

## ‘WITH LUTE AND HARP’

By CHRISTOPHER WILLCOCK

THE PSALMS ARE AT ONCE PRAYER AND SONG. The various attitudes of prayer: praise, petition, thanksgiving, have always been recognized in the psalms. That they are *lyrical* texts and enjoy only half-lives if they are merely recited has been generally less well understood. Stating this position so baldly is both a challenge and an invitation: a challenge to test whether or not this position is tenable, and an invitation to explore its consequences for worshippers using the psalms today.

There is no doubt that the Christian worshipping in the post-Vatican II Church is exposed to a richer fare of the Psalter than were churchgoers in the generations preceding the Council. Now in every liturgy, eucharistic and other, a psalm, or at least a fair portion of one, is an almost invariable element of the Liturgy of the Word. The transformation of the so-called ‘gradual psalm’ of the Tridentine missal into the ‘responsorial psalm’ of the liturgical books promulgated by Paul VI is one of the most significant reforms in the ritual structure of the post-conciliar liturgy. What was formerly a fragment consisting of one or two verses of a psalm is now a more substantial scriptural unit that follows a first reading and is linked to it in one or several ways. In the course, therefore, of the three-year cycle of Sunday readings offered by the Lectionary, a wide choice of psalms is proposed for the assembly to use as its way of receiving the Word of God proclaimed in its midst, precisely by singing texts drawn from another of the books of God’s Word, the Psalter.

That this kind of use of the psalms – responding to the proclamation and fulfilment of God’s saving actions – is only one of the many ways in which the psalms might be used liturgically is clear. Psalms, of course, form a substantial part of the Liturgy of the Hours in which they have a quite different function, namely, the singing of God’s praises. We will return to this point later. But the most common acquaintance that the worshipping Christian has with the psalms comes through their presence in the eucharistic liturgy. Just how strong an acquaintance this same Christian would have of the psalms in their *sung* form is a moot point.

It would be reasonable to assert, I believe, that every assembly sings the responsorial psalm at least occasionally, whilst some communities

would sing it frequently or always. With small variations, the performance pattern of the sung responsorial psalm is fairly uniform: the melody of the antiphon (or refrain) may first be announced on the accompanying instrument or instruments, using it as an introduction; the cantor (or soloist) then sings the antiphon and invites the assembly to repeat it; then the cantor sings a sequence of psalm verses divided into strophes; at the end of each strophe the assembly returns with the antiphon. What the assembly gets to sing, therefore, is just the antiphon, which is usually a refrain drawn from the psalm, or perhaps the word 'Alleluia'. It is the task of the cantor to sing the verses of the psalm in such a way that the whole assembly may appropriate the biblical text so that it resonates with the various experiences of God and of God's activity that the members of the community have had.

And this is where the crunch comes. A wide gap may yawn between the ideals as expressed in the liturgical documents that accompany the revised ritual books and the practice as it is found in different parishes and communities. The 'General instruction on the Roman Missal' has the following short expression of these ideals: 'Through the chants [the responsorial psalm and the gospel acclamation] the people make God's word their own' (GIRM 33). The responsorial psalm, then, is regarded normatively as a 'chant', and it is to be the means by which the assembly takes God's Word to itself. What are some of the problems here? Firstly, if the psalm, or at least the antiphon, is not sung, various practical difficulties arise. In such a case, the cantor will read the text of the antiphon and the assembly is expected to repeat the spoken text immediately afterwards. It then depends on the assembly to keep this text in its memory and to return with it after each of the strophes of the psalm.

The alternative for antiphons that are unfamiliar or lengthy is for the assembly to rely on a printed aid (missal, missalette, or service sheet). A sung antiphon, on the other hand, has a built-in aid for the memory: the text is married to a melody which can give it rhythm, shape and cadence. These additional ingredients transform the words of an antiphon into a unit that not only aids the memory, but also transforms the members of the assembly from being a collection of individual voices speaking a text at perhaps conflicting speeds and expressions into a body joined in concord. Secondly, the problem with realizing the ideal in the latter half of the sentence from the 'General instruction' quoted above is one that has been with the Church from its earliest days, namely, the use of sung prayer as a medium for entering into God's presence, alive and responsive to God's Word.

