

# DISCOVERING THE PRAYER OF THE CHURCH

By JIM COTTER

*How might daily offices be prayed today by individuals or small groups who inherit the Christian tradition of regular prayer but find the present forms too clerical and institutional in flavour?*

**M**ALE CLERGY—at least the Anglican variety—bellow at common prayer. Familiar with projecting their voices in large churches to those who gravitate towards the back (in direct proportion to the hardness of their hearing), parish priests tend to forget that small chapels and living rooms suggest a quieter style.

Other male clergy—at least the Roman Catholic variety—gabble prayers. How quickly can we get through the set words so as to discharge our obligation? The race is on: but there are no winners. The words are not savoured, let alone digested. The prayers are hurried through, not prayed through. Weariness and aridity soon give duty a bad name.

Yet others—at least the Free Church variety—fill the whole time for prayer, supposedly liberated from any set form, with a torrent of words. They drown themselves and their congregations with a weight that is far from the weight of glory beyond comparison.

Yes, there is something of caricature in those descriptions. But the sheer wordiness of most of the forms of daily prayer in official use in the Churches lends itself to insensitive hurry. There is another problem besides this oppressiveness of volume. The content of the offices is predominantly psalms, scripture readings and ancient canticles. In a critical and historically minded age, it is increasingly difficult to use many of these texts 'neat': the cultural assumptions are different from our own and many of the metaphors have gone dead on us. However reverent we may be in our approach to the foundation writings of Christian faith, we cannot swallow them whole. Nor should we have to waste energy in mental

and emotional gymnastics before our minds and hearts can pray through the words before us.

Most daily offices are built round the assumption that in a shorter or longer cycle the psalter is recited and the scriptures read. But who decided that the *whole* psalter should be recited once a week or once a month? Who decided that the *whole* bible should be read through once a year? Why should we regard what is provided as defining the content of daily prayer rather than indicating material from which a selection can be made according to circumstances? Why need the monastic pattern be regarded as either norm or best? The daily prayer of the people, whether in churches, homes or on one's own, is more likely to be short and selective and relate to the beginning, middle and end of the day rather than be the most time-consuming activity of the day. George Guiver makes a useful distinction when he writes,

The more we are involved in the *inner* journey, the more the psalms will function as work, *askesis*. The more we are caught up in the *outer* struggle of 'the world', the more they will need to be carefully chosen according to their ability to refresh and feed.<sup>1</sup>

New (and not so new) Christians do, however, wish to enter more deeply into the 'Prayer of the Church', and explore the riches of our inheritance. There is indeed value in entering into the rhythms of night and day, of the days of the week, and of the seasons, both natural and ecclesiastical, of the year. But how might we put ourselves in the way of discovering those riches without being daunted by many words and without being expected to give the turgid as much attention as the inspired? How might we pray more intelligently and wholeheartedly through the chanting and reciting of common prayer?

To begin with, what would happen if we made the setting aside of a definite period of time for prayer more important than getting through a prescribed and large number of words? (George Guiver reminds us that it was the marking of time that was more important in the early Church than the repetition of content.)<sup>2</sup> We might then be able to give due consideration to silence and pauses, and to slow and quiet speaking or chanting. Relishing and savouring the words and allowing them to flow in leisurely fashion through the time set aside could make possible a communing with God which is opened up by the words but not dominated by them. And

if the words themselves are given their due measure, even their physicality, acknowledging their sound and their rhythm, there will be a balance of prayer *through* the very words themselves as well as in and through the silences between. So does silence make sense of music and the sounds give depth to the silence.

Of course it is *possible* to use many words and still to pray, but I think this happens when those words have become a gentle background murmur to keep the mind from wandering and distracting the praying heart. I suspect that this occurs only when the whole psalter has become a kind of mantra, rare outside contemplative communities.

