will die.' That is the classical expression for this inevitable experience that each of us will have eventually. Even if we never wanted to think about death during our life, it will overtake us—at the latest, just before we die.

Nothing in human life and death can be compared with the way in which Christ went towards his death. Already long before his hour has come, he knows what will happen. He recognizes each step of his future way to the cross. But he expresses his future in quite an unusual way.

If any other human being had to suffer like this, he would say: 'I will be betrayed. I will be mocked, maltreated, scourged, and killed.' But Christ says, although he himself will suffer all these trials, 'The Son of Man will be betrayed. He will be mocked, maltreated, scourged, and killed…' (Luke 18:31–33)

The word 'I' is missing!

Christ looks from the highest point of view to the most horrible experience on earth. Without any personal complaint, without fear or anxiety, he faces the death on the cross.

Even in his agony, shortly before he is captured, he distinguishes between himself and his suffering soul. In Gethsemane, he expresses once more this remarkable, unusual relation to death—not to be compared with any death-experience in human life. 'My soul is deeply sorrowful, to the very brink of death.' (Matthew 26:38)

Again, we would say in a similar situation, 'I am deeply sorrowful…'

Even up to the moment of his arrest, he speaks about himself as somebody else: 'See the hour has come when the Son of Man is given into the hands of sinners.' (Matthew 26:45) With this simple word HE, Christ expresses that each step on his way towards death and resurrection is completely selfless. He goes his way to the cross not for himself, but for you and me, for each of us.

Bastian Baan is the director of the Priest Seminary of The Christian Community in Spring Valley, USA.

Forty days

Christopher Hudson

Occasionally, when reading someone else's thoughts, a quite different train of thought from the writer's is sparked off in one's own mind. Thus it was for me when I was reading with much interest the chapter entitled 'The seven Easter stories in the Gospels' in Rudolf Frieling's *New Testament Studies*.

Towards the end of the chapter, in the section entitled 'The Mountain in Galilee', Frieling describes the appearances of Christ to his closest followers during the forty days that followed his resurrection from the dead.

'On the mountain in Galilee', he says, 'Christ reveals himself as one to whom 'all authority in heaven and on earth' is given.' (Matt 28:18)

As I read this, it struck me that there was a parallel of sorts between the authority with which Christ had then, through his deed of sacrifice, been entrusted, and the quite different offer of 'power over all the realms of the world' made him to him by the tempter in Matthew 4 (the third temptation in the desert) at the very beginning of his ministry.

> *Again the Adversary carried him away. He took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the realms of the world and the gleaming interplay of their forces, and he said, 'All this I will give into your power if you will fall down and acknowledge me as your Lord.'*

Might there be comparable parallels between the other two temptations and the deeds of Christ during the forty days after his resurrection?

The first temptation concerned the bread.

> *…and all at once the Adversary stood before him and said, 'If you are the Son of God, let these stones change into bread through the power of your word.'*

The bread would be central on the first occasion, after the appearance to Mary, upon which the Christ would be recognised in his risen form. During the afternoon of Easter Sunday, when, having walked and conversed with the two disciples on the way to Emmaus, and having been invited to have supper with them,

> *He took the bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him.*

In this, the first celebration of the Eucharist after the Last Supper, a bread completely free of all taint of the sickness of sin was shared and eaten for the first time. Now it would not be stones (that which is without the element of life) which would be changed into bread, but the body itself of the one who had overcome death.

The remaining temptation is the one where Christ was taken to a very high place, from which he was invited miraculously to throw himself down.

Then the Adversary carried him away to the holy city and set him on the parapet of the Temple and said, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down. For scripture says

He has given you into the charge of HIS angels, and they will bear you up on their hands, so that you shall not strike your foot against a stone.

On the final day of the forty days that followed his resurrection, Christ would himself lead his disciples to a high place: 'the heights of the Mount of Olives which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away'. He did not throw himself down that all might marvel and thereby believe, however. On the contrary,

…he was lifted up before their eyes, a cloud received him and they saw him no longer.

Angels *did* indeed appear about the scene at this moment: not to bear him up, however, but to explain to mankind what had just happened, and something of the cycle of time that had just been inaugurated.

You men from Galilee, why do you stand looking up to heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up before you into heaven, will come again, revealed in the same kind of way in which you have now seen him pass into the heavenly sphere.

Observing the parallels between the two 'forty days', those in solitude in the desert, and those in the frequent company of his disciples after he had risen from the dead, one may notice that the three temptations of the adversary represented some sort of parody of Christ's deeds for humankind and for the earth.

The temptation of the bread seems a parody of the Eucharist. The temptation to throw himself down from the temple seems a parody of Christ's ascension into heaven and rightful uniting of his being with the realm of earth. The temptation to gain power over all the kingdoms of the earth seems a parody of the absolute sovereignty of the Risen One, both in heaven and earth: not, however, in the spirit of self-aggrandizement of the tempter. Much earlier in his ministry, Christ had already said all that he needed to about *that* spirit:

You know that those who are supposed to be the rulers have power over their people, and that their great men exercise this might. It shall not be like that among you. Whoever among you wants to be great, let him be your servant, and whoever among you wants to be the first, let him be a slave to all. For the Son of Man also has not come to be served but to serve and to give his life for the deliverance of many. (Mark 10:42–5)

Perhaps, as Lent approaches, we may contemplate how already in the solitude of the wilderness, the essence of Christ's mission was anticipated and profoundly put to the test.

Rock of ageing

Michael Jones

Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in Thee;
Let the water and the blood,
From Thy riven side which flowed,
Be of sin the double cure,
Cleanse me from its guilt and power.

It is said that the inspiration for the hymn *Rock of Ages* came to Reverend Augustus Toplady when he was caught in a storm walking in the Mendip Hills in England in 1763 and found shelter in a gap in a gorge. In Isaiah we find, at least in Young's literal translation ' Trust ye in Jehovah for ever, for in Jah Jehovah is a rock of ages' (Isaiah 26:4), but *ma'oz* (ages) is usually rendered as 'everlasting' or 'eternal'. The imaginative picture that from the ancient hard and dead, new life can spring forth, is established in the water that flows from the rock Moses strikes with his staff in the desert and in the words of Jesus in the Gospel of Thomas, 'Split the wood and I am there'. We can see here that 'ages' can have a different meaning from what is simply frozen in the past, and indeed in the liturgy of The Christian Community, we hear at one point of 'all ages of the earth to come'. Ages, age, ageing, old age, new age; they are not all exactly the same, but all related in our use of language.

Old derives from the Old English *ald* (Anglican) and *eald* (Saxon) with the meaning of aged, antique, primeval: from the West Germanic *althas*, grown up, adult; which we find in the German *alt*. This was originally a past participle stem of a verb meaning grow or nourish. The root *al* we find in for example the Greek *althainein*, to get well. The Old English also has *fyrn*, ancient, related to *feor*, far and distant.

Alongside our ordinary use of 'old' as meaning some thing or person that can be dated by time, we can try and restore some of the richness that has been lost in our modern prosaic usage. The old can and still do nourish us in significant ways, but we have lost sight of this. Creation was for many ancient peoples a primeval source of nourishment that flowed into the present, bringing back the youthfulness of the first unfallen times. Myths and stories of the heroes of the past told around the fire not only reminded us of

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back then, but brought meaning and courage into fallen times. The old is rediscovered as the new; what dawns 'in the beginning' with its creative vitality, renews a world grown old. And the old are closer to this past and so are paradoxically younger the older they are. The presence of the old makes the world well and whole once more. They are the connection to what once was.

