

Chapter four: Times and seasons

This chapter has comments on the following parts of the Leader's Book:

THE CALENDAR AND LECTIONARY OF THE UNITING CHURCH

Sundays of the Year, and
Other Special Days
(Sentence/Readings/Collect)
Year A, B, C
Other Commemorations
Readings for various
Themes and Occasions
A Table of Liturgical Dates

None of these appears in
the People's Book.

PERSPECTIVES

The idea of a 'Christian year' (liturgical year, church year) is strange to some. For many in our traditions, it is a relatively new idea. They ask: Don't Christians live in the same time frame as everyone else? Why should we observe special, 'holy' times? Christians do indeed live in history with all human beings, and it was into this human history that Jesus came: 'in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judaea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee' (Luke 3:1). But time is not only an endless succession of events, it has its cycles also: the turn of the natural seasons, the anniversaries of events in personal or national life. These special times are moments of recollection and recommitment, whether they are birthdays or public holidays like Anzac Day. Because Christians live in time, we too have special times of recollection and recommitment. Our worship, which draws on the deep memory and recognised presence of the crucified and risen Lord, is inspired by certain days and seasons.

THE EASTER FOCUS

One event in human history is central to the Christian memory: Easter. One week after the resurrection, a new pattern of meeting emerged, distinctive of the Christian faith. Certainly the disciples and friends of Jesus continued to observe the Temple hours of prayer and the sabbath day, but they began to meet on the first day of the week, an ordinary

working day, to recall the appearance of the Risen One among them on that day. The fact that they met on a particular day, and one which was not (originally) a holy day, was in itself a proclamation of the Easter faith.

As for the weekly, so also for the annual cycle. The Passover following the one on which Jesus died and was raised naturally became a time of special remembrance. Some Christian communities continued to observe Easter on the exact date of Passover, whether it fell on the sabbath or not. Others always observed it on the weekend nearest Passover, holding services during Saturday night and awaiting the dawn of Sunday. The whole of the Easter message — what we would call 'Good Friday to Easter Day' — was originally celebrated in this vigil; to pray through the night to the dawn was the way they chose to mark both cross and resurrection. They also chose this time as the moment for new Christians to undergo baptism, to die and rise with Christ. By the time of the Council of Nicaea (325 AD) the majority of Christians agreed to observe Easter always on a Sunday, the Christian 'pasch', or passover.

EASTER TODAY

In recent years, our church practice and our holidays have reduced Easter to a one day wonder. Many people go away for the Easter weekend or longer and miss the special celebration of the central mystery of the Christian faith altogether! The rediscovery of some of the riches of the Easter worship tradition, including its connection with baptism, and the recovery of Easter as a fifty day season have some practical implications for both evangelism and worship in parishes. For example:

(a) Whereas until recently we have held confirmation classes between Baptism and Communion, the earliest Christians thought it appropriate to baptise people and give them communion first and explain afterwards. Certainly there was some preparation beforehand of adults and children, but the experience of worship was at the beginning not the end. (It follows that baptism was not appropriate for those who were not already actively part of the worshipping community.) This underlines the importance for the setting forth of the central affirmation of faith of what we do in worship, and how well we do it, particularly in the celebration of Easter and its derivative signs, the sacraments. Our 'sign-acts' are the basis for our teaching.

(b) We might make special efforts to make the seven Sundays of Easter a time for baptisms, particularly of adults. Then baptism can reclaim its proper context in the Christian community's remembrance of the death and resurrection of Jesus (Romans 6). If there are no baptisms, we can re-affirm our own baptism as a congregation, or renew our covenant with God (see Baptism and Related Services LB 14 and PB 14). Another ancient symbol is the lighting of a large Easter candle to signify the resurrection. It is kept alight for services until Pentecost, and thereafter is relit for baptisms, to make the connection with the Easter faith through a visible sign. The candidate's candle is traditionally lit from it. In some churches, the Easter candle is also relit for funerals to signify the Christian hope. These visible symbols can be a gentle reminder of the gospel promises of new life in Christ.

The church of the early centuries did not leave its newly-baptised members without a time of further instruction. On Sundays and often during the week until the festival of the fiftieth day (Pentecost), the local leaders helped not only the newly-baptised but the entire congregation to reflect on the meaning of the Easter ceremonies and of baptism itself,

and to instruct the faithful in the life of Christian discipleship. The period between Easter Day and Pentecost was a season of joy, Easter-tide. No fasting was permitted, no penitential actions (like kneeling). The church allowed itself to anticipate, for a season, the festival of the kingdom.

