

The Book of Psalms⁽¹⁾

THIS Scotland of ours has a reputation, largely, it is to be feared, self-bestowed, of being a "psalm-singing nation." It is true that in the days gone by mere human hymns were frowned upon, and nothing was admitted to the congregational praise except the Psalms of David. Our covenanting ancestors may have dipped more freely into the Pierian springs of the metrical psalms than we do to-day and may, therefore, have really been able to claim the title with some show of justification, but *tempora mutantur* and the position to-day is very different. The great Scottish psalters of 1615 to 1635, largely inspired as they were by Genevan influences, presented to the Scottish nation a large number of glorious tunes which could almost make any queer sort of doggerel verse acceptable. Dr. Millar Patrick has preserved for us some of the precentor's rhymes which were used by choirs in practising for the church services, as it was thought that the words of the metrical psalms were too sacred to be uttered in the process of rehearsal. The choirs no doubt sang these with great conviction ! The tunes would carry them on, and the Sunday performance would probably not suffer very much in spite of the fact that different words had to be grafted on to the tunes.

From the point of view of interpretation, however, this procedure was all wrong. I remember some time ago, my dear friend, Harry Plunket Greene, meeting me during a tour of Festival adjudication, saying, "How are things going ? Are you still preaching the gospel of words-words-words ?" By this, of course, he meant that no singing is worth anything at all unless it is built on words, their proper accentuation, and above all, their significance. The old precentors' method if the words are to mean anything at all, simply does not apply. Any rehearsal must be devoted to words even more than to tunes, however fine these may be.

Having therefore granted the assumption that Scotland has, from native or from foreign sources, gathered a fine corpus of great tunes, we may now proceed to an examination of how these have been used. It will only be necessary for an impartial enquirer to open his metrical psalter and to read carefully through the psalms (I wonder if anyone has ever

(1) Reprint from *The Annual*, 1941-1942.

tried this, and, if he be at all sensitive to poetry, has persevered in his efforts) to find that there are whole tracts of unexplored country, not only for him but for every congregation in the land. We Scots have carefully selected certain passages from the Psalms, and though we sing these very often, we separate them from their context. Our knowledge of the great "Book of Psalms" is consequently comparatively limited. One need only cite Psalm 36, where the metrical version has four fine stanzas, from verses 5 to 9, beginning "Thy mercy, Lord, is in the heavens." These are worthy to be sung in any Christian congregation, but they lose tremendously in effect when they are not contrasted, as they are in the poetic thought of the Psalmist, with the "transgression of the wicked" and all the things which follow therefrom.

When one considers the whole case, it must be admitted that we are not "Psalm-singers," but only singers of snippets from the Psalms. Even the most recent publication of the Psalms—*The Scottish Psalter of 1929*—tacitly admits this by printing as an appendix a "Selection of Psalms and Paraphrases most suitable for use in Public Worship with suggested tunes." An examination of that list will convince even the most sceptical of the truth of the statement anent "snippets."

Now, it is admitted even by lovers of "The Book of Psalms" that a certain number of the "blood-thirsty" type should be eliminated from Christian worship; but there can be no question that in this book we have the greatest heritage of church-song that has been bequeathed to us from bygone ages. How can we use it to the full?

The answer is easy—by reverting to the custom of our ancestors (skipping a few generations) and singing or saying the Psalms in the prose version. A wholly admirable innovation, or perhaps one should say, revival, has been made in certain Sunday Schools of having the Psalms read, verse about, or, to use an old church word, antiphonally, by the minister and the children. Could this be tried as an experiment in our churches? It would, at any rate, ensure that the whole Psalm was read by everybody, and, by the natural evolution of repetition, become known to everybody—a consummation devoutly to be desired.

If this were tried and found to stimulate interest, as I am sure it would, the next stage would surely be that the congregation would like to tackle the whole Psalm themselves. Choral speaking has now become a regular feature in Musical Festivals and some very beautiful results have been ob-

tained, but only after a due amount of rehearsal. Nothing has moved me more than to hear passages of Scripture recited, with careful attention to verbal accent and significance, by a group of people inspired by the beauty of the words and their spiritual message. The same effect could be achieved by an average congregation, if it was prepared to take some pains and to put even one-tenth of the time which these verse-speaking choirs spend in rehearsal. Is this asking something which is impossible ?

The next stage would certainly appear to be to fit this speech-recitation to some form of a tune, and the simplest form of tune is undoubtedly to be found in the Gregorian tones. As the name implies, these date from the time when St. Gregory “ edited ”, as we should say nowadays, a whole corpus of music which had been handed down from earlier ages, some of the tones being traditionally derived from Hebrew rites, and one at least being associated with Our Lord and His Disciples at the Last Supper.

