

The Prose Psalms⁽¹⁾

THERE must, I am sure, be many in the congregation who regard the singing of the prose psalms with uneasiness, perhaps even with a tinge of impatience. Maybe it is the fault of our present way of attempting to sing them, an uncomfortable compromise that surely satisfies no one, with the Choir exhorted to sing the incomparable poetry as flexibly and sensitively as possible, while the congregation either strive manfully to fit words to music and follow the "pointing" of the printed books, or stand unhappily silent. And the organ, in an attempt to help both, veers between the soft background which will serve the Choir's efforts best, and a more robust support for the congregation which, whilst it blankets the Choir, can do little to encourage more accurate singing in the pew.

I do not think ours is a malaise that can be cured by discussion alone, but a word of history may not be out of place here. The practice of chanting the psalms dates back to the services of Solomon's Temple, and, in pre-Reformation days, was built into the Mass and the Offices of the Catholic Church, the words being first translated into Greek and later into Latin, and sung to plainsong. At the Reformation the language of the Church had to become the language of the people, but only in England was the attempt made to preserve the psalms in a version that followed the original Hebrew sense closely and retained its freedom and poetry, and to create music for them that should be easier to sing than plainsong. Elsewhere attempts were made, with varying success, to turn them into regular verse, and, not unnaturally, in the effort to confine the free-flowing Hebrew poetry within the bounds of rhyme and scansion, some of the sense and point of the original was blunted. But the difficulties in the path of those who attempted to sing the prose psalms remained, and congregations tended, and still tend, to avoid them either by leaving everything to the choristers or by ambling along in a discreet *pianissimo* guaranteed not to disturb or mislead anyone else.

Here is the nub of the matter, and let it be faced squarely: Are the psalms, sung in this way, an aid to

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worship? Is it possible to worship God when part of one's mind is busy with the mechanics of chanting? And if, as I suppose, the answer is "No", the next question cannot be avoided: Is not the only alternative to banish the prose psalms from our services, and rely solely on the metrical versions which, noble and beloved as many of them are, do no more than suggest the general sense and import of the Psalmist's meaning? I want to suggest that to allow an answer in the affirmative would be to take the path of least resistance, and would result in a quite disastrous impoverishment of our services; it would be tantamount to rejecting altogether one of the richest and most ancient means of worship with which the human race has been endowed.

The difficulties, however, remain, and it has yet to be seen if they can be overcome. To do so calls for determination and a certain amount of courage. To be able to show that they have been overcome would be to light a bright beacon of encouragement to the Church, not in Scotland alone, but wherever congregations are faced with this dilemma.

Here are two solutions, both immediately practicable and ready to our hands. Either, no doubt, will be found disturbing to our settled routine.

The first is: to rehearse a psalm together before the service at which it is to be sung. It would mean getting to church a little earlier, but the result of ten minutes or so of preparation would be well worth the extra effort. This practice might take place twenty minutes before the beginning of service, with the Choir present to assist and demonstrate. The same psalm and chant could be "spot-lighted" for several Sundays in succession, until it became familiar.

The second solution is revolutionary, and, some will say, uncongregational. I have never seen it done, but I have always believed that it could be the ideal answer in that it satisfies both devotional and aesthetic needs. Approached in a truly worshipful spirit by all taking part, it could be deeply moving. Let the congregation, remaining seated, find the psalm in their Bibles and follow whilst the words are sung by the choristers. Thus the beauty and the natural rhythm of the poem can be allowed their freedom, and the expressive underlining of the sense assist in the devotional exercise of reading the Scriptures together.

But I also want to suggest a third and much more radical approach, and I believe it has considerable hopes of

successful development. It involves throwing overboard the Anglican Chant with its attendant worries about "pointing", and it allows congregation and Choir to sing out and easily to achieve the freedom and vitality of good speech. A Bible (or Prayer Book) alone is needed, all singing can be in unison, and no one, except perhaps the organist, requires any printed music.

Instead of an Anglican chant or Plainsong Tone, the chant can consist of two notes only, the key-note and the note above. The first verse of the psalm is begun on the keynote, and chanting continues on that note until the last syllable of the first half-verse (indicated by a colon) when the pitch rises to the note above. The second half-verse continues at this higher pitch, and falls to the keynote at the final syllable of the verse. Other verses follow the same pattern, but at suitable points of change in the sense of the psalm, the whole level of chanting can be raised or lowered to some related keynote. This abrupt key-change is easy for the singers to follow, and is a simple and effective means of reflecting a change of mood in the words.

Organ support is important, but it must be simple. Common chords and their inversions, with a sparing use of suspensions, best suit the needs of virile singing. Any elaborate "harmonization" would be immediately destructive of vigour and spontaneity in the singing. The style should be that of good plainsong accompaniment, but using a fairly full tone (diapasons and 4 foot stops), and with pedals.

My experience, so far, indicates that this simplified way of singing the psalms not only avoids monotony but generates an impetus and excitement that is infectious. It must, however, be made clear that this third suggestion only indicates a possible field for experiment. Others beside myself are trying to find a workable answer to the problems, and I hope that some readers of this article will feel it worth experimenting on their own account. Neither trouble nor the sacrifice of outworn systems will be in vain, if thereby our congregations and choirs are enabled to recapture the joy and inspiration of singing the psalms devotionally, artistically and enthusiastically.

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