Note that in the description of principal seasons and days in LB 144, the Sundays after Easter day are therefore 'of', not 'after', Easter. In this, the Uniting Church differs from some other church calendars.

If we celebrate Easter for fifty days, those members of the congregation who worshipped elsewhere on Easter Day will have an opportunity to share their Easter greetings with their home congregation. Indeed the various customs described above in (b) may be spread out over several Sundays. The Easter greeting (Christ has risen/he is risen indeed, alleluia) may be used to begin every service during the season; Easter hymns, anthems and other music from the church's rich treasury may dominate the whole period. Thus Hallelujahs will be heard in church long after the world has forgotten its Easter weekend.



HOLY WEEK

By the third century, 'Holy Week' was being observed. Rather than the whole Easter event being celebrated in a single night, Good Friday was observed as a distinct commemoration of the crucifixion — the church chose to follow St Luke's way of counting time rather than St John's. The gospel narratives were rather harshly forced into the mould of a 'last week' of Jesus' life — an event had to be found for each day, as it were. There are a number of books of Holy Week Services now available which take themes for each day of the week without such forced connections. These may be used as the basis for brief devotional services each night.

PALM SUNDAY AND PASSION SUNDAY

Palm Sunday began the 'Great Week'. The custom of processing through the streets with palm branches was borrowed from church practice in Jerusalem itself. But the Sunday of Holy Week already had a special custom: the reading of the Passion narrative from one of the Gospels (and another Gospel was read on Good Friday). The mediaeval answer to this clash was to call the Sunday before Palm Sunday 'Passion Sunday', and it was in this form that most of us received the church calendar earlier this century. However, the Assembly Commission on Liturgy has followed recent Roman Catholic revision and restored the Passion reading to 'Palm Sunday', so we have a choice.

The effect of hearing a whole passion narrative read at once can hardly be exaggerated. It is a deeply moving spiritual experience, which sets the tone for the whole week to follow. It allows us to hear, as we rarely hear in the segmented readings Sunday by Sunday, the flavour and emphases of a particular evangelist. It may be read by one excellent reader (for it is very demanding), or may be read by several, taking the parts of narrator, Jesus, and other characters. Sometimes the congregation takes the part of the crowd, though this means that everyone must have the full text. There are a number of versions of the Passion now published for dramatic reading.

It is possible to have the best of both worlds. Begin the service with a procession into the church with palm branches, singing the traditional hymn 'All glory, praise and honour' (AHB 250); read the story of the Entry into Jerusalem (see the provision for the Sixth Sunday in Lent (LB 175, 247, 308). A word may be said to the younger members at this point, if they leave for their Christian education groups (though they would all benefit from the reading to follow). They may be presented with a cross made of palm leaf. Then proceed with the service as usual, but have the passion (of the Gospel for the particular year A, B or C) read as the total Service of the Word. Leave a good amount of silence at the end, and/or perhaps invite someone to play — for instance, the melody of the Passion chorale (AHB 255), or the spiritual 'Were you there' (AHB 261), on a flute, violin or 'cello. Conclude with a passion hymn (see AHB index). A sermon is redundant, because the evangelist has just had an opportunity to have his proclamation read as he intended it should be.

LENT

Lent developed as a period of intense final preparation for baptismal candidates. Its penitential character was closely linked to the need to 'repent and believe' in order to be baptised (see Acts 2:38 and compare

Mark 1:12–15). Its original length varied, the church finally settling for forty days, on the analogy of Jesus' testing in the desert (and that of the tribes of Israel under Moses). The forty days, beginning on Ash Wednesday and ending with the first Eucharist of Easter (traditionally Easter Eve, Saturday midnight) do not include the Sundays, which, by a nice piece of symbolic precision, are never fast days.

For some Christians, Lent seems to be a question of giving up sugar or cigarettes, or avoiding parties or pleasures or some other seemingly minor matter. However, self-denial is urged upon us by the Bible (for example, Mark 8:34–37), and the earliest Christians developed a discipline of prayer, fasting and almsgiving (Matthew 6) which we might do well to recover, becoming spiritually healthier by doing so. But the purpose is not to impress God with our self-control or other good works (a heresy hard fought at the Reformation) but to prepare ourselves to hear the gospel clearly and live it fully.

