

Prose Psalms in Public Worship

IN his article on the prose psalms in the *Annual*, 1958, Mr Herrick Bunney has not only called attention to our present neglect of these, with consequent impoverishment of our public worship ; he has also sounded a call to courageous experiment. We must face the fact that, as time goes on, we are singing fewer and fewer of the metrical psalms. Compared with the prose psalms of the "Authorized Version" of the Bible, the former are less simple in expression, have less beauty of language and a much bigger proportion of obsolete words. True, in the metrical version there are striking examples of dignity and felicitous phrasing which we shall long continue to use, but these form only a small proportion of the whole. Further, it is tiring for a congregation to sing more than six or seven verses at a time of the metrical psalms, so we choose for our psalm-singing a few snippets of verses, often missing an important context. Take Ps. 103, for example, whose twenty-two verses carry a great theme, a unity of thought which should not be broken ; no congregation could sing all those verses in metre without a break, or several breaks, but the complete prose psalm can, in much shorter time and without fatigue, be read or sung to a simple chant.

Reading the Prose Psalms

For congregational participation in reading, the A.V., in spite of some archaisms, will be the best to use for generations to come. For over thirty years I have had congregations regularly reading aloud the prose psalms, as well as singing the metrical psalms. Of course in some congregations there are a few who will not join in such reading for the sole reason that "they have never done it before" ; but the others respond when it is explained to them that here is something which has for many years been recommended in official publications of the Church of Scotland, seeing that such reading not only puts more of the Bible into the service, but also gives the congregation a greater share in worship. From one of the Bible Societies I buy copies of the Book of Psalms, as published in cheap "portions," to lend to those who come to church without Bibles. I invite the people, children and adults, to read aloud every verse with me, as I

read steadily, not aiming at undue "expression" which would hold up the flow of the words. Each such reading concludes with all saying the old, simple form of the Doxology, "Glory be to the Father . . ." The congregation remains seated for all the above reading, though I know one minister whose congregation stands for the Doxology. If, after using the above method for a while, one is able to train the choir, or any others, to lead in reading, the minister can read alternate verses with the congregation, or treble voices can read alternately with men's voices. In such antiphonal reading I have found it best to read by verses, not half-verses, treating the Doxology as two verses.

Prose Psalms Set to Anglican Chants

These four-part settings can be very beautiful when rendered by a well trained, well balanced choir. Adequate congregational participation, however, is often impossible. It is difficult, also, to preserve speech rhythm because of the structure of the music, the changing chords of which have strong emphases of their own.

Experiments

I. A missionary in Madras has published an antiphonal psalter based on the Revised Version as set out in lines and strophes in Moulton's *Modern Readers' Bible*. The music is from a Tamil chant book. The last syllable (or two syllables) in each line of words is on two notes, written in sol-fa in the margin; these end-inflections form a kind of tune for four or more lines, which is repeated as often as necessary. There are two disadvantages here: the congregation would have to be supplied with special books in place of the A.V.; and the range of some of the tunes seems rather wide.

II. Mr Bunney's suggestion is to experiment with an inflection of one tone up for the last syllable of the first half of each verse, and continue this as reciting note for the second half, with final inflection down to the key-note, or first note. He wisely sees that what is needed to give the simplest alliance of melody with prose words suitable for congregational use is a reciting note with easy inflections at the end of half-verse and verse. I feel he has taken a step in the right direction, but could he not go one step further, in case over-simplification takes away melodic interest? One step to plainsong?

Plainsong

The rise or fall of just one note at the end of a half-verse or verse, as suggested by Mr Bunney, occurs quite often in the *Manual of Plainsong* by Briggs and Frere, revised by J. H. Arnold. The prose psalms in the above book are those of the *Book of Common Prayer*, but these plainsong settings have been adapted to the A.V. psalms. (See the *Annual*, 1953.) Before giving examples, I should explain that there are eight Tones (or modes) used for the prose psalms. Tone VI has only one ending, but each of the others has its own set of endings. The first half of each verse has a Reciting Note followed by a melodic inflection called the Mediation; the second half of each verse has a Reciting note followed by an inflection called the Ending.

Inflection of one note—

Reciting Note and Mediation :

Tone II, Fah s (sometimes Fah s f)
 V, }
 VIII, } Doh r (sometimes Doh r d)

Reciting Note and Ending : Tone IV. Ending 6, Lah s

Inflection of two notes (other than the alternatives above)—

Reciting Note and Mediation :

Tone I }
 VI } Lah s l

Reciting Note and Ending : Tone IV. Ending 7, Lah s l

Inflection of three notes—

Reciting Note and Ending :

Tone II. Ending 1, Fah m d r
 III. Ending 4, Doh l, d t,

Thus to proceed to further inflections is not difficult, especially as the system of pointing is very simple. Of course the precentor and/or choir will need the copies which are pointed for reference to the staff and sol-fa music printed at the head of each psalm. (Duplicated copies may be obtained from the writer.) Members of the congregation who wish it could be supplied with the pointed copies; I have found that the rest of the congregation, after hearing the choir repeat a plainsong psalm a few times, are soon able to learn the tune while following the words from their

