

THE MAN FOR ALL SEASONS

By BRUNO R. BRINKMAN

WE MIGHT start by asking 'for whose seasons?' And the natural reply would be 'for our seasons', for our ups and downs, so that we might see the very 'christiform' imprint of grace upon them.

How many things by seasons season'd are
To their right praise and true perfection:¹

Shakespeare has in mind a timeliness of perfection which will assuredly come to any being with growth. Seasons, after all, are the common condition for human perfecting, and in and through our seasons we may hope to arrive at maturity, or at least that relative ease of performance we associate with experience.

But when we think of our growth in terms of conformity with Jesus, the model presents difficulties. If we insist on picturing him as like us, then somehow he soon becomes less like himself. There are such simple basic differences. Age for one, perhaps; and then, what of the difference of sex? How do you give a quality of permanent adaptability to your meditations on the imitation or the following of Christ? No doubt it can be done; but one may ask whether the process does not force the line of thought. At one time we were prepared to see the significance of any little detail, imaginary or otherwise, of a biography of Christ. Reaction may now have veered to the other extreme. The Jesus cults eschew the artisan milieu of Nazareth and are little concerned with the Rabbi's mission to fulfil the Law. 'The drift is towards no manger, no wonder-worker, no divine alpha and omega; just your friendly, marginal, downtrodden nonentity who looks, sounds, feels and loves – like us'.²

In this attempt to make him 'like us' there is a lesson as well as a danger. The danger is that the man for all seasons, when thus made

¹ *The Merchant of Venice*, v, i, 99.

² Cf my article, 'The Relevant Christ', in *The Clergy Review*, XLVIII (1973), p 599. Much of that article was occupied with John A. T. Robinson, *The Human Face of God* (London, 1973).

anonymous, proves not to be Jesus, son of Mary. The lesson is that his season is not necessarily our season; it recalls us from the too wise and too cultivated perfection which we think our seasons should bring us. Have we in the past set too much store by experience as such, and the maturity of years more or less happily coped with? Was it right to think that the grace and life we shared with Jesus received their specific qualities simply from an experience-maturity factor?

We do have the habit of thinking that the 'mature' adult is the one upon whom age has conferred an adequate psychological balance, and that this is the sign of the present grace. The idea remains an attractive one, of course. Tension and conflict appear to be charmed away in the 'season'd perfection' of grace. But that is not the point about christiformity in grace. The question we should ask is whether the developmental factor is, or is not, *the exemplification* of the christiform life in grace. In short, is that 'season'd' maturity the real meaning of the gospel invitation to the christiform grace to which God calls us?

The collapse of our culture of statues, holy pictures and stained glass on the one hand, and the immediate hippy appeal of Jesus the nonentity are surely telling us to think differently. The Christ-grace form in our lives is not merely a matter of measuring up to a mechanically acquired perfection which comes to us with time. In practice I can of course continue to say to myself, 'I have fallen short', or 'I should have been more balanced and mature in that situation', or again 'I should have been more generous and wiser than I was'. As an *ad hoc* way of coping with daily life that may work well enough. But if the repeated use of such a way of thinking leads me to suppose that in spite of my passing inadequacy I have reached a certain stage of christiform maturity, or that by now I am myself satisfactorily endowed with a certain stage of perfection, then I am misleading myself theologically and, very probably, psychologically as well. The static model is wrong. When St Paul gave us the example of the athlete, he was inviting us to measure ourselves against the project of ourselves as *future* victors. Even in our apostolic work we should strive to see ourselves not merely as established centres or foci of activity, but as projects of an outward-looking service (*diakonia*) of Christ and of the brethren.

Our seasons and our project of self

So we must be ready to correct the static view of ourselves in

grace. If we fail to see it as constant growth, then we shall not so clearly see that our very existence in grace is all of Christ. We shall fail to recognize in him our immediate vivifier. We have to recognize him as the doer and energizer of our growth in conformity with him.