The West Germanic althas we find again in words like altitude. Whereas we generally think of old as being time-based, alt suggest a meaning in space and a moral significance. The old are high. Their wealth of experience puts them in the position of the eagle and the all-seeing eye. They survey the world from above. So the elders are by virtue of their moral stature the leaders of the people who are not high enough to see so far. Their status and consciousness places them in a place far and distant from those they advise. 'Far' is an important word to connect with old age if we want to get a deeper insight into it. The sense world is essentially close to the young, at their fingertips as it were. It speaks to them directly of the present moment. The old are the far away. They are to an extent freed from the present which is dimmer to them. They look forwards to the world from a far distance, backwards into the living past within them. The far consciousness is also the peripheral consciousness, a perception of the world from all sides. High and old and far, they increasingly find themselves disconnected and remote. In other words, the old are isolated and very lonely.

Although the event of birth is veiled and hence invisible to our memory, our future dying has not yet happened and so we have totally different feelings about this coming event compared to our feelings about our birth. The decades before death generally show, at least outwardly, much less development than the stages of growth of an infant into maturity. In many ways they reveal the symptoms of an absence of life rather than a new development. Some of the symptoms are painless to our bodily nature; others hurt our soul as well as our body. These include a lack of flexibility and an unsteadiness in our balance along with a decline in memory and cognition. If we filter out the effects of specific conditions, we find a general background of pain in the whole body. As their brains shrink, old people can feel their bones ageing.

The decline of the senses, especially sight, hearing and taste, means that the elderly become increasing isolated and that their souls find it difficult to draw nourishment and comfort from the world. This is exacerbated by the burden of largely unshareable experience. Professional sympathizers can only listen and perhaps practise empathy, but only those who have

lived long enough can fully understand the treasures of pain that live in the memories of the aged. The world has changed and they do not belong to the colourless present that regards itself as the real world.

Exactly when someone becomes old is a matter of debate. Old is often contrasted with new. We are constantly encouraged to reject the old in favour of the new, even to be ashamed of hanging on to the old. The new reveals itself in its form as a step away from being simply modern, and pushes back the past into the category of the old. We should remind ourselves of this whenever we fall for the new. The use of the word 'new' in a way implies a moral judgement. At Whitsun, Peter quoted the prophet Joel 'your young men shall see visions and your old men shall dream dreams' (Acts 2:17). Today we can read vision statements from organizations describing where they want to go and how they envisage the future, a worthwhile activity of course, hopefully leading to concrete achievements. But what use to us are the dreams of old men and women, seemingly concerned with the past? In the Book of Revelation to Saint John, the One who sits upon the Throne of God says 'Behold I make all things new'. But if all things are new, there will be nothing old and so nothing new in contrast to the old. There was no Old Testament until the New Testament pushed it back.

The isolation that grows through bodily and mental decline and the darkening of sight and the failing of hearing often have an early form in what happens through retirement. For many people their worth, or worthiness, is found in their work. Once they cease being employed, old people might be seen as unproductive and so of no use. They do not apparently contribute to the world and are only consumers of the work of others. The more someone has valued the meaning of their work, the more isolated they feel when they are no longer able to do it through being made to retire. In previous times retirement was not based on reaching a particular age, but rather on the inability to continue though infirmities.

It can be humiliating not to be able to function properly. When someone has been looking after themselves for all of their adult life they cherish their independence. Old people often speak of not wanting to be a burden on others. I met a lady once who was standing in the doorway of her house by the canal near Napier Road in Edinburgh with an empty hot water bottle in one hand and a pleading gesture in the other. I offered to boil a kettle and fill it for her. Her husband had taught in the College of Art and her sitting room was full of beautiful objects. I visited her a few times and we had some interesting talks. I soon discovered that there was a deeper reason for

her fishing for help from people passing her door. She wanted someone to go and buy her a bottle of whiskey. I found later that she had many hiding places for her tipple, but tended to forget where they were. She still had long and wonderful dark hair. A social worker came in to help her, with a view to getting her into a home which she fought against. Once they had to break down her bedroom door which she had locked because she would not answer and they were worried about her, but in fact she was alright, just not wanting to see anyone. Eventually they took her away, smartened her up, which included cutting off her long hair and giving her a perm. She did not last long after that.

Old age makes it seem unlikely that many long term goals are going to be achieved. There is then the hope that the next generation may be able to take them up. In so far as the defeat of one's enemy is at least a part of the longed for failed achievement, we touch upon the theme of revenge. Revenge is not necessarily the opposite of forgiveness, but a righteous longing for justice to manifest itself, and the restoration of harmony. The Norse sagas are very honest in giving revenge as one of the most important factors in a fulfilling life. Retirement means to take to your bed, the place where you will die. It is the last place of humiliation where we are almost powerless to act. We still say, or at least used to, about going to bed, I am going to retire now. In the Sagas there are two reasons for retiring to bed: you take to your bed because of grief or depression, or because you are too weak to take revenge on your enemies. Like the suicide who hangs himself where his wife will find him and hopefully feel ashamed, the Norse ex-hero took to his bed to shame his enemies. In his retirement to bed he found a certain satisfaction in the fact that his enemy would no longer have an opportunity to humiliate or kill him, and it was also a form of protest directed at the gods. The injustices, the wounds, the humiliation, were formalized, exaggerated and turned back on their ultimate source. By taking charge of a situation through non-violent action, the humiliated hoped to shame the active powers into finding favour with their predicament like the monks who trod the relics of saints into the ground to awaken their protection. This treading the relics into the earth, the humous, is one of the origins of our modern world humility.

When I was a theology student at Shalesbrook, The Christian Community Seminary, in Forest Row Sussex, we paid a visit to a local old people's home as part of our course. The inmates had been told that they were going to be visited by some young people training to be priests. I still remember the faces full of grief and tears, and hands reaching out to touch us. 'Please,

please, let us die, we cannot stand it anymore but they won't let us go. Is there really anything on the other side or is it just more darkness like this life? Everyone I knew has gone and I am completely alone with no one to visit me. Please, help me die!' We tried to find some comforting words, but the naked expressions of such deep grief made the words stick in our throats. Nowadays, I expect old people would not be allowed to call out in such pain. Old folks sit by their beds with their far-away eyes, wrapped in a fog of chemical tranquillity. No one wants to hear too much of grief and suffering and wanting to die. But the medication does not always work. The nurses still say 'the poor dear, she doesn't really mean it'. The doctors say that the weeping is one of the symptoms of this kind of condition. Why should we be spared?

