

## On Singing the Psalms: Old and New Patterns of Worship

A Christian who is denied the Psalms in his public worship is like a man condemned to a diet in which there are no fresh vegetables. He can probably achieve some sort of existence, and even some sort of health ; but he will be dyspeptic and uncomely before he is forty-five.

That is easy to say ; but it is undeniable that in the actual presentation and performance of psalms in public worship there are peculiar and intractable difficulties to be faced. If we glance at the English-speaking church's practice up to now we find, broadly, that the problem of using the psalms in *public* worship has never been fully solved. It will at once be said that the Kirk of Scotland found the solution by rendering the psalms in English metre and setting them to easy tunes ; but I am bound to say—and as a Southerner I know to what perils I expose myself by saying it—that even here the problem seems to me only partly disposed of. This I shall in a moment try to justify.

The one church that really sings the psalms, the " whole book of psalms ", in public worship is the Church of England. This is due, as readers of these pages hardly need to be reminded, to an historical accident. In that church the psalms are read or sung in course in the monastic offices from which the compilers of Mattins and Evensong drew their material. This was the medieval Roman practice. Although those offices were never designed to become " public worship ", and those who place the Eucharist at the centre of their scheme of Sunday worship undoubtedly have history on their side, there has been this great advantage in the anomaly, that many generations of anglicans, accustomed to Mattins and Evensong as the main services of the day, came to know the Psalms intimately in the Prayer-Book version : and there is this disadvantage in the otherwise entirely commendable liturgical movement towards the Eucharist, that the psalms virtually disappear from public worship, at any rate for those who do not attend church a second time on Sundays.

In this scheme, the psalms are read " in course ", and originally the scheme was designed for daily, not for weekly,

worship. The 1928 Lectionary provides a system of psalms for use on Sundays through the year that uses a large part of the Psalter.

Now there is no doubt that the psalms, to those who are brought up on their use in this form, provide a quite unique compendium of devotion upon which they can draw at a moment's notice. Faithful attenders at these services soon came to know them largely by heart, to accept uncritically (ultra-protestants would say, too uncritically) their crudities and oddities, and to be able to quote at will their profundities and consolations.

But here the musicians step in. Those who thus learned the psalms often learned them to anglican chants: and, say the musicians, the anglican chant is a holy terror. In plain fact, it is an anomaly, sometimes amusing, sometimes horrific, and sometimes naively beautiful, of much the same quality and degree as the liturgical anomaly of Mattins and Evensong. But it is certainly true that a considerable congregation singing an anglican chant usually makes a disagreeable noise. Sung by trained and well-conducted choirs, anglican chants judiciously used can provide a moving and illuminating commentary on Scripture; and it was most heartening to read <sup>(1)</sup>Mr Herrick Bunney's defence of the practice of *listening* to psalms thus performed. Pestilent papism, no doubt some have called it; but for all that he is right.

There is, of course, plainsong: and for reading the psalms to music (that is what it comes to) it is unsurpassed, easy, adaptable, impersonal, undemonstrative, it lets the words through and makes a long psalm more exciting, because more easy-going and readable, than a complicated set of chants make it. Moreover—and this is of great importance—plainsong precludes bawling and ranting, which hymns often encourage; and in that it provides a most salutary discipline. But it remains true that Englishmen don't care for it and Scots (I suspect) loathe it.

What then of that blessed compilation, the Scottish Psalter? There is congregational psalmody, anyhow. But (dare one say this? I am a guest in Scotland and would not needlessly offend) it cannot be called a monument of style. That is surely not an absurd comment. The psalms not only happen to have been written in Hebrew stress-metres: they owe a large part of their quality, of the texture not only of their language but of their thought and even doctrine, to

(1) *Annual*, 1958, p.48.

the fact that they were so written and that the English prose translation reflects this fact. To metricize them in the manner of sixteenth century ballads has inevitably anglicized their thought as well as their language, so that what in the English imitation of Coverdale or King James is an amiable quaintness becomes a preposterous capering (compare Psalm 114 in the three versions): and what in the old English is of haunting beauty comes out with craggy gracelessness in Common Metre; the most abysmal example of this is surely Psalm 22. Moreover, you can (though you shouldn't) bawl psalm-tunes. They are too like hymns. They can (nowadays at any rate) only be sung small pieces at a time. Imagine shouting the whole of Psalm 40 in metre, and compare that, as an activity of worship, with singing the prose version whether to plainsong or to so beautiful an anglican chant as Walford Davies in B flat, or Edwards in F.