Here the Fathers of the Church have much to say that is helpful.<sup>1</sup> Whilst it was never a question for the early Christian communities whether or not the psalm was sung, it was a matter of concern *how* it was sung. A striking passage occurs in Athanasius' *Letter to Marcellinus*:

Those who do not recite the sacred songs in this manner, do not sing with understanding, but rather gratify themselves and incur blame, because 'Praise is not seemly in the mouth of a sinner' (Sir 15:9). But those who sing in the manner described above – that is, with the melody of the words proceeding from the rhythm of the soul and its harmony with the spirit – such as they sing with the tongue and sing also with the mind, not only for themselves, but also to benefit greatly those who would hear them.<sup>2</sup>

In his famous treatise *On the usefulness of sacred songs*, Niceta, the late fourth-century bishop of Remesiana, blends practical with spiritual wisdom in his advice to the reader:

Let us sing with alert senses and a wakeful mind, as the psalmist exhorts: 'Because God is king of all the earth,' he says, 'sing ye wisely' (Ps 46:8), so that a psalm is sung not only with the spirit, that is the sound of the voice, but with the mind also (1 Cor 14:15), and so that we think of what we sing rather than allow our mind, seized by extraneous thoughts as is often the case, to lose the fruit of our labour . . . Further, our voice ought not to be dissonant but consonant. One person ought not to drag out the singing while another cuts it short, and one ought not to sing too low while another raises his voice. Rather each should strive to integrate his voice within the sound of the harmonious chorus and not project it outwardly in the manner of a cithara as if to make an immodest display . . . And for the one who is not able to blend and fit in with the others, it is better to sing in a subdued voice than to make a great noise, for thus he performs both his liturgical function and avoids disturbing the singing brotherhood.<sup>3</sup>

The overriding concern of most of the Church Fathers who spoke on psalmody was to exhort cantors and congregation to 'sing with understanding'. It will not be surprising, then, to find this theme hammered home in Augustine who elsewhere constantly urges his reader to look beyond the appearance of things, to hear beyond the sound of things, so as to recognize the handiwork of the creator. 'When you pray to God in psalms and hymns, let what is pronounced by the voice be meditated upon in the heart.'<sup>4</sup> This advice would appear to be particularly

relevant for the cantor whose job is, as we have seen, to give vocal expression to the verses of the psalm in a way that allows the assembly to 'digest' the words and to receive God's Word proclaimed in its hearing. But the assembly, for its part, also receives encouragement to value the refrain that it sings as the antiphon. In his eloquent commentary on Psalm 42, John Chrysostom directs these words to the congregation:

Do not think that you have come here solely to pour out words, but rather, when you respond to the psalm, understand that you bind yourself by this refrain. When you say, 'As the deer craves running water, I thirst for you, my God,' you make a pact with God. You have signed a receipt, but without paper or ink. You have confessed with your voice that you love God more than any other, that you prefer nothing else to God, and that you burn with love for God . . . Do not, therefore, come in here carelessly and respond with the refrains as though settling a bill. Use them as staves when you leave the church. Each verse contains much that can train us in wisdom . . . If you are too poor to buy books, or if you don't have the time to read the ones you have, carefully remember the refrain of the psalm that you have sung here, repeating it afterwards not just once, or twice, or three times, but often.<sup>5</sup>

So far our discussion has been limited to the singing of the responsorial psalm in the Liturgy of the Word. Given the importance and the frequency of this mode of psalm-singing, it provided a useful entry point for our enquiry. But it is clear that psalms are sung at other points in the liturgy, and in other ways. Psalms might be used in processions, either the entrance procession or the one at communion; they are an important feature of vigils, particularly the Easter Vigil; and of course they figure prominently in the various offices of the Liturgy of the Hours.

They may also be sung in different ways. Before the translation and adaptation for English-speaking use of a selection of the so-called Gelineau psalms in the early 1960s, the only practice that Roman Catholics knew of singing psalms in the vernacular would have been restricted to a few metrical psalms originating from the churches of the Reform. 'The Lord's my shepherd' (Ps 23) sung to the tune *Crimond*, and 'All creatures that on earth do dwell' (Ps 100) sung to the *Old hundreth* would probably have exhausted the repertoire for most Catholics. This method of singing sees the psalm divided into stanzas of equal length and cast in more or less regular meter. The same melody is used for each stanza and the psalm is normally sung in its

entirety by the assembly. More significant than metrical psalmody in the musical diet of Roman Catholic worship has been the influence exerted by the psalmody of Joseph Gelineau. This psalmody, chiefly responsorial in structure and developed out of an ancient practice of the Church, is sung in the vernacular to melodies and harmonies in the modal manner. The congregation was given back its antiphon and the cantor was charged with singing the verses of the psalm to patterns called psalm-tones. Less frequently encountered is the practice of antiphonal singing where the community is divided into two groups. The text is shared between the two groups alternately, with the same melodic configuration normally used by both groups. The practice of cantillation, another ancient way of singing the psalms, has the cantor improvising a vocal line for the text of the psalm, using a number of melodic cells developed after training and with experience. This method clearly demands that the cantor has first to 'digest' the words of the psalm and to 'sing with understanding'. All these methods of singing, and others that could be added, simply address the formal question of the psalm's performance. They leave untouched the question of the psalm's spiritual significance. This is embraced more directly when the content of a psalm and its various ritual functions are explored.

