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## **THE PSALMS IN ANGLICAN WORSHIP**

By Richard Sherratt

In the Book of Common Prayer the Psalms of David have always had a very prominent place and rightly so. At both Morning and Evening Prayer the psalms are read out or sung. Indeed the psalms are divided so that all one hundred and fifty of them will be sung or read during the course of a month, or more accurately in thirty days, and specific psalms are designated to be used upon specific days. Hence upon Christmas Day Psalms 19, 45, 85, 89, 110 and 132 are the proper psalms to be used. On Ash-Wednesday the proper psalms to be used are 6, 32, 38, 102, 130 and 143. On Good Friday the proper psalms to be used are 22, 40, 54, 69 and 88. On Easter-Day the proper psalms to be used are 2, 57, 111, 113, 114 and 118. On Ascension-Day the proper psalms to be used are 8, 15, 21, 24, 47 and 108. Finally upon Whit-Sunday the proper psalms to be used are Psalms 48, 68, 104 and 145. The central psalm of the Morning Prayer liturgy is Psalm 95 (Venite, Exultemus Domino) however Psalm 100 (*Jubilate Deo*) may also be sung. During Evening Prayer you may end up singing Psalm 98 (*Cantate Dominio*) and Psalm 67 (*Deus Misereatur*).

Whilst the psalms are used thus, the liturgy itself also makes use of the psalms in another and important way, that of forming the basis of petitions within the liturgy itself. This shall be demonstrated in what follows for I shall quote from the liturgy of both Morning and Evening Prayer and provide psalms to illustrate the source of the liturgical petitions.

*Then likewise he [the Priest] shall say,*

O Lord, open thou our lips.

*Answer.* And our mouths shall shew forth thy praise.

*Priest.* O God, make speed to save us.

*Answer.* O Lord, make haste to help us.

Now read Psalm 51:15 “O Lord, open thou my lips; and my mouth shall shew forth thy praise”; Psalm 106:47 “Save us, O LORD our God, and gather us from among the heathen, to give thanks unto thy holy name, and to triumph in thy praise”; Psalm 22:19 “But be not thou far from me, O LORD: O my strength, haste thee to help me”; Psalm 38:22 “Make haste to help me, O Lord my salvation”; Psalm 40:13 “Be pleased, O LORD, to deliver me: O LORD, make haste to help me”; and finally, Psalm 70:1 “Make haste, O God, to deliver me; make haste to help me, O LORD.”

*Priest.* Praise ye the Lord.

*Answer.* The Lord’s name be praised.

Now read Psalm 111:1 “Praise ye the LORD. I will praise the LORD with my whole heart, in the assembly of the upright, and in the congregation”; Psalm 116:19 “In the courts of the LORD’S house, in the midst of thee, O Jerusalem. Praise ye the LORD”; Psalm 146:1 “Praise ye the LORD. Praise the LORD, O my soul”; Psalm 147:1 “Praise ye the LORD: for it is good to sing praises unto our God; for it is pleasant; and praise is comely”; and, Psalm 147:12 “Praise the LORD, O Jerusalem; praise thy God, O Zion.”

*Then the Priest standing up shall say,*

O Lord, shew thy mercy upon us

*Answer.* And grant us thy salvation

Now read Psalm 85:7 “Shew us thy mercy, O LORD, and grant us thy salvation.”

*Priest.* O Lord, save thy people.  
*Answer.* And bless thine inheritance.

Now read Psalm 28:9 “Save thy people, and bless thine inheritance: feed them also, and lift them up for ever.”

*Priest.* O God, make clean our hearts within us.  
*Answer.* And take not thy holy Spirit from us.

Now read Psalm 51:10, 11 “Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy holy spirit from me.”

This demonstrates that a number of petitions within the liturgy are either direct quotes of psalms or based very heavily upon them, all of which illustrates their vital importance in Anglican worship; they are read, they are sung and they are said during the course of our liturgy.