The discipline began because there were disciples to be made. Easter was the season for baptisms. The candidates for baptism entered a period of more intense preparation, lasting the forty days leading up to the sacrament at Easter. They were stripped of all earthly encumbrances and plunged naked into the water, to be raised to new life in Christ (Romans 6, Galatians 5). Thus, Lent was a time of discipling when the whole congregation joined the candidates in their commitment to Christ alone for salvation.

When baptisms ceased to be held at Easter, Lent largely lost its point, and became a time of penitence and introspection unrelated to growth in faith and love. In the Uniting Church we have an opportunity to get Lent right: we can use it as an opportunity to throw off all that hinders us, and to run the race with Jesus 'who leads us in our faith and brings it to perfection' (Hebrews 12:1, 2, *Jerusalem Bible*).

ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS

The liturgical year has another focus: Christmas. Easter and Christmas each has its own season. Easter has fifty days; Christmas twelve. Advent began on the analogy of Lent, a time of preparation, finally set at four weeks before Christmas. We have seen above that the penitential note of Lent is not negative. It is a response to grace: 'those who wish to come after me must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me' (Matthew 16:24). Advent, however, is marked not so much by preparation (as for baptism or its renewal) as by anticipation; anticipation of the Lord's advent, or coming. Its mood springs from that expectation.

Advent is, however, rather a bi-focal season. Our gaze is focused by everything happening around us (from October if we would allow it!) on the first coming of Jesus and the feast of his birth, Christmas. But Advent also lifts our gaze to his final coming. It is not easy to say, even from the New Testament, *how* that second advent will occur. Certainly there is no hint as to *when*, despite much speculation by various sects. But we do know something of *what* that coming will mean.

Christians believe that the world and its history are in God's hands. From the moment of Easter, evil was under sentence. To believe in the final coming of Jesus is to proclaim that the Easter victory will be consummated, that all present partialities will become whole, and the kingdoms of this world will become, at last, the kingdom of God and of his Christ (Revelation 11:15). Thus, this is a season of hope and perseverance, of faith and encouragement.

The lectionary for the Sundays immediately before Advent already begins to anticipate this 'end-time' theme, and it is an essential part of Advent. The readings for Advent itself draw on the prophets — but their message must not be preached naively, as if they were not addressing the people of their own day. Views of fulfilment which make the prophets into crystal-ball gazers and reduce the Hebrew scriptures to futurology must be avoided. That Christians saw and see in Jesus an inbreaking of the same divine help which the prophets foresaw in their own day is legitimate. And all humankind still awaits the coming of the kingdom in its fullness. But the stories of John the Baptist and of the annunciation to Mary (rather late!) soon move the focus of this season to the incarnation.



Photo: Eddy Marmur

CHRISTMAS AND EPIPHANY

These two feasts, which now form the beginning and end of the Christmas season, are the western and eastern European approximations of the same date, the northern winter equinox (now around December 21st!). Neither has any relationship to the actual day of Jesus' birth, which remains unknown.

By the fourth century, the churches had decided to celebrate with a feast akin to Easter the beginning of Jesus' life: his birth, the worship offered by the magi as representatives of the pagan (as distinct from the Jewish) world, and his baptism, the beginning of his ministry. They chose a date when the northern sun begins to grow in strength, a day celebrated by pagan Rome as the Day of the Invincible Sun. The Christians celebrated the coming of the Son of Righteousness. The complex of ideas related to the early days of Jesus are all now embraced in the Christmas season and on the Epiphany (January 6th), and may be traced in the lectionary. The first Sunday after Epiphany always has the theme of the baptism of Jesus.

Epiphany is a day, not a season. The Sundays are Sundays 'after' Epiphany, and are further identified as 'Sunday 1', 'Sunday 2' and so on (see LB 158ff for Year A). The series is picked up again after Trinity Sunday, which is the First Sunday after Pentecost, with Sunday 9 (see LB 197ff), and from here on it is also possible to indicate between which dates this particular Sunday will fall.

The Uniting Church also fixes the theme of the last Sunday after Epiphany, the Sunday immediately before Lent, as Transfiguration. Other churches observe August 6th as a separate feast of the Transfiguration; the Assembly Commission on Liturgy chose to read the gospel narratives of the transfiguration in the spirit of the evangelists (especially Luke): a glimpse of resurrection glory before Jesus turned his face towards Jerusalem.