In his autobiography *My Days and Dream*, Edward Carpenter makes a significant observation about old age. Writing in 1915, in the final chapter entitled *How the World Looks at Seventy* he writes:

> *It had become obvious that the existing order of things in Government, Law, Finance, Industry, Commerce, Morality, Religion, the Capitalist Wage system, the Rivalry of nation with nation, the administration and cultivation of the Land, and so forth could not continue much longer. In each one and all of these matters we have been heading towards an impasse, a block, a point at which further progress in the old direction must cease, and a new departure begin. The Catastrophe has come. We are already in the welter of a World-war which in magnitude exceeds anything that has ever occurred in the past, or even been imagined… But at present we are still unable to see the outcome, or even to guess what it will be. The lineaments of the new world are hidden from us.*
>
> *In some sense the outer forms of these things will remain: but the Spirit will be changed; and so greatly changed that their shapes also will be profoundly modified. When Industry exists really for the supply of good and useful things and not for the manufacture of profit; when High Finance is not for gambling, but for the insurance and security of everybody; when Courts of Law are for the uplifting and not for the down casting of criminals, and so on; then the forms of these institutions will be as different from what they are now as the organs of a Dragonfly are different from those of the Water beetle from which it sprang.*
>
> *But before this great and wonderful Transformation takes place, there must, it is abundantly evident, be great sacrifices. No such huge change could happen without. Some of the functions and activities of the present Society must perish; and with them must perish those who*

are engaged in these functions. Thousands and millions of individuals must die in the mere effort to create and establish a new collective order. Heroisms, exceeding those of the past, will be needed and will be supplied. We need not fear. We know the great heart of humanity.

In my little individual way I experience something of the same kind. I feel a curious sense of joy in observing as at my age one is sometimes, compelled to do—the natural and inevitable decadence of some portion of the bodily organism, the failures of sight and hearing, the weakening of muscles, the aberrations even of memory—a curious sense of liberation and of obstacles removed. I acknowledge that the experience the satisfaction and the queer sense of elation seems utterly unreasonable, and not to be explained by any of the ordinary theories of life; but it is there, and it may, after all, have some meaning.

Edward Carpenter was able to know a correlation between the breakdown of society and the hope for its renewal through sacrifice via the ageing of his own body. He found, in a modest way, within the process of the destruction of the world and his own body, the light of the future. Others have also testified in their old age to a spiritual youthfulness of their life forces that are breaking free of the physical.

Towards the end of the Gospel of Saint John, Jesus makes a contrast between the two disciples, John and Peter. To John he says that he will remain 'until I come' and to Peter 'Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you would; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go.' (John 21:18). John and Peter represent two aspects of every disciple. It is the death that follows upon old age that is said to 'glorify' God. Peter, the rock of ages of the new church, is the disciple who experiences old age and glorifies God through his death. The Greek word *doxa* (glory) is contrasted with the word for shame in the New Testament. It has the meaning of a transforming light, like the aura of the sun, for example in Matt 24:30 'and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and much glory (doxa)'. It could be compared to the light around the transubstantiated bread and wine at the altar, a beginning of the new heaven and earth promised by the resurrection. The words sometimes spoken after the seven petitions of the Lord's Prayer are known as the doxology because the glory encompasses the kingdom and the power, the earth and the heavens. From the light of creation through the light of the transfiguration, to the light of the new creation…can we learn to see it within and around the old man, or the old woman, in spite of, or even because, of the shadows of time?

The opportunities of old age

Judith Jones

Simeon Care for the Elderly was founded thirty years ago as the first Camphill Community caring for older people. It came about through the working together of a group from Camphill and The Christian Community who were concerned about the needs of older people. Originally formed as a community of those who wished to share their last phase of life together, it has evolved over the years to become a nursing care home and will move into a new purpose-built setting on site in Cairnlee estate in May of this year. Whilst many of the earlier residents had been relatively active when they came to Simeon, those who come now already have greater care needs. Through many changes, the name of Simeon remains, after the old Simeon in Luke's gospel who had longed to meet the Christ child before he died. His is a fitting name for a home where many may come in the hope of finding fulfilment in the last phase of life.

> *The old person who is returning to the primordial source of life is moving out of fleeting time and entering into eternity. One can see fire in the eyes of the young, but one can see light in the eyes of the old! To be a light, a gentle, peaceful, steady light that shines in the darkness, may be useful, more precious to those people who surround us, than if we remain a scorching flame.* (Victor Hugo)

The shepherds who came to the Christ child are often depicted as old. We find this in paintings of the old masters or in the Oberufer nativity play. The old shepherds bring a special quality of humility and devotion to the heart of the Christmas story. Celebrating Christmas with older people is itself an experience. At Simeon Care for the Elderly whether it be singing carols, lighting the first candles on the Christmas tree, or sailing boats on New Year's Eve, there is wonder and joy amongst many of our residents. As we witness what may appear as rediscovered childhood, it is a reminder of Christ's admonition that we should 'become like little children'.

Judith Jones is a member of the congregation in Aberdeen.

One of the leading gerontologists of our time is the Swedish born Lars Tornstam who through extensive research, has since the 1990s developed his theory of 'gerotranscendence': 'Gero'

(from Greek): old age; 'transcendence' (from Latin): to climb over (in this case, to climb over boundaries). He has introduced a new understanding of ageing, stating that human development is a life-long process that continues into old age, which, when optimized, ends in a new perspective. He claims that old age has its own character, meaning and values quite different from those of mid-life. He gives an alternative to the popular view of successful ageing or 'active ageing' that maintains faculties and activities from mid-life into older age. Tornstam identifies that there can be a shift in perspective in later life from a materialistic and rational vision to a more cosmic and transcendent one. This can be expressed in the small everyday experiences of life and nature, and a sense of mystery about many things that had been taken for granted. He seems to be describing the discovery of the eternal child within. The transcendent experience is captured in a quote from a ninety year old nursing home resident:

> *Lack of physical strength alone keeps me inactive and often silent. I've been called senile. Senility is a convenient peg on which to hang non-conformity. A new set of faculties seems to be coming into operation. I seem to be awakening to a larger world of wonderment, to catch glimpses of the immensity and diversity of creation. More than at any time in my life, I seem to be aware of the beauties of our spinning planet and the sky above. I feel that old age sharpens my awareness.*

What many gerontologists used to describe in negative terms as 'disengagement' is seen by Tornstam in reality as positive personal development. He lists many aspects of this changed perspective. There is a redefinition of the self and relationships to others, as well as a new understanding of basic existential questions concerning life and death, time and space. The person becomes less self-preoccupied and more selective in the choice of social and other activities. There is less interest in superficial social interaction and a growing appreciation of solitude as opposed to loneliness. A sense of affinity with past generations grows. There is also evidence of increased broadmindedness and tolerance. Some of these characteristics may be recognisable to readers. Tornstam also suggests that these inner changes are followed by an increase in life satisfaction.

The concept of experiential transcendence had been developed in the 1970s by the Yale psychiatrist Robert Lifton, who described this unique kind of experience:

> *The feeling is often used to express one's involvement in, and in a sense passive acceptance of the slow sad truths of life and nature… The acceptance of and even pleasure in sadness—the sadness of change, loss*

and death—has to do with one's sense of being part of the cosmic and the eternal.

The theory of 'gerotranscendence' was anticipated by Rudolf Steiner in the early twentieth century. Steiner described how in healthy ageing there is a gradual loosening and freeing of the soul and spirit from the physical body. He said that older people can become rich in their life of soul and spirit if they do not let themselves be put off by their physical conditions. Steiner regarded it as depressing that most people sleep through geriatric experiences that could lead them into tremendous depths if they would get older consciously.