Now it is a most interesting thing that the Roman Catholic Church has bestirred itself to produce a new kind of psalmody, which we all ignore at our peril, in the psalmody of Père Joseph Gélinau of Paris. This psalmody is becoming familiar enough not to need minute description here. What concerns us now is to ask whether it can be to Protestants anything but an eccentric, agreeable, and even slightly enviable curiosity.

Gélinau took the bold step of translating the Psalms (or some of them: 53 are at present available) into French, reproducing with remarkable accuracy the stresses of the Hebrew. He then set them to melodies of extreme simplicity—much simpler, much less locally evocative than anglican chants yet more stimulating to the imagination than plainsong chants—which a congregation can pick up in a minute or two. These French psalms have now been translated into English, similarly observing the stresses of the Hebrew.

Now observe what we have. First, we have an essentially *simple* technique, that anybody can do well reasonably easily. They are less musically demanding than anglican chants or than plainsong, requiring neither the choral concentration of the one nor the ascetic inwardness of the other. The printing convention is of the simplest, demanding only two different kinds of types and no other marks whatever. This is the pattern of verses 3 and 4 of Psalm 43:

O send forth your light and your truth,  
let these be my guide :  
Let them bring me to your holy mountain,  
to the place where you dwell.  
And I will come to the altar of God,  
the God of my joy.  
My Redeemer I will thank you on the harp,  
O God my God !

Each heavy-printed syllable represents the first beat of a bar of four quick beats ; the syllables that intervene between that and the next heavy-printed syllable are fitted conventionally into the four beats : as it were four crotchets, or a minim and two crotchets, or two minims. The seventh line above is sung as a series of equal crotchets, the note changing with each bar : while the eighth line above is sung as four minims. In the Gélinau melodies so far published there is no exception to the rule that at each bar the note changes.

Second : the preservation of the Hebrew rhythm has a powerful effect on the style. Skilfully but not affectedly translated it becomes tender and flexible. The use of "you" for "thou" may offend some ; it is not strictly necessary to the scheme. But the best way to express the effect of this to those who have not heard it is to say that it seems to make its full appeal when it is sung by children ; and that is something it is difficult to say of any other kind of psalmody.

It would be lunacy (even by Sassenach standards) to suggest that this ought to replace metrical psalmody. But I am sure that a psalm sung this way is so different a *kind* of worship-rhetoric from an arbitrary hunk of metrical psalm sung to "Newington" or "Duke Street" that there is room in protestant public worship for both. If any church, for example, indulges in the pleonastic practice of singing a verse or two of some succulent hymn as an introit, it would be well advised to replace such a foolish sentimentality with some verses of a Gélinau psalm. Between the readings of Scripture it might find a suitable and agreeable place.

In Catholic circles it is making much headway in family worship ; and that is undoubtedly an excellent place for it. It sounds very well without accompaniment.

It may be sung in unison or in harmony, accompanied or unaccompanied ; it is wonderfully adaptable. And, above all, it enables you, without strain, to sing a whole psalm of tolerable length, and to become familiar with many

more than the conventional selection prevalent in the Kirk.

The sources in English for this are these: (a) *Twenty Four Psalms and a Canticle* (3s 6d)—psalms with melody only: (b) *Accompaniments and Four-Part Harmonies* to the above book (7s 6d), and (c) a ten-inch L.P. record of eight psalms variously performed, GR 24, (30s 11½d): all can be obtained from Grail Publications, 58 Sloane Square, London, S.W. 1.

ERIK ROUTLEY