All of this is in full accord with the Scriptures. We are taught clearly in the Old Testament that the psalms are the inspired word of God for King David, “the sweet psalmist of Israel”, declared “The Spirit of the LORD spake by me, and his word was in my tongue” (2 Samuel 23:1-2). David tells us here that he spoke for the very purpose of giving songs to the Church<sup>1</sup> (Israel being the Church under the Old Testament Cf. Acts 7:38). We are also taught that the singing of psalms is desired for Psalm 95:2 reads “Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving, and make a joyful noise unto him with psalms” and Psalm 105:2 declares “Sing unto him, sing psalms unto him: talk ye of all his wondrous works.” To which may be added 1 Chronicles 16:7-9 “Then on that day David delivered first this psalm to thank the LORD into the hand of Asaph and his brethren. Give thanks unto the LORD, call upon his name, make known his deeds among the people. Sing unto him, sing psalms unto him, talk ye of all his wondrous works.”

That God desires the singing of Psalms is shown clearly in 2 Chronicles 29:25-30 which describes the reformation of worship during the reign of Hezekiah, king of Judah, and which deserves careful attention and close examination:

“And he [Hezekiah] set the Levites in the house of the LORD with cymbals, with psalteries, and with harps, according to the commandment of David, and of Gad the king’s seer, and Nathan the prophet: for so was the commandment of the LORD by his prophets. And the Levites stood with the instruments of David, and the priests with the trumpets. And Hezekiah commanded to offer the burnt offering upon the altar. And when the burnt offering began, the song of the LORD began also with the trumpets, and with the instruments ordained by David king of Israel. And all the congregation worshipped, and the singers sang, and the trumpeters sounded: and all this continued until the burnt offering was finished. And when they had made an end of offering, the king and all that were present with him bowed themselves, and worshipped. Moreover Hezekiah the king and the princes commanded the Levites to sing praise unto the LORD with the words of David, and of Asaph the seer. And they sang praises with gladness, and they bowed their heads and worshipped.”

The key points are that the worship was commanded by God (verse 25) and this included singing (verses 27 & 28) but more specifically the singing of psalms (verse 30).

Let us now move to the New Testament wherein both Matthew 26:30 and Mark 14:26 we find it written that “when they had sung an hymn, they went out into the mount of Olives.” What does it mean by “hymn”? I am of the opinion that this was a part of the “hallelujah” which begins at Psalm 113 and ends with Psalm 118 and which the Jews sang at the Feast of the Passover. Such is the

view of Albert Barnes, Matthew Henry and others including William Romaine in *An Essay on Psalmody* hence this hymn was a psalm.

When St. Paul and Silas were imprisoned they “prayed, and sang praises unto God” (Acts 16:25) in accordance with James 5:13. The title of the Book of Psalms can be translated as “Book of Psalms”, “Book of Hymns” or “Book of Praises” and the root of the word *Tehillim*, translated as “Psalms”, is *halal* which means “to praise” hence when we are told that St. Paul and Silas “sang praises” we ought understand this as meaning they sang psalms.

Both Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 speak of singing “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs”. These all describe the Psalter. “Psalms” refer obviously to psalms; “hymns” refer to psalms for as John Gill wrote, “I take hymns to be but another name for the book of psalms; for the running title of that book may as well be, the book of hymns, as of psalms”<sup>2</sup> but what of “spiritual songs”? A simple glance at the titles of a number of psalms will find them called songs as are Psalms 18, 30, 45, 46, 48, 65-68, 75, 76, 83, 87, 92, 108, and 120-134. They are called “spiritual” because they were written by the Spirit of God (2 Peter 1:21) and composed for spiritual edification. Do you find it odd that St. Paul would use three different words in one sentence to describe the same thing? I would point out that this is done in a number of places including Genesis 26:5, Exodus 34:7, Deuteronomy 8:11, 1 Kings 2:3, Nehemiah 1:7 and Acts 2:22.

Why then are we to sing the Psalter? The reason is simply that it is God’s hymnal given to his Church, the singing of which he has commanded, its content overflowing with the sweet fragrance of Christ Jesus (Luke 24:44) in whom his soul delights (Isaiah 42:1). Let us then sing, with the sweet psalmist of Israel, “It is a good thing to give thanks unto the LORD, and to sing praises unto thy name, O most High” (Psalm 92:1) and use the Psalter to do so!

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