

O Lord, open my lips ...

This verse from Ps 51 is used in both east and west to begin the prayer of the day first thing in the morning. Some commentators see it as a foretaste of the resurrection.

From very early times, the whole of psalm 51 has also been used daily to begin the morning office, in all the ancient traditions.

O God, make speed to save us ...

This belongs to the Roman tradition as a versicle to open all the other offices of the day. Those who are familiar with praying the daily office will know how difficult it can sometimes be, and this cry for help can speak eloquently to our condition.

Venite

The use of this at the beginning of the first office of the day seems to belong to the monastic tradition. Ps 95 naturally offers itself as a call to prayer. It gets darker as it goes along. In the ASB the final warning was replaced by a verse from Ps 96. The warning, however, is about the simple truth that as we will sail forth into the day we fall many times as we go along, just like the children of Israel in the wilderness.

Hymn

Modern Roman reforms have put the office hymn at this point. However, until Vatican II it came immediately before the gospel canticle, and the evidence suggests that the hymn was the original climax at that point, rather than the Benedictus or Magnificat.

Psalmody

The psalms were the hymn-book of Israel. We do not know how far they were in common usage at the time of Jesus, but the many psalm-quotations in the gospels and other NT books show that at least a part of the psalter was very familiar.

Pss 148-150 are sung in the morning office in all ancient rites, including the Byzantine and Roman, and are also found in the synagogue sabbath morning service. It is likely that Jesus would have been familiar with this usage.

Pss 51 (see above), 63 and others are standard fixed psalms for the morning office.

Ps 141 seems to have been used in the Jerusalem Temple for the evening sacrifice of incense, and this was taken up again by the Church in the 4th century in the evening office. In the Roman office its opening verses survive as a versicle before the Magnificat.

USE OF THE PSALMS

In the public offices of the 4th century onwards only a few select psalms were used, and they changed little from day to day.

In monasticism the practice soon grew up of reciting the whole psalter in numerical order (*in course*). This came into the public offices in the form of psalmody added on the front of the office. We find it as early as c.384 in Egeria's Jerusalem.

In the medieval west the whole psalter was used, but not in numerical order at every office. Cranmer simplified it all for the CofE by directing that the whole psalter was to be read in a month.

PRAYING THE PSALMS

'Original intention'

Most modern devotional commentaries on the psalms content themselves with explaining their origin in Jewish worship, the motive for their original composition, and the ways they would have been used. This assumes that God's intention for them remains that of the 'original writers'. While this biblical background is helpful, it is not enough on its own.

All of life is there

It is often said of the psalms that they reflect the whole gamut of human experience, desolation, joy, hatred, violence, desire, nostalgia, hope, yearning, and so on. This argument is used to support inclusion of the cursing passages of the psalms (e.g. 'dash their little ones against the stones') on the grounds that the psalms show us the unadorned truth about ourselves and hold it before God.

Very often when we are praying the psalms we pray them personally, as an individual: Ps 23 for instance.

Steeping in the narrative

Ever and again the saving deeds of God are told and re-told. Cycles of redemption, falling-away, chastisement and repentance crop up everywhere, and especially in psalms like 106. Elsewhere the desire to 'tell God's deeds' runs through these texts like a refrain (e.g. Ps 71.16). It is in being steeped in the narrative that we understand who Israel is, what the Church is, who God is, and who we are. On meeting someone, we ask, 'Who are you', and they respond with details of their life. This is the only way to say who we are - our narrative. Narrative is a basic key to the understanding of life. These narratives about Israel are just as applicable to the Church and its life, and to ourselves and our personal life. There is little new in Ps 106.

Christian interpretation

In the New Testament a new slant is put on the psalms, so that they are made to refer to Christ. It is clear that the early Church made great use of the psalms in its preaching. Ever since then, the Tradition has approached the psalms as having been re-interpreted in Christ. Before his coming, their true meaning was veiled, but now it is made manifest.

Referring to Christ

Many psalms can be prayed as referring the Christ, eg Pss 45 or 93.

The voice of Christ

Some psalms, such as 22 or 118 can be seen as Christ himself speaking. In the daily office, it is Christ speaking in us. This is one of the great themes of patristic commentaries on the psalms, of which those by St Augustine are perhaps the greatest. Time and again he says that we, as one body, are the body of Christ, speaking Christ's voice.