How can we attempt to make this conscious journey into ageing? In his book *Contemplative Ageing,* Edmund Sherman addresses those in their sixties who have arrived in what we could see as the adolescence of old age. He speaks about meditative practice and exploring silence and solitude. He also suggests the importance of developing autobiographical consciousness through review of one's life. He defines Socrates dictum *Know thyself* through William Earle's definition, *to become explicit as to who I am, what it is for me to exist, what my singular existence has been, where I am now and what lies before me.* There is still be time to resolve issues and relationships that have been obstacles and burdens on life's way.

If the experiences of old age can be so glorious, why do we fear and wish to deny this phase of life? It is no doubt to do with the realisation that the gateway to these inner discoveries leads us to a path that brings loss and limitation. The loss of memory and orientation, of mobility and bodily functions may bring a loss of self-esteem and the fear of losing autonomy and control. In a society which puts so much value on independence it is no wonder that there is dread of becoming a burden to others. In a society that places importance on the intellect it is no wonder that one of the greatest fears associated with ageing is developing dementia.

Those who come to Simeon or to other care homes have already walked the pathway of loss and limitation, and accepted their need for help and care. One of the supports is finding the companions, those who will journey with you: family, friends and carers, and on certain stretches of the journey the doctor, nurse or priest. Our experience in Simeon is that the journey many residents make is not from independence to dependence but from independence to interdependence. It is a strange mystery but it is often the most frail and vulnerable who are able to bring the most joy and sense of meaning to those around them. Metropolitan Anthony writes of our difficulties to receive and the opportunities old age brings for this learning experience, *to receive with gratitude, to receive with grace, to receive in*

such a way that the giving be a joy for the giver and add new depth to the relationship.

Birth and death are also constant companions. It is always special to witness the joy that an older person can have on greeting a baby and we are fortunate in Simeon that several mothers bring their young children to visit. It is equally special to sense the acceptance when someone dies and the wish to offer support and sympathy to the family. On Boxing Day we gathered round the Christmas tree to celebrate an eighty fifth birthday and at the same time to share an unexpected event in our midst earlier that morning. Geoffrey had died just a week after his own ninetieth birthday had been celebrated. Everyone was aware how he had long awaited death and was ready to leave us. His death was part of our Christmas.

On New Years Eve it has become our tradition in looking back, to especially remember those who have died during the year. New Years Eve 2013 was exceptional in that there had been twelve deaths within twelve months. One of these was Betty Colville, well known to some of *Perspectives*' readership as she had been for many of her almost one hundred years a member of The Christian Community and active in the congregations of Edinburgh and then Aberdeen. Betty had been a wonderful exponent of 'active ageing' during her time in Simeon, maintaining her activities in the garden into her mid nineties. In terms of inner change her last few years were even more significant. As her mobility decreased, memory failed and confusion set in, there was an inner transformation in Betty. She had previously been rather shy and reserved; now, a gentle warmth broke through and in her serious nature a new contentment could be felt.

Verner von Heidenstam's poem, 'At the End of the Way', beautifully expresses the wisdom and fulfilment that can be reached in old age:

Wise, O Man, thou shalt become
When thou winn'st unto the evening coolness
Of the topmost height, the Earth o'erlooking,
Turn thee at the ending of the way,
Rest an hour, O King, and look behind thee!
All is clear there, all is reconciled,
And the realm of youth once more is gleaming,
Strewn as erst with light and morning dew.

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The fragility of old age

Wistful reflections upon ageing

Annette Menninghaus

Old age is a test that requires courage according to Loriot (a German comedian, humourist, actor and writer). One needs courage to accept all the physical, emotional and spiritual limitations which old age brings.

Everything that we have kept because 'it might come in useful sometime' must go. Or at least, sorted and organised so that our survivers won't need a large container to get rid of it all. For they certainly won't need all the things we have collected. We can't leave much to our children because they have everything already. Also their tastes are different from ours. Would I have wanted my parent's furniture in my life? Could I have made a new home with my mother's vertiko cupboard, her dresser, and the glass topped sitting room cupboard with walnut root pattern? Or the very large double bed made of ash? Or the china service with a wide gold border? My elder sister uses this precious china inheritance from our mother on special occasions. I inherited a less valuable service with gold border from an aunt. However, I must have given it away sometime as it is thankfully not in the cubby hole where it lay unused for years.

And how do I experience old age emotionally? I experience the borders of my personality in one way as thinner, but in another way becoming harder and less flexible, even brittle, like unused antique china that could break more easily now than when it was used daily years ago.

Every experience has formed, left its mark, and enriched us. Young people notice this and voluntarily and trustingly seek our presence. What about the thinner fragile part of my personality, which is so different and new? How do I deal with this without becoming hard and hurting myself or others? I must gather my courage every time I expereince this new side of my being, and I must remind myself of what I can still achive and not just what I can no longer manage.

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When I was young I thought that with age everything would become easier, and everything would become clear to me. That hope was to a great extent an illusion. And now? The connections between missed chances, omissions, difficulties and successes is becoming clearer. The mysterious intertwining

of life's unfolding and destiny is becoming more clear as well. My opinions are stronger and I must guard that they do not become inflexible. Much has been decided, confirmed, solved, irretrievably finalised and belongs to the past. I realise this wistfully and also with relief.

Am I nostralgic? Yes and it requires courage to be able to take leave of old ideas, separation and pain. It makes me feel good when young people voluntarily seek my presence like we used to seek the presence of older people around us in our youth, e.g. the landlady when I was a student. It has now come full circle, which is healing for both generations.

How lonely must old age be when one is isolated, locked away and separated from younger people who would benefit from contact with older people. My old friend Otto said gratefully: 'I experience the connection to the younger generation through you.'

Now I see from a new perspective what I felt when I was young. On the one hand I remember being disgusted at the sight of old people in trams moving their dentures around their mouths. And on the other hand I see myself as a small child sitting happily on the laps of old men when they were contentedly smoking their pipes. I was drawn by their calmness and tranquility, and the understanding and warmheartedness which came from them. Now it is my turn to deliver this, and it feels good when it is required. I remember the toothless wrinkled mouths of some old people, when their scrawny arms drew me to them for a goodbye kiss. Those toothless mouths rayed out powerlessness but also peace. When I was a student I had to night watch a person who was dying. His mouth became one big hole for his last gasps, in and out, in and out. We both breathed the same air.

Looking back, even the most negative experiences make sense and become acceptable. However, it can be difficult to forgive. I experience spiritual guidance which leaves me free and watches over me. This fills me with thankfulness and confidence that these beings will continue to care for me. Even though I become less able to remember and less able to cope, my hands won't be empty when I walk towards the light filled figure that will open its arms and lead me towards my new life.

Life simply was as it was. What counts is the effort which we have made, the courage with which we have mastered our own situation. The people who accompanied me during the course of my life and were important to me will meet and recognise me 'there'.

I sought my own way. No angels were responsible for my choices, no God, but my celestial friend, my angel was always aware of me and I knew that he went with me, suffered, worried and cried with me, but also shared

my joy. I hope I won't forget about him when I forget so many other things. I find it very hurtful not to be taken notice of, not to be greeted, not to be included or to be ignored and I imagine he does as well.