As the rest of the gospel for the year is read, the church listens to the teachings of the Lord and lives them out in the Spirit. These other Sundays are aptly named 'Sundays after Pentecost'. Yet each one of them is 'a little Easter' when the church proclaims Christ until he comes. For that reason, the season ends, on the Last Sunday after Pentecost, with the fixed theme 'Christ the King' (see, for example, LB 222 for Year A).

The Revd David Brown summarises what we have been saying:

In following the pattern of the liturgical year in this way, every year becomes a 'year of the Lord'. The story of what God has done and is doing, how he formed and is forming the Christian community, is retold. In retelling the story of God's saving work in Christ, the identity of the people of God is formed. The retelling of the story also gives a contact point between Christ and people, growing into and within the community of faith.

In following the liturgical year and focusing on God's saving acts in Christ, the church's attention is taken off itself. We do not reflect on being the people who believe in this or behave like that. The liturgical year frees us from ourselves to focus our attention on God. When we speak of the Bible as being 'inspired', or as having unique authority, it is for no other reason than it tells us who God is. The beauty of the liturgical year is that it can help the Bible do this.

(David Brown, *Introducing the Three Year Lectionary*, Uniting Church Press, Melbourne, 1982, p. 14.)

OTHER COMMEMORATIONS

Just as the focus of the whole liturgical year is the life of Christ, so it is of other commemorations. The celebration of the life and witness of individual Christians is not intended to focus on their spiritual attainment, their faithfulness, their achievement, but on God's faithfulness to them, the good news of Christ's love being shown forth in their human lives — and therefore in ours. St Paul wrote, 'It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me' (Galatians 2:20). The section in LB 347–364 is therefore an extension of the calendar of days and seasons, celebrating the continuing life of Christ — in the lives of Christians.

It is important to understand this perspective, otherwise the only use which will be made of this remarkable provision is to provide a long list of moral examples for young and old. This is not to say that the saints do not provide many good examples. But Christians are not called only to be 'like Christ', but to live 'in Christ', and thereby to give God glory. This is what the saints in heaven and we on earth have in common. The whole church — apostles, martyrs, Christian pioneers, Christian thinkers, faithful servants, people of prayer, reformers of the church, renewers of society, witnesses to Jesus — are proofs of grace, witnesses to Christ's transforming power in human lives. The nine categories are not exhaustive, but begin to spell out the marvellous variety of human response to the one Christ. The ninety-five names are also a selection from a 'cloud of witnesses' — a more balanced selection than some traditional lists in terms of the century or the part of the world in which they lived, their gender, race and tradition. But a local congregation, presbytery or synod may add the name of a beloved founder, leader, pastor in whom the presence of Christ was recognised — provision is made, for instance, on LB 354 for a local pioneer.

A glance through the names and categories will provide many ideas for mid-week devotions, projects for Christian education, local commemorations, discussions of baptismal names, addresses in services, introductions to a prayer of thanksgiving, etc. Further resources will be published to elucidate the possibilities in this list.

READINGS FOR OTHER OCCASIONS AND THEMES

The table on LB 365–368 will also extend the range of possible commemorations — a number of them very demanding. Amongst the more usual, such as Anzac Day, harvest thanksgiving, or the Inauguration of the Uniting Church, will be found occasions on which men and women of good will beyond the church may wish to be involved: perhaps especially the several categories of 'victims' — of injustice, the nuclear age and the holocaust. Nevertheless, we must be careful about multiplying the occasions on which special causes or themes are remembered. Many people meet for good purposes, including purposes Christians heartily support, but if the church ceases to tell the story of Christ, to declare its allegiance to him as Lord, and to offer worship to the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit, we have missed our distinctive calling. These commemorations, therefore, never supersede the Sunday celebration of Christ's resurrection.

LITURGICAL COLOURS

The explanation on LB 141–142 might be focused a little more. In ordinary life, we also use colours, which vary from culture to culture, to symbolise significant moments in life: for instance, white for weddings; black for mourning. In the early church, white was used to mark the fundamental conversion of new Christians, using the symbolism of night and day, so the newly baptised were robed in white (Latin: *albus*, a white garment being an alb). White was seen as a symbol of purity, of glory (deriving from the sun), and thus of the Son of Righteousness, the Holy One of God, Jesus. So when the church commemorated the festivals of Christ — his annunciation, birth, baptism, transfiguration, resurrection and ascension, kingship — they dressed themselves and their churches in white, sometimes with the added enrichment of gold. By derivation, our baptism (into Christ) is marked by white, (and so also — it could be argued — for confirmation, though the Commission on Liturgy has suggested red because of the prayer for the Spirit in that rite). All Saints' Day, the festival of ordinary Christians — all baptised Christians, martyrs or not — is white. By derivation also, Trinity Sunday, the revelation of the nature of God which we know through Christ, and in whose Name we are baptised, is white.