The corrective in question is justified by the pauline idea that we are not yet anything, but are still *waiting for* 'adoption as sons'.³ In other words, grace both has come and is still coming. To make sense of that, we must see ourselves not merely as isolated individuals, but as members of a community of hope in the Spirit. Without a life in the eschatological community, our christiformity in grace is incomplete. In fact, if it were not the grace of his body in which we grow, the growth itself would be no growth. Equally, that is why a spirituality which relied entirely on a one-to-one correspondence between Christ's seasons and our own would be a defective one. His one deed for us is irreversible and he unchanging. By it he elevates our plasticity into an existence in freedom. We are his project, too, which he draws into existence and to which he gives of the perfection revealed in his one season. It is that which continues to emerge in our lives. '*Being made perfect* he became the source of eternal salvation . . .'⁴

The *project of self* is thus a workable model for our thought; and the corresponding psychology of the idea is not bad either. It has distinct advantages over the *nature of self* model. It allows too for all those concrete, formative influences on our lives, known or unknown to us. It seems to me that we should not deny the role of such influences in the advent of Christ's season upon us. They go on playing their role, and in so doing witness to the fact that our perfection is indeed a matter of becoming rather than being. Thus, when we offer this life to an alloplastic moulding in Christ and his grace, we should not think of the daily grind as of a series of events of which we can take a cross-cut and call that our season. We should think rather of our seasons and their tensions as an internal growth factor within our lives, the condition *out of which* rather than the condition in which our christiform grace is finding its form *in his season*, not ours.

Thus these tensions are not merely a regrettable external situation hostile to us, and over which we have no control. The tensions are part of the growth, 'growing pains' which should be viewed with optimism. 'My power is made perfect in weakness'.⁵ In spite of the

³ Rom 8, 23.

⁴ Heb 5, 9.

⁵ 2 Cor 12, 19.

suddenness of his own conversion, Paul allows for continued struggle as a dimension of the bestowal of grace. The christiform project, which we are, has to be realized *in and through*, rather than around and upon, our own existence. Though all of God, it is still our emergent reality.

Many of the theologians of grace (Paul, Augustine, Luther, Newman) had an intuition about a complete 'twice-bornness' which was the irreversible event in their lives. Grace, when it came, brought a trauma of change and difference never to be repeated. The theological value of that suddenness is not easy to estimate; but it was the suddenness which struck them, a suddenness in conversion. What they were getting at was, I think, the irreversibility of grace, irreversible in its action upon us as it comes from God. Again that irreversible character implies something about Christ's action in his season upon us. It is teaching us that his action upon us is not only his temporal, last act, but that it is also his final act upon us in the sense of being ultimate in significance. More than that christiform grace is not and cannot be. Our own self-realization can therefore by no means be an achievement 'by seasons season'd'; it can only be the acceptance of and growth in that being, whose single season was ultimate with the ultimacy of God.

There remains of course the linear, biographical programme in our own history which we must play out. There is our experience of the struggle, the active affair. An example in the synoptic tradition is a good one. The rich young man is given a programme: *go, sell, distribute and follow*. If he accepts, the subject will proceed from one state in life to a new Christ-inspired one. The behaviour sequence enjoined is to be a bit of his biography in linear time, and it is proposed to him as a condition of his perfection. But giving one's possessions would not of itself constitute that perfection. Something else has to be present, and to be paramount. Had he accepted Christ's call, the perfection would have been constituted only by love.⁶ Nevertheless we also have to say that adversity, self-spoliation and unworldliness are basic conditions, and in them we shall find our seasons.