We have unfortunately imbibed the assumption that clearly defined content is more important than understanding of principles and values, in the outworking of which responsible choices can be made from the quarry of material available to us. Moreover, regular praise of God reflecting the rhythms of night and day, of the week, and of the year need not be limited to the words of psalms and scripture. Indeed, canticles and hymns of succeeding centuries have found their way into the common stock, but why not other music, and other prose and poetry and art? Not uncritically of course, but with the same spirit of discernment that we need to bring to the whole of psalms and scripture.

Respect for what has been inherited should not turn into idolatry. In a scene from Robert Bolt's play, *A man for all seasons*, Signor Chapuys, the Spanish ambassador to the Court of King Henry VIII, is visiting Thomas More, Lord Chancellor of England, at his home in Chelsea. Chapuys exchanges a Latin greeting with William Roper, More's son-in-law, and turning to More says, 'And how much longer shall we hear that holy language in these shores?' More replies, 'Tisn't holy, Your Excellency; just old'.

Now a critical respect for the tradition will indeed highlight its jewels, those psalms and readings and prayers which are indeed old but which bear repetition because they continue to do their work of carrying us into the heart of the God revealed in Christ, enabling us to be refreshed and encouraged there. So one guiding principle is this: which parts of the inheritance do we do well to take to heart, to learn by heart, which are justly memorable?

I kept this question in mind when compiling a version of Compline, entitled *Prayer at night*. Even though there is a considerable variety of material, the criterion was consistently this: dig deep here and water will spring up in the desert.

The choice, however, was not idiosyncratic. The 'commonsensus' of the faithful was very much in mind. Indeed the choice of psalms was aided not only by including the ones traditionally used at Compline, but also by conducting an informal parish survey concerning people's knowledge of the psalms. They were asked to look through the psalter fairly quickly, noting down the numbers of those they both immediately recognized and had valued over the years. Out of the thirty or so that emerged as clear favourites, a further selection was made by asking which were appropriate to ruminative praying late in the evening or at night. These are the ones chosen: 103 (Sunday); 134; 4; 23 (Monday); 121; 16, 7-11; 31, 1-5 (Tuesday); 139, 1-18 (Wednesday); 46; 91, 1-5. 11. 14-16 (Thursday); 130; 126 (Friday); 42; 43 (Saturday).

Whatever the value of a systematic *study* of all the psalms, we can begin to take responsibility for saying that not all of them can be *prayed* as they are, but that a few of them are worth praying more or less as they are, and very frequently indeed.

The choice of scripture readings was based on the same principle: which short passages from the heart of the bible can nourish us directly without the need for questions and interpretation? Among the thirty-one chosen for the days of the month are the Beatitudes, the passages about loving your enemy and not condemning from Luke, and 1 Corinthians 13. A seasonal note is struck with separate choices for Advent through to Trinity.

The criteria for the selection of hymns and prayers were similar. Are they memorable, will they wear well in daily and weekly use, and, for the hymns, do they reflect the quiet mood of the late evening?

The *structure* of the office will be familiar to those who are used to saying Compline: prayers of introduction, thanksgiving, confession and absolution; psalm(s); scripture reading; hymn; *Nunc dimittis*; Lord's Prayer; further prayers and blessing.

Companion volumes, *Prayer in the morning* and *Prayer in the day*, follow the same principles: a simple structure, 'nuggets' of material that stand repetition at least a few times a year, few enough words to allow the breathing space of silence, and yet sufficient for fifteen to twenty minutes of prayer. Because there are not too many words, each office can be printed in pocket book form and so used by nomads as well as settlers. A daily office needs to be accessible to those who travel to work and at work as well as those in

communities where work and prayer take place under the same roof.

*Prayer in the morning* follows this sequence: preparation prayer, opening psalm, psalm(s), scripture reading, canticle, prayers. *Prayer in the day* follows this sequence: opening responses, hymn, Psalm 119 (part), scripture reading and picture for meditation, prayers. Thus they are loyal to the tradition of daily prayer which is based on the movements of praise (psalms) and prayer (intercession—this can be introduced as biddings at the beginning of the office, lending it its tone or ‘intention’, or before one of the prayers), and of proclamation. The fourth ‘p’, penitence, finds its place but once a day, at the beginning of *Prayer at night*.