“ Tone ” means merely “ tune,” and if we use these tunes we can with justification feel that we are associating ourselves with the very early Christians and even with the apostles themselves. This is not the place to give an exposition of these historical tunes from the point of view of a musician. It is enough to say that they are the simplest form of melody which is known, and can be reproduced by anyone without much trouble. Indeed, one of the most moving experiences of my life was to hear a class of infants, *aetat* about 6, in an ordinary elementary school in Edinburgh, singing the 23rd Psalm to the First Tone. The teacher had attended some of my talks on church music and had, fortunately, been inspired to try it on the children. It was a good idea and the result was unforgettable.

How can we establish this link between our Scottish Presbyterianism and the Early Church ? The first thing is to find an enthusiast—either a minister or an organist—who will study the words of the Psalms carefully enough to be able to offer to his choir or congregation a pattern of correct verbal accentuation (to put it no higher). If he does so, the rest is easy. The congregation, assuming that the members are willing to assemble themselves together, or even to wait for a few minutes after a morning or evening service, will soon pick up from him the rhythm of the verses and will, very easily, adopt the “ sing-song ” flexibility of the tone. The main thing, to revert to Harry Plunket Greene, is “ Words, Words, Words.”

The best adaptation of the Gregorian tones to the words of the Bible translation of the Psalms which I know is in *The Book of Psalms, pointed in accordance with the Twelve Ancient Tones*—published by George J. W. Pitman, 140 Gower Street, London. The system of pointing is easy to follow by anyone who has “Words” in his heart. The notation of the plain-song is simple to any good solfa-ist. The harmonisation, if an organ accompaniment should be desired, can be founded on a rudimentary knowledge of a few simple chords which, later, can be eked out by the study of some of the numerous works on the harmonisation of plain-song.

Then comes the crux of the problem—Is it congregational? I can only say that I have heard the Psalms sung in this way in many congregations in Scotland and in England with an effect which is staggering even to one who is accustomed to hear the finest efforts of Festival Choirs; but to revert once again to a previous statement, the congregation must be prepared to take some trouble in the initial stages. Thereafter, it is easy. The first pioneers pass on the idiom and a habit is established.

A beginning might be made with the canticles, but there I feel I am treading on dangerous ground, as the settings in the Revised Church Hymnary are so badly presented that they must inevitably choke off those who feel an urge towards experiment. A succession of dreary looking minims would damp the soul of the most ardent plain-songist. The only one of the ancient hymns of the church which has been decently presented is the version of the Eighth Tone, arranged by C. Hylton Stewart, and adapted to the “Te Deum.” There the quavers do, at least, suggest something of the movement which we should associate with speech rhythm.

The question now arises as to the adaptation of the so-called “Anglican Chant” to the speech rhythms of the Psalms. The Anglican Chant arose through an adaptation by Thomas Tallis of one of the Gregorian Tones. Now Thomas Tallis, living as he did at the beginning of the great period of English Church Music in the 16th century, was one of the really great composers of all time, but, if he had foreseen the outcome of his justifiable adaptation and harmonisation of a simple Gregorian tone, he might have hesitated long before he gave rein to his inspiration. He could not have imagined how tyrannous the bar-lines, added later, would become, nor the way in which Cathedrals and Parish Churches would twist the natural rhythm of the words to make them fit the wholly artificial rhythm of what became

known as a chant. The "Anglican" form of chanting which ensued was one of the most stilted and artificial of all art forms. The Church of Scotland has adopted many customs, both good and bad, from her great sister Church on the other side of the border. Heaven forbid that the old so-called "Cathedral" method of chanting the Psalms should be one of them !

Robert Bridges was one of the first to point out the absurdity of it all, and his protest was so vigorously effective that the Church of England roused itself. Several new psalters have appeared in recent years under distinguished aegis, and a new attention has been paid to "words." These have been adopted in ever so many places which have responded magnificently to the lead of the late Poet Laureate.

How beautiful and significant good chanting can be, can be judged by all who take the trouble to listen carefully and, if possible, with a Prayer Book in hand, to the broadcasts of the B. B. C. singers. They spare no pains or thought at rehearsal to make their singing as devotional and as perfect as they can. There can be no finer model for our choirs and congregations. They use, it is true, the Prayer Book version of the Psalms, but their methods can be applied by any reasonably sensitive person to the Bible versions.

The high-minded ideals which inspired the work of the English Editors were reflected in the preparation of the *Scottish Psalter* (1929). A courageous, and, for the most part, effective attempt was made to suggest the correct verbal accentuation of the Psalms and to show how it could be sung to the Anglican Chants. There are places where the thoughtful minister or organist will disagree with the suggestions, but the remedy is easy. Perhaps, in this connection, a start might be made with the Canticles in the Hymnary. The previous remarks refer only to the notation of the plain-song, and do not apply to the other chants. Once again, the approach should be made through reading the words until the natural speech rhythm has been attained. Then monotone them, and finally fit the tune to them. The tune must be fitted to the words, and not the words to the tune.

Difficulties there may be, but they exist to be overcome and any trouble is worth taking which will result in the *complete* Book of Psalms becoming a part of our ordinary life.

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