To such an extent does God, as it were, protect us, that even those conditions have their unclarity. Here again our christiformity is protected from an invasion by techniques. Techniques of self-spoliation and unworldliness, were they the whole story, would

⁶ Cf 1 Cor 13, 3.

bring back again *our* seasons and would minimize his.⁷ I said that the unclarities are there to help us. There are for example, important unclarities and paradoxes about the kingdom. Is it here, or is it not? Is it visible, or is it invisible? Does it arrive of itself, or do we storm it? Is it restricted, or is it universalist? What such paradoxes of the kingdom effectively demonstrate above all is that the kingdom can never become a possession of ours, never *our* season. For Paul that is why we must rid ourselves of the impious boast (*kauchēsis*). That is why he forbids the boast that is possessive, or the boast over origin. We must have a *theologia crucis* which alone averts the possessiveness distorting the very christiformity of grace, lest it be in danger of not being God's grace. That is why he chose 'to bring to nothing the things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God'.⁸

Here again we see the christian reason why the seasons of the creature are not, and cannot be, the means of its 'season'd' perfection. For the same reason not even a developmental theory based on tension and crisis will do. Of course we do grow when in tension and crisis; but the growth itself comes from something beyond that again. Growth comes in the 'word of the cross',⁹ and that refers not merely to the destruction of life, but to the unique life in Christ which comes in the completion of the cross, namely the resurrection. For our part, obedience to his word must bring us beyond the possessive boast, even the boast that we possess Christ. Our pseudo-wisdom has to become folly, so that in his season Christ can become our new wisdom, 'our righteousness and sanctification and redemption'.¹⁰

I would like to think that in our considerations we have reached this point. Our seasons in christiform grace do not matter unless they share in *the season* (*kairos*) of the crucified. The engraced season-process of man is impossible without the engracing season of the Man-God.

Grace's form and finality

Our christiform grace from Christ on the cross cannot be inco-

⁷ Even the supremacy in us of the love of God can be parodied. One has only to remember the well-known prayer of the Blessed Angela of Foligno, whose spirituality is said to be christocentric: she begged God to rid her of her husband and her children, so that she could perfect her mystic prayer (cf. art. 'Angela of Foligno, Bl., in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, I, 501).

⁸ 1 Cor 1, 28-9.

⁹ 1 Cor 1, 18.

¹⁰ 1 Cor 1, 30.

herence, still less selfishness. *It can be* 'abandonment, oblivion, uselessness, insignificance'. Such kenotic forms within ourselves are not un-christiform, because of the spontaneous love and will of the Saviour to obey the Father's will. That after all is what gives the apparent formlessness of those 'emptyings' their true form.

Why is that? The answer must surely be that the form which Christ gave us in his season (*kairos*) was a form of crucifixion and resurrection, and it was final. For, once we accept his season (*kairos*), we live also in an age to come (*aiōn*). The life of that eternal age is the divine one. On this unified view of it, we can see more easily what von Balthasar meant when he wrote: 'there are not really three counsels, but one – to *one* form of life, nor are there really three vows, but only one vow – to vow oneself to the crucified form of love, as to the one and only form of life'.¹¹

Yet, 'since it does not appear what we shall be',¹² we in our seasons remain to ourselves only a project. Such project-talk would be misleading, if it took away the form of love, and made us merely formless again. (We cannot give ourselves form of course; but we can in thankfulness look for that emergent form of love in our formlessness.) Our seasonal formlessness is given its coming form in his own season. Our seasons are in reality not merely phenomena of a rectilinear time, they are absorbed in his trans-temporal *kairos-aiōn*. There we can safely project, because in the truth of the incarnation true form is no projection, though the mystery of his abiding love-form for us is still opaque. In that sense he is still 'found in human form' and 'humbled' in his season.¹³

But it would not do to think that in accepting the season of the Lord, we are merely stunned by the imposition of a final death-form upon an otherwise formless life. It would not be right to translate the idea into the language of psychological dynamics, and to say that all we have to do in our christian living is to super-impose the Christ-death-symbol or the cross upon the otherwise polymorphous perversity of our instinctual life. Death and mortification in the old christian sense do have something to do with it, but they are by no means the whole story of our christiform grace.

¹¹ Von Balthasar, Hans Urs: *Love Alone: the Way of Revelation* (London, 1968), p 110. A similar situation obtains for marriage: 'In marriage the form of agape is superimposed on sexual eros (and given the family, on private property and the free and responsible use of it)' (*ibid.*).