Old age is not lovely but it would be worse if I worried about it; or, if through fear, I blocked out what has to be. Ageing is different for each of us, in its unspectacular and gentle way.

My farewell from earth will be a celebration of the recollections I have worked through. I will need courage to incorporate each day in the chain of my life with all my previous days. The dark night gives way to the new day and loses its horror when I know where I am going. It is the land that as a child I visited in the evenings when I was dropping off to sleep. It is a land of wonderfully gentle but also powerfull music, and I remember the vibrant, divine colours and forms. As I dropped off to sleep I gave myself a jolt inwardly and then I was there, home.

The heart of the epistles Part IV

Cynthia Hindes

In The Christian Community there are nine festival seasons celebrated in the course of the year, three triads of three. Each festival has its own epistle. Since Passiontide has two, and the Christmas season has three, there are twelve epistles. Further, there is a thirteenth, a Trinity epistle, for four times of the year between festivals. This Trinity epistle appears between Epiphany and Passiontide, between Pentecost and St. Johnstide, between St. Johnstide and Michaelmas, and between Michaelmas and Advent. [1]

Passiontide

Passiontide begins the second triad of Christian festivals. Passiontide in The Christian Community is four weeks long, rather than the traditional six and a half weeks of Lent that begin with Ash Wednesday. However, in The Christian Community, the Gospel readings for the Sunday before, and the two after Ash Wednesday, can enlighten the mood with which we enter into Passiontide. They are the stories of the rich young man who would gain eternal life through renunciation [2], the story of Christ's overcoming of the three basic human temptations [3], and the description of his transfiguration of Jesus [4]. Although they are not within The Christian Community Passiontide, the sequence tells the story of humanity up to the point of Christ's incarnating: the wish for eternal life; Christ's cleansing of the soul of Jesus of the basic human temptations; and his strengthening of Jesus' inner body of light and life in the transfiguration. It is the sequence that illustrates the entry of Christ into our humanity. It starts with a human wish. Christ progresses level by level into his ever fuller and more complete penetration of the archetypal human constitution of Jesus.

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By the time the first Passiontide Sunday arrives, Christ has arrived at the very core of our nature, our heart. The altar and vestments are black. The mood is one of somber grief. The black of Passiontide inclines us toward sadness over ourselves and over others, over what we do today to Christ and the divine world with our weaknesses. Instead of a collective voice, the voice is the angel-voice of Christ, speaking to us from within us. He speaks in grief of what he experiences: a heart that is empty, of blood's longing, of a sense of lack, which is surging through the breath. He speaks from our core, from within the body, in a mood of compassionate realism. Yet all is not fully black and dead. He sees our inner recognition that something, someone of great value, the awakener, is missing.

In the epistle it is as though we have dropped into the silence of suffering. It is Christ who speaks within us. In the inserted prayer, we speak in answer. We ask that he not dwell upon the very real potential for (or perhaps even actuality of) evil in us; that he not gaze upon the thorn of evil that has been pressed into our hearts. We plead that he recognise that the strength of temptation's power comes from the weakness in-

herent in our human constitution. We admit to this weakness, a weakness that has led us to powerlessness, to our inability to stand in the face of either our temptation or our God. We ask only that he raise us, for we cannot do so on our own.

For three weeks we lie in the misery and weakness of the sickness of sin. Holy Week has its own epistle. In the fourth week, already something begins to shift. Just as the dark sky lightens before the dawn, something, the thinnest glimmer, begins to stir in the heart. Christ within us notices and describes it: our heart begins to burn within a cold, god-forsaken dwelling. Our blood seeps in sorrow; yet within the breath there is hope. Hope lies in a grave, yet is alive. Christ, our hope, lays himself down in us. In his gaze we see his grief over our loss of ourselves.

This theme of hearts that burn will reappear after Easter in the beautiful story in Luke 24.[5] Two of the disciples are walking on the way to Emmaus on the Sunday after his death. He walks with them, unrecognized at first. Later they say, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road…?' The four weeks of Passiontide, and especially Holy Week, is to Easter what Advent is to Christmas. But now, instead of a great hope that we greet joyfully, coming to us from the widths of space, we perceive hope as someone who speaks from the fragile silence within us[6], in the empty, burning place of our hearts.

Easter

The Easter festival season lasts forty days, nearly seven weeks. It begins Easter Sunday, which falls on the first Sunday after the first full moon after the March equinox. It ends with Ascension Thursday, forty days later.

Easter is a complete and astonishing inversion of what went before. Overnight the heavy blackness of the altar and vestments has turned into a bright clear red of love and courage, outlined with the bright green of life and hope. The red and green of Easter time moves us toward joy, strength and victory over weakness and death. The mood of the heart is delighted joy.

The Easter Epistle is in three parts. The first part describes that illness and weakness have turned into healing. The acute crisis of illness, of the sickness of sin has been overcome. The heart that was empty is full, and now beats high in jubilation; the blood weaves in fullness; breathing brings comfort. He who laid himself into the grave of our being, into the depths of our human constitution, has overnight burst into the fullness of the power of life; he has healed and invigorated us in the body's depths, in the very core of our being. He has emerged from the body's grave, and the earth's grave, as one who walks before us. The voice speaking in the Epistle now recounts what it sees and hears, both from within and without. It is as though the angels at the empty tomb are describing what they saw at the first grave, and at the same time what they still see at the empty tomb of the heart: the grave is empty; he walks before you.

Here Christ resonates in step with his Father, the one 'who goes before his creatures like a Father.' And Christ walks as spirit guide in front of us, comforting us with the Father's healing Spirit of love.

The second part of the epistle is the individual's response to the miracle of new life and health: my heart praises! The death of my spirit has been overcome! My breath and blood, my very body, rejoices in grace.

And the third part, spoken toward the congregation is again in the voice of the angel. It expresses that this awakening is to be shared in spirit-enlivened words, in recognition that Christ, his deed, his very being, constitutes the very meaning of the earth.

This is a kind of octave of the equivalent place in the Christmas epistle, where his appearance on earth was affirmed. Now, at Easter, not only does he appear, he acts. He heals; he comforts; he shows the way. He has become so mighty that he gives the earth its very meaning.

The inserted prayer expands on these themes. The jubilation in the body, in blood, breath and heart, is echoed in the air's delight and rejoicing; the earth inhales the living power of the sun. Christ lives in the human being's rejoicing. To the soul's delight, from the null point of the inner grave, from meaning shrunk to the size of a tiny seed of hope, there springs a boundless illuminated interior landscape, shining with newness, filled with power, life and health. Before the soul's eye, the dark and confining inner grave transforms itself into an altar within a cosmic landscape. At this altar Christ is making his offering of himself, and of us, to the earth, to the far worlds. This offering is happening both now, and in the eternal boundless realm beyond time. It is also happening within us. Heaven and earth, inner and outer, have been reunited and filled with overflowing life.

Ascension

The Ascension festival season lasts for ten days. It begins on Thursday, the fortieth day after Easter Sunday, and ends with Pentecost (Whitsun), the fiftieth day after Easter. It includes only one Sunday. The colours at the altar are still red, but now shining with an edging of sun-gold. The red and gold of Ascension helps us feel how the victory, the resurrection that transforms all darkness, can make everything shine golden. The mood of the heart is tinged with openness and praise and at the same time with a note of reflection.