Red is obviously associated with the Spirit, because of the flames at Pentecost, a very simple symbol. It happens also to be the colour of blood, and so marks the commemoration of martyrs for the faith, and others who give their lives for Christ. Perhaps this is more powerful than the argument that red is appropriate for Ordinations and Inductions because the gifts of ministry are of the Holy Spirit. Indeed the church itself as a body of witnesses and a community of the Spirit, marks its festivals (such as the Inauguration of the Uniting Church) with red.

Violet, or purple, is used for the two seasons of preparation: Lent and Advent. Its origin lies in the purple robe in which Christ the king was robed before his death (Mark 15:17). It is thus at the same time both royal and penitential, deriving its meaning from the suffering of Jesus himself.

This leaves the rest of the year. The Roman Catholic Church, rather prosaically, calls it 'ordinary time', which is what time is when we are not in festival. Only when we have ordinary times are we able to celebrate extraordinary, special times. It is the ground bass for the harmonies of high days. (This is, incidentally, a good reason for not multiplying 'special days', or at least being careful how we celebrate days other than those which mark something central to the faith itself. If National Care for Cats Sunday outshines Easter Day, what have we preached?) The colour chosen by tradition is green, the colour of growth. Originally, the dye used, somewhere between green and blue, was simply the most easily available dye. It was basic. When nothing special is going on, the church reverts to green. In the Uniting Church, we have preserved the custom of calling these 'Sundays after Pentecost' as a reminder of the promise of the Spirit to counsel and guide the church's life.

A certain sanctified imagination is used in this symbolic set as well. Of course there are other ways of doing it. For many centuries, different dioceses of the Western Church had their own colour schemes. There are some variations which may well be made to give a distinctive Australian use, which will not be discussed here. Yet without limiting the creativity of Christian artists, there is some value in a basic scheme which denotes our unity in Christ, the gospel which all preach, the life in Christ we pray to live.

THE LECTIONARY

The lectionary is primarily a list of readings for Sundays. The Uniting Church, since 1985, has followed the lectionary of the Consultation on Common Texts (CCT) of the United States of America, which itself has proposed some modifications to the Three-year Cycle of the Roman Catholic Church issued in 1969, after the Second Vatican Council. The difference between the two cycles is found chiefly in the Old Testament readings, especially in Years B and C. Many felt the need for a greater provision for readings from the Hebrew scriptures, an opportunity to hear something of the great biblical narratives. There was also a different judgment as to the proper relation of Old to New Testament. The Roman lectionary tended to choose the Old Testament reading on the basis of a connection with the gospel reading for the day, which sometimes resulted in typological or allegorical 'snippets'. The CCT lectionary attempts to allow the Old Testament to have its own voice, its own integrity. At this point in our ecumenical history, churches and scholars are still seeking satisfactory solutions. But on most Sundays, most churches in Australia will still be reading the same readings.

A great deal more is provided in *Uniting in Worship* than the lectionary readings for the day. For each Sunday (and some other days listed on LB 145) there is also a Sentence, which may be used for a Call to Worship, and a Collect of the Day chosen with some attention to the day itself and the lectionary. It is perhaps worth noting that the biblical readings will rarely yield a single 'theme', and the temptation to tie the readings down in this way has been avoided.

It may also be useful to explain the way the readings have been chosen. One of the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) is used each year A, B and C. John is not forgotten: he appears each year in Lent, Holy Week and the Easter season, and in the Year of Mark, the shortest of the Gospels. The First Reading (Old Testament or Acts) is sometimes a reflection of a theme in the gospel, and sometimes (it is usually obvious) a continuous narrative in its own right. The psalm is chosen as a devotional response to the Old Testament reading. The epistle is an independent stream. It is true that some care has been exercised by the compilers in the choice of the readings to run alongside a particular gospel — the Pentateuch in Matthew's Year, the Davidic narratives in Mark's, and the minor prophets, and Ruth in Luke's. There may be some general thematic connections, therefore, but not necessarily week by week. The search for the single matching theme is rather fruitless; there is none, excepting for the unity of the scriptures themselves.