¹² 1 Jn 3, 2.

¹³ Cf Phil 2, 6ff.

What we must never forget is that the season of his death was also the season of his resurrection-life, a Spirit-life. So also with our internalizing of this mystery and our acceptance of its form. When we do internalize it in our faith, we make real in ourselves the call to a life-fellowship with him in the Spirit. Thus his interiorized season now becomes ours indeed, but not merely in the sense of an individual or personal enhancement. It is a perfecting in fellowship (*koinōnia*). Because the Son in being 'lifted up' has acted out his obedience to the Father and his love in the Spirit for God and men, so the form of that love in us now becomes trinitarian. We must now think of our real existence in the *kairos-aion* as of an existence in the trans-subjective sense. That existence is no longer merely *ours-mine* but *ours-ours*. In that sense we are sons in the Son and in that sense temples of the Spirit. That is how his season in us is already a divine and eternal one. It happens, as the fourth gospel points out, by the fact of believing. Hearing his word and believing in him already enable us to live in the sphere of 'eternal life', having 'passed out of death'.¹⁴

And this trans-subjective mysticism of time and season in eternity is the mode of our communication in the Spirit. When we accept and will our mutual interdependence, then comes the intimacy of his season, then is the proximity of Spirit existence, the divine indwelling.¹⁵ By the love-given form of grace can we be Spirit-filled, and by the same form ever new resolutions of the life-death tension vivify the *I* and *not-I* into the *being-with* that we must become. The negative acts of our existence, though we still trail them along with us, have their positive values enhanced. A project is being realized. We thought it would be ours; but our possessiveness vanishes. We thought that in being possessed by Christ we would possess the All. In this field of divine inter-personality, 'God is "the centre of centres" in an interlocking web of free spiritual relationship in which the all and the personal are no longer exclusive'.¹⁶ In realizing the project of ourselves, not statically because we are growing and living, we transcend our loneliness and isolation as well as our passivity and selfishness. For it is *his* season which is the sphere of this realization.

¹⁴ Jn 5, 24.

¹⁵ That intimacy finds its religious expression in the way sacramental man lives his sacramental life. Cf my article, 'On Sacramental Man, II, The Way of Intimacy', in *The Heythrop Journal*, XIV (1973), pp 5-34, esp. pp 23ff.

¹⁶ Cf Robinson, John A. T.: *Exploration into God* (London, 1967), p 145.

And the world's seasons

So Christ is for all men and to live in them. In this lower world do even we, his christians, take in what that means? 'Yes', we say, 'he is to be given to all men', though we go on to add, 'but he is not yet given to all'. 'The end-time is not yet' is a reflection which shields and insulates us from the final form of the christiform grace offered to the world. But if we do not try and deepen our sense of the Christ-for-all, then we have to ponder the condemnation of the laodicene church:

I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth. For you say, I am rich, I have prospered . . .¹⁷

It is a condemnation among others surely of the proclamation of our Christ through the framework of a friable triumphalism which says, 'he is mine and cannot be yours'. Christians have been so much tempted to make their historically-conditioned Christ their own, that they have been obliged to maintain a fictitious universality for him. That characteristic has been given its proper name, 'the scandal of particularity'. Gerhard Kittell called attention to this danger, an exclusivism of outlook about Jesus which leads us to contradict the basic universalist appeal of christianity.¹⁸

It is a charism of this century that we have reacted in a healthy direction. The ecumenical movement has drawn strength from its efforts to bring home to us the 'scandal of our divisions', especially in the mission fields. But behind the institutional problem there lies a doctrinal one. 'Is Christ divided?' asked Paul.¹⁹ It was a protest of horror at the absurdity of a fragmented Christ parcelled

¹⁷ Apoc 3, 15-17.