...in the psalms we should not see the isolated voice of an individual in prayer, but the voice of all those who make up the Body of Christ. It is as if, because we are all gathered in one body, it is one person speaking ... This one Body is also the Temple of God, according to the words of the Apostle, 'the Temple of God is holy, which you are' (1 Cor 3.17) ... to pray in the Temple of God means to pray in the communion of the Church ... [on Ps 130.1]

It is Christ who speaks, because Christ is in the members of Christ. [on Ps 30.4]

Speaking to Christ

The Church's prayer of the psalms is 'the voice of the bride addressing the bridegroom' (St Ambrose).

The same person, the one saviour of the body, prays for us, prays in us, and is prayed to by us [Augustine, on Ps 85.1]

This is becoming language about participating in the life of the Trinity.

I = we

It obviously follows from this that the 'I' of the psalms is not only me but us, and it is also Christ.

Christ = the Church

It follows again that 'I' is the Church.

Giving voice to the world

The prayer of the psalms is often described as a priestly act of the Church, and the daily office as the priestly service of the people of God. This is obvious in the intercessions. But in the psalms it is especially profound. For instance, in the psalms of lament, and in those passages which verge on despair, we are giving voice to the hidden sufferings of countless people the world over who are trapped in oppression, exploitation and powerlessness. The daily offering of the psalms gives voice to the whole of creation. In us human beings the universe, which has no voice, finds its voice.

With some psalms, a particular approach seems obvious, such as the crucifixion of Christ in Ps 22. Other psalms can be interpreted in a number of ways.

It can be useful to pencil in the margin the different ways of praying a psalm. For instance, psalm 23 can be prayed as our **individual** prayer to Christ, or as the prayer of the **Church** as a body, or as giving voice to the yearning of all **humanity**, or it can be prayed as a psalm of **Christ's** passion. You might decide on each occasion which interpretation you want to use this time.

More subtly, there are different traditions of praying particular psalms, which you can read about in the patristic and medieval commentaries (see for example the commentary by J.M. Neale). Psalm 24 is usually associated with the ascension, but there is also a tradition of associating it with the descent into hell, whose gates give way at the coming of Christ.

Gloria Patri

'Glory to the Father ...' seals the Christian prayer of the psalms in a Trinitarian doxology. It has been used since very early times. In the western tradition we bow for the first part. In the Byzantine tradition the people stand and make the sign of the cross.

Benedictus and Magnificat

These were both originally a supplement to the psalmody of the morning office. In the 5th or 6th century in the city of Rome the Magnificat found itself moved to vespers, and this seems to be reflected in St Benedict's Rule, written about 540.

The evening incense originally accompanied the singing of Ps 141, which in the Roman tradition shrank to just one verse. Then the censuring of the altar came to be associated with the Magnificat.

This use of the gospel canticles is a happy accident. They are both in the *berakah* tradition, and therefore eucharistic, rehearsing the events of salvation like a eucharistic prayer.

The content of both texts is very rich, and routine rattling-off needs to be resisted, as concentration will always be repaid. Both of them are prime examples of doxological telling of the *narrative* of God's saving deeds.

The first 6 verses of the **Benedictus** look forward to the birth of Christ, and the final 4 are addressed to John the baptist, to be born to prepare the way. Key words are *promise* and *free*.

The **Magnificat** directs our attention to the incarnation, to Mary, to the saving deeds of God.

Intercessions

Originally the offices consisted of psalmody followed by intercessions. The 6 versicles of the BCP and ASB can be traced back to the Rule of Columbanus (6th cent.), and in the Roman tradition there were more of them. They were a bit of imaginative liturgy evolved by the Celts, who may have found the repeated refrains of litanies a bit tedious day in and day out. The original form which their versicles replaced is a number of petitions with repeated refrain, such as is commonly used in the eucharist.

Lord's Prayer

This was not always used in the office, probably because anyone could attend, and the Lord's Prayer was treated as a quasi-secret text at one period in the early centuries.

Collects

Some forms of office are sprinkled with collects, especially after the psalms. One practice in the Roman tradition was to have the collect of the day at the end. In the Sarum Use there were morning and evening collects, including 'Lighten our darkness ..'. Stringing of sermon and prayers on to the end of the office is a purely Anglican practice.

THIS IS NOT THE DAILY OFFICE

This handout only looks at some principal texts. It is not looking at the office as such. For that, other elements would need to be included, especially its liturgical performance, music (these texts were never intended merely to be said), the setting, and the wider context of the liturgy and of Christian prayer. The daily prayer of the Church is made up of all of those.