To the degree that a psalm, or even just its antiphon, is well known by an assembly, to that degree is its power to be a vehicle of prayer enhanced. There are strong arguments, then, for considering afresh the virtues of developing a corpus of so-called 'cathedral' psalms. The word 'cathedral' in this context goes back to the writings of the German liturgist Anton Baumstark who, in the first half of this century founded the school of comparative liturgy. As a consequence of his researches into the Divine Office, Baumstark describes a pattern he called 'cathedral' contrasted with one labelled 'monastic'. By 'cathedral' he meant what was popularly encountered in the bishop's church, the centre of the local church's liturgical life. I would wish to extend the meaning of this term to cover what today would be meant by 'parochial'. In this understanding, a corpus of 'cathedral' psalms would be limited, and not aim at popular use of the quasi-totality of the Psalter.

In practical terms, this means that a restricted number of psalms would be used in those liturgies designed, say, for parish celebrations of the Liturgy of the Hours. There is strong evidence, dating from the time of the church historian Eusebius (c. 263–339), that Psalm 63 was *the* psalm used for 'cathedral' morning prayer, and Psalm 141 for its

evening prayer. Equally, for the responsorial psalm in the Liturgy of the Word, the use of restricted number of antiphons should be encouraged for parochial eucharists. The current Lectionary, in fact, does provide such a selection of antiphons, gathered under the title 'Common Responses'. These are ten antiphons, distributed as follows: one antiphon for each of the seasons of Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter, followed by a choice of three antiphons to accompany psalms of praise, and three antiphons to accompany psalms of petition. The assembly, therefore, once it has gained familiarity with these ten antiphons, has a response that can be matched with any psalm that occurs in the Lectionary throughout the liturgical year. The Lectionary also provides a group of what it calls 'Common Responsorial Psalms'. This collection of twenty-two psalms is similar to the collection of 'Common Responses'. Psalms for the various liturgical seasons and for Ordinary Time have been chosen and may be used 'whenever the psalm is sung, in place of the text corresponding to the reading' (GIRM 36).

Just as Psalm 63 and Psalm 141 have long been associated with the offices of morning prayer and evening prayer respectively, so other psalms have been associated with other ritual units. Psalm 42 ('As a deer craves running water') has ancient links with the celebration of baptism,<sup>6</sup> and Psalm 34 ('Drink in the richness of God') with the rite of communion.<sup>7</sup> The wedding of a particular psalm to a particular liturgy or rite, such as those we have just mentioned, and the close association of a psalm to a particular season (for example, Psalm 51 with Lent, and Psalm 118 with Easter) contributes to the enrichment of the spiritual 'freight' we have been exploring. These psalms in song, through their association with the liturgical building blocks of sacrament, season and time, can contribute to the understanding of these liturgical elements and provide a means for the assembly gathered in prayer to give voice to the various attitudes of prayer embodied in the psalms, be it praise, thanksgiving or petition.

Where and how does the composer of liturgical music today enter this long history of Christians singing the psalms, so evidently restored to life in the years of the post-conciliar liturgy? The 'General instruction on the Liturgy of the Hours' offers this remark on the psalms:

The psalms are not readings or prose prayers, but poems of praise. They can on occasion be recited as readings, but from their literary genre they are properly called *Tehillim* ('songs of praise') in Hebrew and *psalmoi* ('songs to be sung to the lyre') in Greek. In fact, all the psalms have a musical quality that determines their correct style of delivery. (GILH 103)

To be faithful to the essence of the psalms, then, a composer has to be faithful to their nature as poems of praise. Not just the words of the psalms are important, but the images, the verbal rhythms, and the literary structure are also important. These were some of the questions that exercised the team engaged in the translation of the Psalter for liturgical use, published under the auspices of the International Commission on English in the Liturgy (ICEL) in 1995.<sup>8</sup> This translation seeks to offer composers a translation in which the 'sounds of words, their sequence and rhythm, as well as their sense . . . might be attractive to composers and musicians'.<sup>9</sup> It will be the words of the psalm, and their function within a psalm, that will help a composer bring a psalm text to musical realization. As we have already seen, the history of composing musical settings of the psalms shows that there is no single correct way in which this is done.