¹⁸ John A. T. Robinson calls attention to another 'scandal', the opposite 'scandal of impartiality' which makes it 'questionable how he can be the man for *any*, let alone for all' (cf *The Human Face of God*, p 230). It needs to be very strongly said that this is also a danger. If we empty our churches of all stained-glass, statues and the like, and concentrate all attention upon Christ, the Principle of Creation, the Evolutionary Christ and the Christ of cosmic harmonization, we run the risk of detaching our belief from the historical carpenter of Nazareth. We end with a *Christo-sophy*, a superior wisdom about the Christ, not an account of our belief in Jesus Christ, the God-Man. Very often of course the artistic triviality of the statues, which was docetic in tendency, betrayed a fear of the 'scandal of particularity'.

¹⁹ 1 Cor 1, 13.

out among empire-building sectarians at Corinth. That he and his christiform grace are shared should be clear. That is the meaning of the Christ mysticism just outlined above. Yet in practical living, the 'scandal of particularity' is such a scandal that it operates on nearly any level we like to think of. It is a piece of selfish religious indolence as old as the New Testament itself. There can be no petulant hugging to ourselves of our Christ in a world with arms outstretched for him.

At the same time there is a paradox involved which must never weary us. On the one hand we say that the Christ is The Man, who resumes in himself all that is in man, and on the other we say and preach that Christ is present there where our Church is present. One reason why the paradox is wearying is, of course, because in practical living we do not care to resolve it. Not even our basic preaching does so with gladness. Indeed, we do preach a lordship of Jesus over all worlds and all men. But we maintain some form of anathema to him who understands Jesus otherwise than our christian Church proclaims him to be. So when we come up against such spontaneous movements as those of the Jesus-people we find them intellectually and theologically null. 'Unitarians of the second Person', we might call them. But the very tragedies of theological history should make us look closely at any re-birth of the Spirit in man. The New Testament churches knew something of spontaneity, and in their earliest phases something of social radicalism. They certainly knew something about concentrating on immediacy of experience.

Whether it is by contamination with a world-season of generalized and somewhat unfocused desire of a Jesus only dimly to be recognized, I do not know, but we christians are now asking more than ever for a personal encounter with Jesus. We exalt it as such, and pin it on to a philosophy of an 'I-Thou' relationship. As a result we are performing a balancing act. The public preaching of the traditional Christ must be maintained and adhered to in all its orthodoxy. On the other hand we recommend among ourselves the esoteric experience of the 'I-Thou' relationship. In the first stance we secure an objectively expressed faith at the cost of particularism. In the second we encourage the swallowing up of our expressed faith in experience and awareness. 'Only connect'; 'be sensitized', we think, should be enough. In the first mode of behaviour the danger is one of possessiveness, particularism, sectarianism, while in the second the danger is an abrogation of objectivity.

Undoubtedly since Vatican II world pressures have played upon

the believing Church so as to elicit from it the lively tensions which underlie its life of faith. Ministry and prophecy in the Church are once more in tension. Institution and 'undifferentiated comitatus' tug against each other.

After Vatican II we are experiencing, it would seem, the juxtaposition and alternation of the second model with the first. Any attempt to put into action the concept of the Church as the 'People of God', or as a 'servant' body, is clearly drawing on a different model from that suggested by the highly structured organization (we have known since for example Vatican I).²⁰

If what I have said about tension and growth in christiform grace is true at the personal level, then we may expect that the grace of christiform belief in the Church will be vivified according to the same law of tension and growth. I believe this to be the case, and conclude that the tension in church-faith and its conditions is simply the emergence for our time of the form of love for the Church, which for her too is the vivifying cross. And by our inside tension we are recalled to the universality of our Christ in his destiny for all men. In practice, whether we live inside or outside the christian milieu, the tension from within should make us all the more concerned with a Jesus for the world and for all its seasons.