Forty days before Easter we heard the gospel story of the rich young man who seeks eternal life; he is told he must give up everything to follow Christ in his descent into the realm of death. Now forty days after Easter, the young man can follow Christ into the heights as well. For Christ, whose creating word resounded at Advent, inspiring change and transformation, is now himself engaged in a further transformation of his being. His resurrection body resolves into the clouds, as he expands his being into the biosphere of the earth. He makes the earth his body. Air and water are saturated with his life. And we, who like the disciples are unable to follow this process of transformation, soberly watch him seem to disappear. In a certain sense Christ's resurrection body dies into the cosmos of the earth. He rises as the spirit of the earth.

As often happens at the end of a life, the epistle for Ascension reflects back on Christ's life on earth. The voice is our own, addressing the Father and acknowledging that he, the Father, was the one who sent Christ, and further remembering all that Christ did; that he taught, suffered death, was victorious over death. Now our hearts become organs of perception; they acquire a power of vision and see how Christ continues to live, how he transfigures the earth, that is, how he fills the earth with radiant shining life. He rises in ascension, not forsaking the earth, but expanding his being for the sake of the earth. We acknowledge that

Christ dwells with our Father, while maintaining his active place in and with us, we who would continue his gesture of self-offering at the altar.

To this acknowledgment the inserted prayer adds a hymn of praise from the depths of our heart, thrown out like a towline, through which we hope to follow Christ in his further course, for the further blessing of the earth.

With Ascension, the second festival triad ends. Passiontide and Ascension are the bookends of Easter. This second triad of festivals has emphasized the working of God the Son. It ends with an affirmation that Christ Jesus is indeed the Son of the Father. The Holy, healing Spirit is hinted at as the awakener and as the comforter, but will come more to the fore in the third festival triad of Whitsun, St. Johnstide, and Michaelmas.

Pentecost (Whitsun)

Pentecost or Whitsun begins the third cycle of three festival seasons. It begins a cycle in which the Holy Spirit, the healing spirit, is emphasized. Pentecost is celebrated for three days only — Sunday and the following Monday and Tuesday. Its very brevity suggests that it is easy to miss the moment when the Spirit briefly descends. The Pentecost festival season begins on the fiftieth day after Easter Sunday (pente means fifty). Traditionally it was also called White Sunday, hence it is also called Whitsun. It recalls the event described in the second chapter of the Book of Acts, when the disciples gathered on the fiftieth day after the Passover celebration. This fiftieth day was itself the Hebrew festival of Shav'uot, celebrating the culmination of Passover's redemption. Gathered together, in prayer and celebration, the disciples experienced the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, giving them comfort and strength. They began to understand what they had experienced; they began to understand the meaning of Christ's incarnation, death, resurrection and ascension, as the even greater redemption and healing of humankind.

Pentecost is a celebration of individuals gathered into the community of Christ. Interestingly, in The Christian Community, the gospel reading does not commemorate the Pentecost event itself. Instead, the passage is taken from the time before Christ died, from John 14. It reminds us that experiencing the health-giving Spirit is grounded in and emanates from Christ's abiding love for us, and our love for Christ himself, even when he seems gone.

Pentecost marks a transition. The previous festival seasons celebrated Christ's progressively deeper indwelling of the individual human body and soul of Jesus. At Pentecost he, along with the Spirit of his Father, indwells individuals who are gathered in community. The community becomes his new body. This is especially the case when people are gathered in communal prayer, or, as the original event suggests, gathered in unity of heart and mind.[7] The opening verse in Acts of this event is usually translated that the disciples were 'together in one place'; the literal Greek translation of 'being in one' could signify not only that they were together spatially, but also inwardly. We can imagine them in the upper room where the Last Supper had taken place, praying together, perhaps singing Psalms, praying the proscribed prayers for the festival of Shav'uot, all the

while waiting for something that Christ had promised that he and the Father would send. Again this echoes the first of the triad of three festivals which touch on the theme of hope.

The altar and vestments are white, edged with the yellow. The white and yellow of Pentecost lets us feel the nearness of the world of light, and the healing power of the spirit. The mood of the heart is one of an ongoing acknowledgement of the need for healing, and at the same time, an upward-streaming sense of dedication and self-offering. In the previous Ascension epistle, we acknowledged that Christ was sent from our Father. Here at Pentecost a further relationship is expressed: Christ sends to us the Father's spirit of healing. It elaborates and affirms the interweaving of the members of the Trinity and their relationship to us.

The voice of the Epistle is again ours, a communal voice. We acknowledge that Christ sends the Father's spirit of healing. It refers to this healing spirit as a physician for the souls of the world (not just for us). In our act of consecrating, we ask that this spirit of world healing unite with our offering, so that the human weakness that leads to infirmity of soul can be mitigated, through Christ and through the light of the Spirit.

The word 'spirit' is perhaps something of a mystery. One can perhaps understand that by the word 'spirit', a living being is meant. But what is the essence of 'spirit'? I would suggest that spirit-being consists of states of consciousness. As a child, one has an intense awareness of what one sees, what one feels. At the same time, the child usually experiences adults, particularly parents and teachers, as beings who are greater than himself. This is because as a child, one's own wisdom of experience is yet small; there is too much that the child does not understand about the world; too much that cannot be foreseen, for the consciousness of the child lives in the here and now, in the moment. The adult has a higher and broader awareness of the world of the past, of the future, and of the child's momentary and future place in it.

The nature of the consciousness of a spirit is further characterized not only by the degree of its awareness, but also by the quality of its consciousness. Our language, for example, speaks of a spirit of brotherhood, or of being mean-spirited.

The Father's spirit is a spirit of love and integrated wholeness. It is a love that heals. His spirit's awareness extends over the fullness and breadth of time and space. His spirit-consciousness knows and loves the whole. He recognizes what is ill or broken, what has fallen out of the wholeness, and seeks to strengthen what is weak and to heal the rifts. Love seeks to redeem. God's spirit wants to heal and gather. Yet, as always, he respects the freedom that he gave to human beings.

The inserted prayer of Pentecost (Whitsun) speaks of human hearts aflame, hearts that are now not just burning with sorrow, as before Easter, but hearts that have been enkindled in praise. This flame of praise is born of a glimpse into the greater awareness and love shining from the Father and his Son. The flames are flames of self-offering. They are the natural and healthy response of hearts that become aware of how great a sacrifice the Trinity has made. Father, Son and the Spirit of Love continue to sacrifice themselves, not only so that we can exist, but also so that we can thrive and continue to grow. The triune God has offered us his

substance, his creativity, his love and healing. Our first response is the counter-offer of the praise of our hearts.

Through the Triune God, and through all that has happened before, we realize that we have been given a way out of a dead end; we have been given a future. With St. Johnstide we will take up Christ's life anew; we will change hearts and minds as altar flames of Pentecost begin to burn within our hearts. During the ten week August and September Trinity interval, we will immerse ourselves again in his teachings, healings and sendings; we will rise with new strength with the widow's son of Nain; and we will view the future and its hopes during Michaelmas, the last of the three festival triads. This last triad emphasizes the Holy Spirit, the healing spirit as it begins to work within human beings, within human hearts.