Now the psalms in the offices for morning and day have been adapted. They are not simply translations, nor are they paraphrases. They come from meditating on the original (at least in the best English translations!) and allowing the New Testament, and Christian reflection since, to be woven into them. We see this process at work in hymns which are based on psalms, for example, ‘The King of love my shepherd is’, with its lines,

thy rod and staff my comfort still,  
thy cross before to guide me.

In the dynamic of interpretation and prayer we are called to *engage* with the psalms, to become participants in the process of creating words and phrases that bring us more closely in touch and in tune with God. We need to remember, in imagination, those nights under the stars when our ancestors of faith told stories and sang songs round the fire. They were not using immutable texts, but responding to requests: Tell us what God is like. Tell us about our ancestors. Sing us one of the songs of our people. Compose a new ballad to celebrate our victory. Why are we exiled?

In some such fertile soil we may guess that the seeds of the psalms were sown, with their expressions of personal anger and awe, grief and gratitude, and of corporate recitations of the people’s history and acclamations of the people’s God on high and holy days. So we glimpse soul-deep into their life over many generations. And we can begin to understand too how these poems and songs will have been polished and pruned, even argued with and developed for new occasions.

Whether that process should ever have stopped is an interesting question. There seems to be a perennial temptation to foreclose

prematurely, to wish to reach final decisions about a definitive collection. And that happened with the psalms in particular and with scripture as a whole. But at least the faith expressed in the psalms had been maturing over hundreds of years, whereas the Christian Testament reflects only the experience of the first few generations. And it was not long before the Church formally declared what was to be included in that Testament and what excluded. And in its pages there are but a few scraps of what might have developed as Christian psalms.

What happened was that canticles and hymns were written instead. But only a selection of these has ever found its way into books of daily prayer. Hymns have been written in different languages in different centuries for different occasions. They have been added to, altered, forgotten, rediscovered. Christian people have felt this to be an appropriate activity in the Spirit of God. And I find it hard to see the psalms as different in principle, even if in practice more of them deserve to have survived than the majority of hymns. Have we been blinded by the mindset that insists that scripture must be holy because it is old? Unless we are to be fundamentalist, there is no alternative to continuing the task of discernment of what has been handed down to us from our ancestors.

This discernment is necessary in our day for another reason, our changed understanding of the relationship of Church and world: neither the one over against the other (pre-Constantine), nor the one coterminous with the other (Christendom), but the one in critical solidarity with the other. We now experience a to and fro between Church and world, with mutual criticism and to mutual benefit. So the concerns and metaphors of our modern world become an essential ingredient in our prayer.

Further, we forget that there is a 'scandal of particularity' at the heart of Christianity, that of a circumcised Jewish man of Nazareth crucified under Pontius Pilate. We cannot woodenly repeat what he did; we can only attempt to live and pray by the Spirit of Jesus through all the *particularities* of our own lives and times. From that perspective we shall cease to expect most of the scriptures to speak to us directly. But through our committed and discerning engagement with those words and with the Spirit in which they were spoken and written for their time, we shall enter into a dynamic creativity in that Spirit so as to pray in our own distinct

tone, even hearing afresh the wonderful works of God in our own language.

Much of the bible is offensive to us if we are honest. We distrust the mood of self-righteousness. We fear the example of a God who is supposed to have been angry with Saul for not killing *all* the Amalekites. We find the pastoral, patriarchal and military metaphors often too dated to feed the imaginations and hearts of people praying in urban democracies and beginning to learn how to resolve conflicts without war.

