

FROM THE ANGLICAN PATRIMONY

Importance of the Psalter in Worship

You will not have failed to note that the orderly singing of the whole Psalter is historically the very center of the music of the Office. Every fortnight in the Ambrosian rite, every week in other ancient rites, every month in the Anglican rite, this continuous act of praise to God has gone on. We should have great searchings of heart that it has so nearly disappeared in America. Few Churches sing the Psalms at all. Fewer follow any order which insures the regular use of the entire Psalter. The last revision of the American Prayer Book, far from abandoning such a use, directs it, imperatively, in certain places. "In places where it is convenient, the Psalter *shall* be read through once every month." I do not believe that this refers *only* to Cathedrals. I know of at least one small country church where for years the daily Evensong Psalter has been *sung* through every month, and the Matins Psalter read. A certain degree of adaptability to conditions, of reasonable flexibility, is good: but the permissions grated in the rubric have often worked out disastrously in our Offices. Not only our people, but some of our clergy, are slowly losing any spiritual knowledge of the Psalter as a whole. That spiritual knowledge has therefore, in every age, been the main sustainer of the soul of man apart from the Sacraments and Prayer; and the main vehicle of the praise of God, even in the Sacraments. The Christian Psalter is not identical with the ancient historical Psalms in their literal original meanings. It brings the worshipper's heart and lips the perfect devotionally life of Jesus, who lived and died by it. Furthermore, it joins him to the vast company in heaven and in purgatory and on earth who day by day, week by week, month by month, year by year, have striven to form their lives on Jesus' life, and to praise the Father as he did in his holy Manhood on earth.* Do we clergy choose a

*On the devotional and practical value of the Psalter, note the following passage from John Donne, Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral, London, 1621–1631 a.d.

"The Psalmes are the Manna of the Church. As Manna tasted to every man like that that he liked best, so doe the Psalmes miinister instruction and satisfaction, to every man, in every emergency and occasion. David was not onely a cleare Prophet of Christ himself, but a Prophet of every particular Christian; He foretells what I, what any, shall doe and suffer and say."

single Psalm, almost invariably the shortest available, for each of our public Offices? Do we permit it to be carelessly and hastily read, instead of reverently sung, where that is feasible? Do we thus suggest that the Psalter is an outmoded encumbrance, to be perfunctorily dealt with, until we gain sufficient iconoclastic courage to abandon it, and substitute a Gospel hymn? If so, we strike at the very life of all sound Church music, because we cut off the main stream of Christian praise. St. Benedict called the singing of the Divine Office *Opus Dei*, the Work of God, the primary spiritual labour “to which nothing is to be preferred.” Was he right? Is the Praise of God elementary, or merely accessory, in the services of the Church? Is their object primarily didactic, and, to use a horrible word, ‘inspirational’? Or is it primarily to render our due service of joyous adoration to the God who created us with our miraculous faculties for aspiring to him; to the God who redeemed us by ‘taking upon him Manhood for our deliverance,’ and as Man passing through death of the Cross for love of us; to the God who descended upon his Church to breathe into it the very Breath of the divine, that the eternal worship of heaven might at least be attempted by our mortal tongues, whose present stammering imperfections must prepare one day to join in the praises of Angels and Archangels and of all the Company of heaven? Is our prayer man-centered, for our own personal profit, or God-centered, to his greater glory? Do we come to Church to give or to get? On our answer to these questions may depend our decision as to singing the Psalms according to the Church’s ancient order in the Praise of God.

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From *The Hale Lectures. Church Music in History
and Practice: Studies in the Praise of God*, pages 135-137.

Canon Charles Winfred Douglas (1867–1944) was editor of the Episcopal Church’s New Hymnal in 1918 and a major contributor to the Hymnal 1940. He was also editor of a plainsong psalter, still in print as The St. Dunstan Plainsong Psalter. His work as choirmaster for the sisters of the Episcopal Community of St. Mary included his translation of the monastic offices, published as The Monastic Diurnal. In his time, he was among the most learned churchmen of any denomination in the area of music and chant.