During the course of the liturgical year, our hearts have moved from the hope and sensing of salvation at Advent, to feeling the light of the grace of Christmas. We have generated warmth in the light of prayer that radiates love at Epiphany. The heart is empty and then burning at Passiontide; warm, full and beating in joyous praise at Easter. Our heart acquires the power of vision in praise at Ascension and flames spiritual revelation at Pentecost. The heart gives warm thanks and burns in the transforming fire of St. John. Our heart's experience of the offering of self in the Act of Consecration is a preparation for the heart's awakening to spirit awareness, in which our hearts are kindled.

Pentecost, St. Johnstide and Michaelmas, the last triad of Christian festivals, are not about endings or finishings; they are all beginnings. They are our opportunities to start over, to begin, again and again, year after year. They express the way Christ, the Spirit of his Father's love, would work into human communities. They express the hope and faith that the Triune God has in humanity as it moves into the future. In the words of the poet Rilke:

If the angel deigns to come
it will be because you have convinced her,
not by tears but by your humble resolve
to be always beginning; to be a beginner.

1 Liturgical texts are meant to be heard in the context of the living service to the divine in which they are embedded, not read on paper. It is the author's hope that these contemplations of the theme of the heart's seasons in the epistles will help accompany and prepare the listener to hear and live more deeply into the words and mood of the Christian festivals. The author owes much of the content of this article to the work of Hans Werner Schroeder, *Die Episteln der Menschenweihehandlung*.

2 Luke 18:18–34

3 Matthew 4:1–11

4 Matthew 17:1–15

5 Luke 24: 13–25

6 Rabbi Rami Shapiro's translation of 'the still small voice within,' from Elijah's experience of God in 1Kings 19:12. Other authors have translated this passage as 'the sound of sheer silence'.

7 Acts 2:1

Bringing myrrh to myrrh Part III
HD and the gleaming Magdalene

Michael Steward

In the first part of this 'triptych' of essays, we explored through HD's eyes and sensibility how the Sophia infuses the world with the Christ and how the Christ suffuses the world with the Sophia. Then, in the second part (Winter 2014/15), we teased out various aspects of HD's perception of the nature of the Sophia or, at least, of sacred presence which she experiences as distinctly feminine. Perhaps the most mysterious aspect of this is the feminie's absolute (yet playful) resistance to definition. Now you see her; now you don't. This core ambivalence is emphasised strongly in the gnostic gospels, as in the following extract from the scripture known cryptically as 'Thunder: Perfect Mind'.

For I am the first and the last;
I am the honoured and the scorned;
I am the harlot and the holy one:
I am the wife and the virgin.

In the final part of HD's 'Trilogy', there is a puzzle which reflects and unfolds this enigmatic theme. Before the beautiful climax of the poem in the image of the innocent Mary with 'the bundle of myrrh' she cradles in her arms, a story is related which is rather confusing because the sequence of the narrative is circular and elliptical and its content seems both sharply focussed and mysteriously diffuse.

The story describes an encounter between a man and a woman which is fleeting but carries a charge of numinous significance out of all proportion to its brevity. We learn, first of all, that this man occupies a small shop of sorts, hidden away in the back streets of a marketplace, one which people would be unlikely to find or enter by chance. What he stocks is not clear, except it includes a jar of myrrh that is infinitely precious. Then, one day, he is surprised that not only is he visited in this place, but it is by an unescorted woman.

And Kaspar (for, of course, the
merchant was Kaspar)
did not at first know her:

she was frail and slender,
wearing no bracelet
or other ornament, and with her scarf

wound round her head,
draping her shoulders;
she was impersonal, not a servant

sent on an errand, but, as it were,
a confidential friend, sent
by some great lady;

she was discretion itself…

He had barely recovered from this (in his view) outrageous breach of cultural etiquette, when something else happens to compound his shock, which is that her scarf slips off her head and her hair falls loose.

It was hardly decent of her to stand there,
unveiled, in the house of a stranger

…it was unseemly that a woman
appear disordered, dishevelled;

it was unseemly that a woman
appear at all.

He attempts to indicate to her, by courteous but definite means, that the meeting is improper and is over and that she must leave.

...he drew aside his robe
in a noble manner
but the unmaidenly woman
did not take the hint;

she had seen nobility herself at first hand;
nothing impressed her, it was easy to see;

she simply didn't care
whether he acclaimed
or snubbed her—or worse;
what are insults?

She knew how to detach herself,
another unforgivable sin,

and when stones were hurled,
she simply wasn't there;

she wasn't there and then she appeared...

The critical point here is that the unloosing of her hair is the action which triggers in Kaspar the awareness that he is in the presence of the Magdalene and that the whole purpose of his being here in this place and this time is for the moment (the soul-stirring momentum) of this meeting.

Kaspar did not recognise her
until her scarf slipped to the floor,

and then, not only did he recognise Mary
as the stars had told...

but when he saw the light on her hair
like moonlight on a lost river,

Kaspar
remembered.

Still, a great struggle ensues inside him about whether or not he can surrender to this glowing presence who has entered his world so (one might say) seductively. He is a learned man and wonders if he should heed the warnings implicit in certain legends. He recalls…

they called the creature...

seated on the sea-shore
or on a rock, a siren,

a maid of the sea, a mermaid;
some said this mermaid sang

and that a siren-song was fatal
and wrecks followed the
wake of such hair...

However, as we have already noted, he is in the presence of someone who will merely shrug off attempts to constrain her with any kind of imprisoning definition; and he is, after all, a sensitive and thoughtful man who has experienced the hallowed act of 'bringing myrrh to myrrh'. He knows the stories that she

was devil-ridden or had been;
but Kaspar might call

the devils, daemons,
and might even name the seven

under his breath, for technically
Kaspar was a heathen;

he might whisper tenderly those names
without fear of eternal damnation,

Isis, Astarte, Cyprus
and the other four;

he might re-name them,
Ge-meter, De-meter, earth mother

or Venus
in a star.

While his thinking gave him pause, it is something far more powerful that influences his response. As he witnesses her hair

flowing free, he finds himself entranced by a vision:

He saw as in a mirror,
clearly, O very clearly,

a circlet of square-cut stones
on the head of a lady,

and what he saw made his heart so glad
that it was as if he suffered,

his heart laboured so
with his ecstasy.

His eyes are drawn particularly to one of these stones which has a miniscule flaw and, as he gazes, enchanted, into this little 'fleck or speck', it unfurls like a rose:

And the flower, thus contained
in the infinitely tiny grain or seed,

opened petal by petal, a circle,
and each petal was separate

yet still held, as it were,
by some force of attraction

to its dynamic centre;
and the circle went on widening
and would go on opening
he knew, to infinity...

And this lucid blossoming is enhanced by an aural counterpoint, a kind of blissful chorale, whose purpose is to unfold and reveal the whole story of earthly and human evolution

And he heard, as it were, the echo
of an echo in a shell,

words neither sung nor chanted
but stressed rhythmically;

the echoed syllables of this spell
conformed to the sound

of no word he had ever heard spoken...
but he understood the words

though the sound was other
than our ears are attuned to;

the tone was different
yet he understood it;

it translated itself
as it transmuted its message

through spiral upon spiral of the shell
of memory that yet connects us...