I mentioned above how I believe it is possible for many words to be used leisurely in prayer, even to be almost ignored. Yet I wonder how their repetition over the years does in fact influence the mind and will. We may in the end go beyond words altogether, but we will not be helped by thoughts and images which are remote or misleading; it then becomes impossible to sit lightly to them. I believe it is important to work on the psalms so as to make them prayable without unnecessary linguistic and imaginative hurdles. As an example of general form, it is easier to pray by addressing God rather than by reciting descriptions of God: the former is in the second person (you or thou) and so more involving, the latter in the third person and so more distancing.

In arguing in this way I am not wanting to say that all scripture needs to be paraphrased or re-written. I think we need to accept the various scandals of particularity and read and hear the bible in the most accurate translation. Certainly we need also to interpret by means of illumination, disagreement and affirmation, but it is only when we wish to address God in prayer that I think that the re-interpretation needs to be woven into the original. For example, in the *praying* I would wish to avoid all trace of sexism or racism or anti-Semitism, but in the *readings* I think it is salutary to be offended—and then to express by means of our own illuminations, disagreements, and affirmations—prayerfully, in the Spirit—how we think God is addressing us today. So, for example, many people find it helpful to use a reading plus comment (such as provided by the Bible Reading Fellowship) as part of a daily office. By discernment do we come to recognize and receive the Word of God. (So perish as soon as possible the literalism of the declaration at the end of scripture readings, ‘This is the word of the Lord’.)

Some may still find it possible to use with ease the metaphors of lordship, fatherhood and kingship, all of which have associations with masculine power. But is it coincidence that those three

metaphors account for between two-third and three-quarters of the descriptions of God in the official liturgies of all the Churches?<sup>3</sup> Who wrote the scriptures and the prayers and hymns? Men in positions of power and influence?

The fact of this imbalance is making it hard for many people to use those metaphors at all. We should be able to rescue fatherhood—in due proportion—since we do still experience fathering. But we no longer go in fear and trembling of our temporal lords and masters, no longer petition the king on bended knee. ‘Lord, graciously hear us’ is much used in intercession, but a versicle and response such as, ‘Dear God, your will be done: your love be shown’, is also scriptural, but not feudal.

If we are called to be co-creators with God, in our own small way being refined and chastened, but also accepted and encouraged so that we may flourish and enable others to flourish; if we are increasingly aware that we are as one species among others interdependent in one living organism; if we human beings are indeed being made in the image of God, then it is intolerable that the language of prayer should continue to be so dominantly masculine. This is so both in reference to ourselves (so that no one feels excluded from the prayers being prayed on their behalf), and to the God who cannot be exhaustively described in words, but who acts towards us in both fatherly and motherly ways, and who is revealed to us in and through a perfect human being in whom there is no ultimate significance in being male. Here is one attempt to draw out the meaning of John 1,14, casting it in the form of a prayer: ‘We saw your glory, divine glory shining through a human face, as a mother’s eyes live through her daughter’s, as a son reflects his father’s image, your glory in a human being fully alive’.

Take another example. While for the Jewish mind, as expressed in Psalm 119, the Torah is more akin to a way of life than to detailed rules and regulations, it is hard for Christians influenced by the juridical traditions of European history to use in prayer words that inevitably sound legalistic: precepts, ordinances, statutes etc. Some re-working is needed if that long psalm is to be accessible to most of us, using words like wisdom, way and truth, as in this version of the first eight verses:

Blessed are those who are honest in their ways,  
 who walk in the paths of God’s Law.  
 Blessed are those who treasure God’s Wisdom,

who seek God with all their heart.  
 Those who do no evil deeds  
 are those who tread the way of Justice.  
 Dear God, you have given command  
 that we diligently hold to your Word.  
 May my ways be kept steadfast  
 on the narrow road of your Love.  
 So I shall not be confounded  
 while I respect the whole of your Counsel.  
 I shall thank you with unfeigned heart  
 as I learn to be guided by your Spirit.  
 I shall hold fast to your Truths:  
 do not utterly abandon me.