Perhaps we should remember more often that at first Jesus proclaimed not his own lordship, but the rule of his Father. The disciples themselves began their faith-experience in the resurrection-Christ with an awareness of his lordship. Through the death-life form of the cross, they now saw their messiah as the heavenly one, whose activity here on earth was a royal anticipation of cosmic finality.²¹ Even therefore in the reassurance of the resurrection the disciples looked forward. There was no resting in their faith as a faith entirely of the present. The reason why they did this was surely because the master had taught them to do so.

But the future is not the only way to focus our belief. We do not have to despair of a present christiformity in grace, thinking that it cannot touch the world or ourselves. Neither continuing church crises nor world crises, nor our own personal perplexities should

²⁰ Cf my article, 'On Sacramental Man: III, The Socially Operational Way', in *The Heythrop Journal*, XIV (1973), p 186, where I am much indebted to Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process, Structure and Anti-Structure* (London, 1967).

²¹ Cf e.g. 2 Tim 4, 1, 'I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus who is to judge the living and the dead and by his appearing and his kingdom'.

overwhelm us. It may be true, as Joseph Comblin writes, that 'In fact the average catholic is a being frightened by the evolution of modern man'.²² If that is true, and I suspect that for many a pew-bound catholic it is, then again we should look back to the New Testament. In Paul's churches of Ephesus, Colossae and Philippi, the christians were indeed frightened beings. Their domestic version of christianity could not prevent a feeling of cosmic anxiety. The political and social world seemed infected with demonism beyond what they could bear. They were afraid of their own future, afraid of what the 'principalities' and 'powers' could do to them. Like many an african christian, who in a death and life emergency sends for the witch-doctor, they wanted to make doubly sure. Paul had to insist again and again that the exalted Christ has somehow already subjugated the 'spiritual powers'. Perhaps it was, as John Bligh writes, in the sense 'that he *could* (author's italics) at any moment reduce them to powerlessness'. They were 'created in him and for him'; and even more, Christ 'exerts his power over evil powers through the spiritual gifts he imparts to believers'.²³

There are two conclusions of immense importance here. The *first* is that the present season of the world does not escape from the lordship of Christ which emerges in and through the tensions. The *second* conclusion is that it is *his Lordship* indeed, but that the believers (church-institution as well as church-community) all participate in his mission. When there is true ministry in the Church, and when there is true prophecy, and (best of all) when these two are fused in one witness, then the lordship of Christ is truly proclaimed. At the same moment, as with us in our own individual seasons of growth, the seasons of the world are swallowed into the cosmic season of Christ. I doubt if we ever have a certain assurance of when and how this takes place. If we did, the scandal of particularity would finally be set at nought.

A famous verse of Paul reminds us whence came the lordship of Christ and whither it must return. That reality is set even beyond the stage of our last enemy, death. 'For God has put all things under

²² Cf Comblin, Joseph: 'Outside Criticism of the Church', in *Perspectives of a Political Ecclesiology*, ed. J. B. Metz (New York, 1971) p 33.

²³ We can take that as 'certain' from Eph 6, 12. See the very sage assessment of the situation in Paul by John Bligh, 'Demonic Powers', in *The Heythrop Journal*, I (1960), pp 314-23. Eph 6, 12 runs: 'For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against the powers, against world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places'.

his (Christ's) feet'. In the end-time, 'when all things are subjugated to him who put all things under him . . . God will be everything to everyone'.²⁴ Of course the end-time is not going to show us a hidden limitation upon the lordship of Jesus. It is going to show us that when there can be no more process, his lordship will be complete. All the world's seasons will now become one with his season, 'as the Son now brings the entire creation into the obedience of sonship, thereby mediating it into immediacy to the Father'.²⁵ Nothing will, nor could, be more final than that act. Nor can any created reality escape it. The end will prove to be the beginning after all, for in the Son's procession from his Father, the end boundary of all reality is also the generation point of all reality. In that trans-temporal season of the 'all in all', the world of God will be disclosed as God's world.

²⁴ 1 Cor 15, 28.

²⁵ Cf Pannenberg, Wolfhart: *Jesus, God and Man* (London, 1968), p 369.