As Kaspar emerges from this enchantment and his sense of time contracts back to the actual and mundane, he is confronted with a further enigma. Just a few seconds before, in his intense social discomfort, he made clear to this 'interloper' that 'his was not ordinary myrrh and incense and anyway it is not for sale'. This prompts the Magdalene to declare herself fully, then bring their encounter to a peremptory conclusion:

I am Mary, the incense flower
of the incense-tree,

myself worshipping, weeping,
shall be changed to myrrh;

I am Mary, though melted away,
I shall be a tower...she said, Sir,

I have need not of bread nor of wine,
nor of anything that you can offer me,

and, demurely, she knotted her scarf
and turned to unfasten the door...

Some say she slipped out and got away,
some say he followed her and found her,

some say he never found her
but sent a messenger after her

with the alabaster jar...

However the story is resolved, we are clear now the literal 'truth' hardly matters. While it is Kaspar's task to safeguard this myrrh of transcendent quality, it is not within his

Mary Madgdalene, drawing by Leonardo Da Vinci

power (neither is it his will) to withhold it from the woman whose being and sacred purpose is bound up with its character, for this and all time.

I am Mary, a great tower;
through my will and my power
Mary shall be myrrh.

The imagery of this bold assertion has a beguiling link with the ancient prophesy in Micah (4:8) that many now believe refers directly to her especially since the prophet goes on to affirm that she will firstly have to endure exile and the defiling of her name before being 'delivered' into her true power:

> And thou, O tower of the flock (Magdal-eder), the stronghold of the daughter of Zion, unto thee shall it come, even the first dominion; the kingdom shall come to the daughter of Jerusalem.

Christopher Hudson is a member of The Christian Community in Stroud, UK.

While HD's re-imagining of the Magdalene prefigures by some fifty or sixty years the recent fever of interest in reviewing the nature and stature of this undoubtedly great soul, this is not the place to consider the merits or otherwise of the proliferation of theories that now surround this figure. The main focus here is on what is more or less universally agreed, which is that she is the first witness to the resurrection; and on HD's view of Mary, not so much as a person, but as entelechy, as a burning purpose and uncompromising force, here to ensure, through anointing Jesus with her myrrh and myrrh-nature, that the Christ is actualised, for

...resurrection is a sense of direction,
resurrection is a bee-line

straight to the horde and plunder,
the treasure, the store-room

the honeycomb;
resurrection is remuneration,

food, shelter, fragrance
of myrrh and balm.

And I do believe she offers us now the possibility of re-imagining our desperate struggles and restrictions as gateways into new life, through which she can help to 'midwife' our passage; and that she represents also, perhaps, the possibility of stepping into a new kind of freedom in which the scaffolding of belief and ideology (all 'isms' are schisms) is dismantled, so we can ask the rhetorical question posed by HD in an earlier poem that paraphrases 'found' fragments from Sapphic verse:

What need of a lamp
when day lightens us,
what need to bind love
when love stands
with such radiant wings over us?

In response to Christopher Hudson's article on The sign of peace

Louise Madsen

In his thoughtful and informative article on the Sign of Peace in the Act of Consecration of Man, Christopher Hudson relates it to what takes place in the Roman Catholic Mass which highlighted for me the new elements present in the Act of Consecration.

One facet of the threefold nature of communion that emerges out of the two (bread and wine) can be seen by looking at what precedes the general communion.

In the priest's communion the taking of the bread is related to the sickness of sin that is part of the human condition. The consecrated bread is to be seen as the medicine that works to restore our fallen nature. The realm of the soul is especially addressed with the wine: there is confession, but there is also the appeal for the power of the hindering forces to be removed.

These references to the needy body and soul leave no room for doubt as to why we take communion. And we begin to see how these two parts of our being relate respectively to the Father, who is in our whole being, and to the Son, who lives in the creative powers of our soul.

The new element in the Act of Consecration as a whole is that the activity of the Spirit is referred to again and again. We are asked to take what happens in the service into our thinking and, later, we pray that the power and grace of the Spirit may work into the bread and the wine that we offer up. After taking communion, the priest prays that the healing of the sickness of sin be an activity of the Spirit, which makes whole what was sick and broken—a direct expression of what we hear in the Creed, 'through him can the healing spirit work'.

In the opening prayers of the communion we hear of the danger associated with taking the bread and wine: it also has the potential to lead into death. Being aware of this gives rise to a feeling of incompleteness, a need for something that brings our taking of the two substances into some kind of resolution that has the potential to reconcile the disparity between our fallen human state and the partaking of hallowed substances. This 'something', then, is the peace. And, as was pointed out in the article, in the Act of Consecration it comes, so to speak, to the fore after the general communion, that is, in connection with the receiving of communion by those who receive it individually. So we have this third element, which can be viewed as bringing each recipient, now in this particular context, into a relationship not only with Father and Son, but also with the Holy Spirit. And this gives the receiving of communion its sense of being rounded and complete. Seeing the peace as being given to us through the Spirit is, to my mind, what gives the forward thrust to this activity that comes at the end of the service: it finds its completion and culmination in an act of will which we take with us as we depart from the sphere of the altar.

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LOUISE MADSEN

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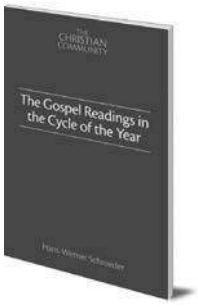

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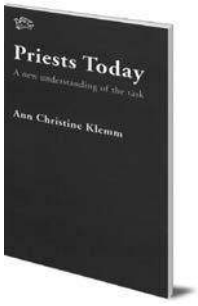


PRIESTS TODAY

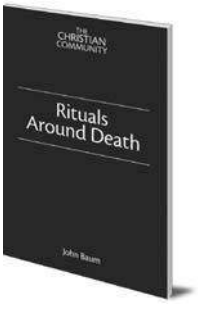
ANN CHRISTINE KLEMM

This booklet describes the spiritual background of priesthood, the Ordination service, the tasks of priests in celebrating sacraments, and teaching and pastoral care. It also explores the relationship betwen priest and congregation.

THE ESSENCE OF CHRISTIANITY

RUDOLF FRIELING

This booklet explores the creation of human beings, the Fall, freedom and redemption through Christ.



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JOHN BAUM

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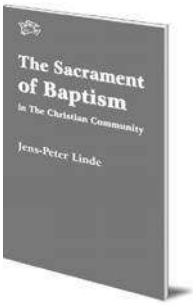

THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM

JENS-PETER LINDE

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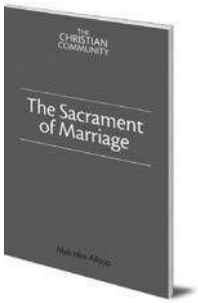

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MALCOLM ALLSOP

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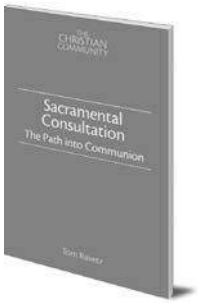

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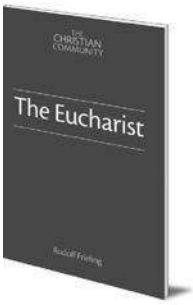

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Unfortunately we do not have disabled access and there are steps and stairs inside and outside the building.

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