REFORM

The Uniting Church takes a particular risk in publishing these lists in *Uniting in Worship*. The *Basis of Union* makes it clear that the church's life is open to constant reform under the Word of God. The comments above on the lectionary indicate that we have here only the form which seemed best to us at this stage of our church life and of lectionary scholarship. Everything here continues to be evaluated. We will continue to search for the best ways in which the church may hear the Word of God, to pray it, and to do it.

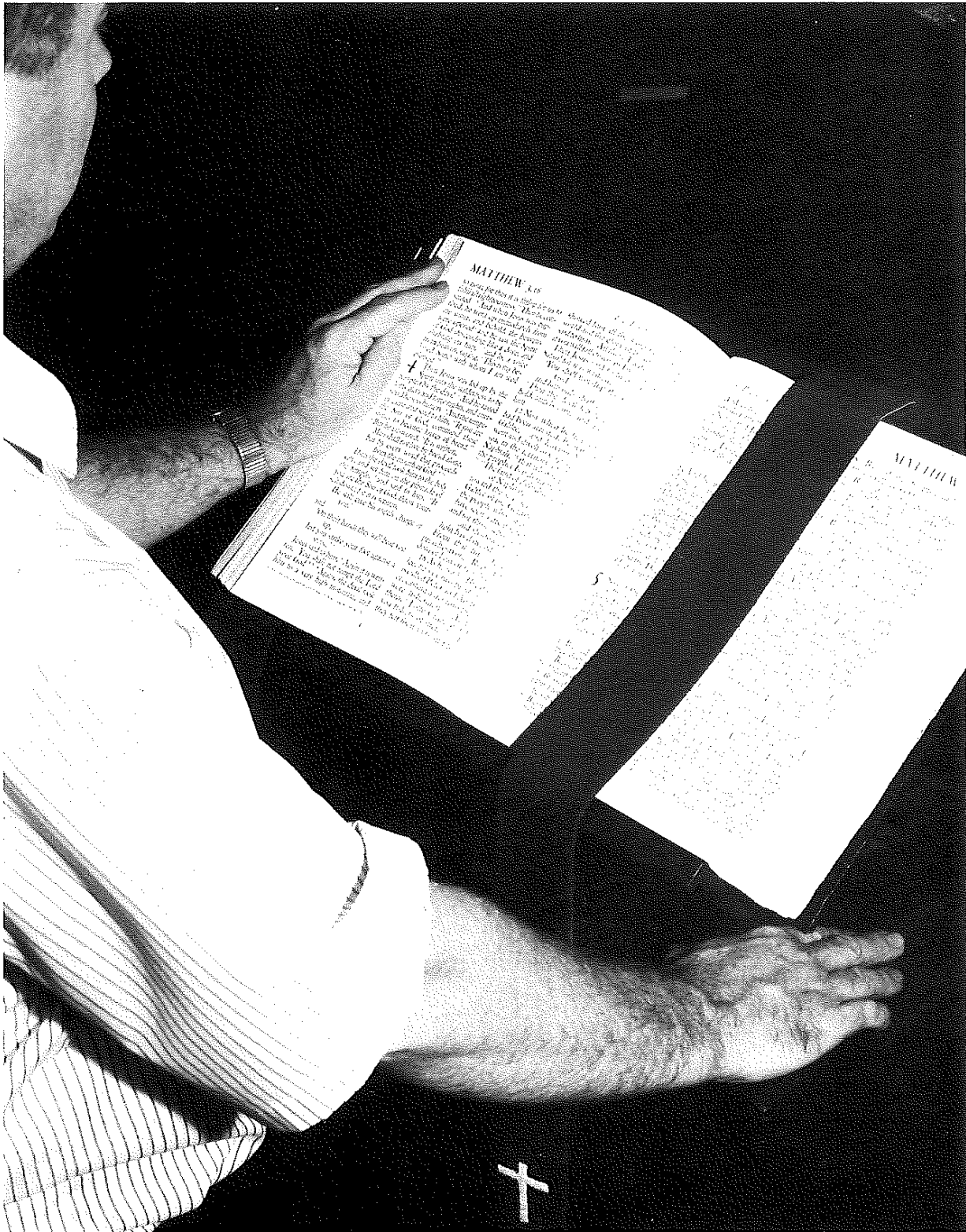


Photo: Eddy Marmur