Much more could be said about the psalms, with necessary re-workings of a theology of the enemy, with new expressions of our stewardship of the planet, with metaphors and pictures from our urban culture. Whether the whole psalter can be ploughed and re-sown, I am not sure, but the attempt is worth making. And where most readings from the scriptures are concerned, I think it important that we compile scene-setting introductions and reflective, interpretative meditations.

So Psalm 119 in *Prayer in the day* and the selection of psalms in *Prayer in the morning* have been adapted with these thoughts in mind. But what of the rest of the quarry, other than that which is accessible to us, or nearly so? Short offices can draw on the material at the heart of the tradition but, for example, there is no reason why those with more time to pray should not use psalms and scriptures more systematically (with the proviso of the interpretative work that needs doing on them).<sup>4</sup>

Then there is the store of canticles, hymns, other readings, poems, paintings, music. With all this available to us we should be able, in small or greater measure according to the nature of our households and the timetables of our lives, to draw on the inexhaustible *Prayer of the Church* without being exhausted by it. We would sense that other Christians were drawing that day from the same store, but that not all were obliged to use everything available. And we should no longer be inhibited from making amendments in the margins or composing new words and tunes for new occasions, most of which would be used awhile and forgotten, a few of which would eventually be taken into the common store.

Various outline sequences could be suggested by means of which, in our various ways, we might enter into the rhythms and continuities of prayer over thirty or more centuries. For example, the ministry of the word at the Eucharist might be regarded as equivalent to the main office of the day in some communities. It could include three biblical readings, like the present Sunday readings. The writer is working on one possibility that would avoid long indigestible extracts: an Old Testament cycle of four years, a New Testament cycle of two years, and, for the Gospels, John before and after Easter, and two of the other three in each year.

This article could easily be expanded into a book of introduction to daily prayer, its principles and practice. Not least among its suggestions would concern the kind of instructions that usually appear in books of prayers. Most assume clerical leadership. With short offices, in small groups, it is easy for each and all to make a contribution without fuss. Rubrics and references clutter the page and distract the one praying. Too few books allow the words enough room to breathe on the page, and in too many of them you have to turn a page in the middle of a prayer. Psalms could be set out in sections, without verse numbers, and still be chanted by choirs, but also spoken by individuals or small groups without their feeling that the book was really meant for someone else. Refrains that can be sung between sections, or said corporately while one person reads the sections, enable a variety of practical ways of praying. If the nuggets of short offices need to be bound in pocket books, the much larger store is probably better available in looseleaf format, with one item per page. Indeed, computer technology will enable us to hold the entire store in our hand, and enable it to be altered easily. Perhaps the office book of the future will be a leather-bound, slim-line, demi-octavo, hand-held computer!

Whatever the binding, we shall need to continue to work with our inheritance of prayer, no longer expecting it to enable us to pray without our making our creative contribution. The new technology will allow as many of us who feel called to do so to take part in that process. Indeed that will be the main way in which some people will actually pray: they will find themselves closest to God in the midst of creating new forms. And it will be their privilege to know that others are drawn closer to God through their work. We shall not only discover the prayer of the Church, not only uncover the riches of the past, we shall be taking part in

the creative activity of the Spirit in whom all our praying finds its source and goal.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Guiver, George: *Company of voices*, (SPCK, 1988), p 156.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p 182.

<sup>3</sup> See Wren, Brian: *What language shall I borrow?*, (SCM, 1989).

<sup>4</sup> Cotter, Jim: *Through desert places: a version of Psalms 1-50*, (Cairns Publications, 1989).

NB The short office books referred to in the text, *Prayer at night*, *Prayer in the day*, and *Prayer in the morning*, and *Through desert places: a version of Psalms 1-50*, can be obtained from Cairns Publications, 47 Firth Park Avenue, Sheffield, S5 6HF. A descriptive brochure with prices is available. The first and third of the books is being published in one volume in the United States and Canada early in 1990 by the Pilgrim Press, New York, with the title, *In the midst of life*.