To return for the last time to the model of the responsorial psalm, what is written for the assembly to sing – the antiphon – needs to combine the twin attributes of singability and durability. If the mind and the heart of the members of the assembly are to find an appropriate 'voice' in the music offered in the antiphon, this music will need to match the ability and the singing habits of the assembly. It is the kind of music that Bernard Huijbers in his writings calls 'elementary music', defined as music in which 'the musical elements in themselves are sufficient, used in their simplest form and simplest combinations, and not multiplied, varied, or played off against each other'.<sup>10</sup> But an antiphon must also be durable. If, as I believe, the appropriation of a psalm, by means of its antiphon, is going to be achieved, it will only do so through repetition. It will not, however, bear repetition if it wears thin. A poorly constructed melody or unreflective programming will militate against a psalm setting or an antiphon being recognized as a conduit for a community's prayer. Rather, it will be in the use and experience of a psalm setting in a variety of liturgical contexts that the assembly may find the psalm acquiring spiritual and theological resonances that will give it a life beyond the occasion of its first use. To fashion such an antiphon, then, that both sits well on the voice and has the capacity for multiple usage is not an easy task, but is one that the composer needs to embrace if the singing of psalms is going to succeed in our liturgies.

And lastly what kind of music is it that the cantor sings? We have already mentioned the improvised style of singing called 'cantillation' which is the product of the cantor's skill in appropriating the text of the psalm joined to the gift of melodic invention. In this style there is

strictly no composer; the words of the psalm pass directly through the medium of the cantor's, usually unaccompanied, voice. What is more likely, however, is the situation where the cantor invests the vocal line provided by the composer with the fruits of the cantor's meditation on the text and the transparency of vocal declamation. Here what is communicated is the burden of the psalm, intelligently and prayerfully embodied in the cantor's voice.

A psalm can be a threshold across which we bring our human experience into God's presence. To what extent this will happen depends on what underpins the singing of a psalm in its liturgical setting: how far the skills and habits of the various ministries within the assembly (cantor, accompanists and congregation) are married with the literary and liturgical genres of the biblical texts of the psalms. For a psalm can be many things to many people. This, too, the Fathers of the Church understood well. In a passage that has a number of echoes of the great lyrical proclamation of the Easter mystery, the *Exultet*, Ambrose develops this catalogue of the properties of the Psalter:

What is more pleasing than a psalm? David himself puts it nicely: 'Praise the Lord,' he says, 'for a psalm is good' (Ps 146:1). And indeed! A psalm is the blessing of the people, the praise of God, the commendation of the multitude, the applause of all, the speech of every human being, the voice of the Church, the sonorous profession of faith, devotion full of authority, the joy of liberty, the noise of good cheer, and the echo of gladness. It softens anger, it gives release from anxiety, it alleviates sorrow; it is protection at night, instruction by day, a shield in time of fear, a feast of holiness, the image of tranquillity, a pledge of peace and harmony, which produces one song from various and sundry voices in the manner of a cithara. The day's dawning resounds with a psalm, with a psalm its passing echoes.<sup>11</sup>

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> A very useful collection of passages on music from writers and councils of the early Church is edited by James McKinnon, *Music in early Christian literature* (Cambridge: CUP, 1987). Most of the translations from the Church Fathers that follow are drawn from this collection.

<sup>2</sup> *Epist. ad Marc.* 29 (McKinnon, no 100).

<sup>3</sup> *De util. hymn.* 13 (McKinnon, no 311).

<sup>4</sup> *Epist.* 211 (McKinnon, no 379).

<sup>5</sup> *Hom. in Ps. 41*, PG 55, 156–166.

<sup>6</sup> Used during the procession to the baptismal font in the liturgy of the Easter Vigil.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted, for example, by Cyril of Jerusalem in his *Mystagogical catechesis* 5, 20, PG 33, 1124 (McKinnon, no 157) and in the *Apostolic constitutions* 8, 13, 16 (McKinnon no 235).



<sup>8</sup> *The Psalter: a faithful and inclusive rendering from the Hebrew into contemporary English poetry, intended primarily for communal song and recitation* (Chicago: LTP Publications, 1995).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p xxvii.

<sup>10</sup> Bernard Huijbers, *The performing audience: six and a half essays on music and song in liturgy* (Phoenix: North American Liturgy Resources, 1980), pp 19–25.

<sup>11</sup> *Explanatio psalmi 1*, 9 (McKinnon, no 276).