



25 January 2009
The Conversion of St Paul
Choral Evensong
Ecclesiasticus 39 vv. 1–10
Colossians 1 v. 24– 2. 7



**Reading the Bible as...Worship:
Offering the Word back to God**
By Mr Jesse Billett

I have been asked to speak about Reading the Bible as Worship. This is a vast theme, and a sermon calls for a narrower scope. Let me say something, therefore, about reading the Bible in just one aspect of worship, the Divine Office. What is the Divine Office? To be brief, it is what we are doing right now. We have gathered at evening to sing psalms, to read the scriptures, and to lay our petitions before God. From the earliest centuries Christians have set aside certain times of day for formal, corporate prayer. The Book of Common Prayer provides for two daily 'offices', Morning and Evening Prayer. The medieval Church celebrated eight offices, including one in the middle of the night. The most important part of the Divine Office, whatever form it takes, is the recitation of the psalms, and I would like to take the psalms of the Divine Office as a particular case from which we can take some more general lessons about how to read the Bible profitably as worship. The Director of Music very kindly indulged me in allowing you to hear tonight's psalm in the form that would have been familiar to most Christians down through the ages, and you should keep that stark but beautiful sound in your ears to understand better what I am going to say.

The best advice I have found about how to worship God through the psalms comes in a commentary on the Rule of St Benedict—the great sixth-century guide to the monastic life—written in the first part of the ninth century by a Frankish monk named Hildemar, who taught in the northern Italian monastery of Civate. In commenting on part of the Rule to do with the Divine Office, Hildemar has this to say:

It is especially during the time of prayer that we are able to see that God sees us. And for this reason the Lord has given us the words with which to pray, and these same words are few; so that, as we stand in prayer before God, by attending to the power of the words our minds may be made tranquil and serene unto the full enjoyment of that Invisible Light, at least so far as our human nature will permit. For we are not able at all times to see God, because of the various earthly concerns in which we are entangled. Our mind is torn in two, and our eye is not fixed on God alone.

The contents of this paper are the views and expressions of the author.

The contents may not be used without the permission of the author, more information can be obtained from chapel@joh.cam.ac.uk

© Jesse D Billett

Image © St John's College Library (MS D.30 f.97v)



25 January 2009
The Conversion of St Paul
Choral Evensong
Ecclesiasticus 39 vv. 1–10
Colossians 1 v. 24– 2. 7

This requires some explanation. Liturgical scholars distinguish between two different traditions of the Divine Office, one is called the ‘Cathedral Office’, and the other the ‘Monastic Office’, both datable at least to the fourth century. The Cathedral Office was celebrated at sunrise and sunset by the bishop and all his clergy and people, greeting in the dawn the Risen Christ and at dusk celebrating the light of Christ’s abiding presence in the world. The Cathedral Office made use of the psalms, especially those most suited for morning and evening, as the perfect praise to offer to God. From a practical point of view, the psalms were ‘safe’ to sing because, unlike the songs of heretical sects, they were free from doctrinal error. But their appropriateness was much deeper than this: the psalms were read by the early Church Fathers as prophecies about Christ, and in the psalms they heard the Father speaking to the Son, and the Son speaking to the Father, and even the Church and its apostles and martyrs crying out to God. This point is vital, because all true Christian prayer is a participation in Christ’s prayer to the Father, most dramatically in the Eucharist, but no less so in the words of scripture, through which Christ makes himself present in our midst. For Christians, communion with God is made possible only through Christ—that is, all worship is God’s initiative, not our own. As we have sung tonight, ‘O Lord, open thou our lips : and our mouth shall show forth thy praise.’ Even in asking God to open our lips to praise him, we do so with words from the psalms (cf. Ps. 51:15) .

This is what Hildemar means when he says that the Lord has given us the words with which to pray. In the Cathedral Office tradition, the Church takes as its own the words of Christ in the psalms and addresses them back to the Father. This is not without certain difficulties, and I shall return to them shortly.

The Monastic Office was the form of worship adopted by the emerging Christian monastic movement, beginning in Egypt. The monks, too, gathered at nightfall and very early in the morning to sing the psalms. Later on, they also assembled more frequently throughout the day, and the eightfold Office of the medieval Church is an inheritance of this monastic tradition. But the monks did not select a few appropriate psalms for their services. They merely sang through the psalter in numerical order, twelve psalms at a time. The general consensus was that all one hundred and fifty psalms ought to be gone through at least once in the course of the week, though some monastic communities aimed for considerably more than this. But the main difference between the Monastic and Cathedral Offices is not to do with length. In the Cathedral Office, the Church addresses the psalms to God. In the Monastic Office, however, each monk hears in the psalms the voice of God speaking to him. The psalm itself was not seen as a prayer, but instead as an invitation to prayer. In early monastic practice, every psalm would be followed by a period of silence during which the monks would lie prostrate on the floor in prayer. The primary purpose of the psalm was to focus the mind and to remove all distractions, allowing the Holy Spirit to speak to the heart and provoke it to prayer. One sixth-century monastic author advised that if while you are singing a psalm your mind begins to wander, you should make the sign of the cross over your mouth to drive away the devil’s influence. And then, when you lie prostrate in prayer, imagine that you are clinging to the feet of Christ himself and offering your petition (*The Rule of the Master*, chs. 47–48). The silent prayers following the psalms seem to have lasted no more than a minute or two. As Hildemar says, our weak human nature can sense God’s nearer presence for only so long, before the entanglements of the world draw us away again. That is why a monk has to sing so many psalms: each psalm—indeed, each word of each psalm—is a moment of conversion, of turning away from the world and back to God to be filled, however briefly, with his Spirit, without whom we are unable to pray at all.

The contents of this paper are the views and expressions of the author.

The contents may not be used without the permission of the author, more information can be obtained from chapel@joh.cam.ac.uk

© Jesse D Billett

Image © St John’s College Library (MS D.30 f.97v)



25 January 2009
The Conversion of St Paul
Choral Evensong
Ecclesiasticus 39 vv. 1–10
Colossians 1 v. 24– 2. 7

You may now have guessed at what I see as a point of contact between these two supposedly distinct traditions of worship with the psalms: in both of them, prayer and worship are impossible without God's initiative. We receive the Word from God, which enables us to offer our prayer and praise back to him. As Hildemar says, the words of the psalms have 'power', and to pray effectively we must pay attention to them. So let me offer three practical suggestions for how to 'attend to the power of the words' of the psalms in the Divine Office.

First, we must commit ourselves to frequent and regular prayer of the Office, so that the words of the psalms and the other scriptures may be so ingrained in us that they begin to speak to us not just individually, but to illuminate one another. This was especially possible in the medieval Office, in which the psalms were recited with short musical pieces, called antiphons, which drew attention to words and themes of special resonance for the occasion. We have actually had an example of this tonight, since an antiphon was sung with the Magnificat. The antiphon, let me remind you, was 'Their sound is gone out into all lands, and their words into the ends of the world'. This is from Psalm 19 (v. 4 BCP), and in its original context it refers to how the sun, moon and stars testify to the glory of their Creator. But this text was later understood by the Church to refer to the apostles, who made known in every land the Gospel of Jesus. Sung today, on the feast of the Conversion of St Paul, it interacts with the text of the Magnificat in a still more meaningful way. In the Magnificat, we sang that God, 'remembering his mercy hath holpen his servant Israel : as he promised to our forefathers, Abraham and his seed, for ever'. But the antiphon tells us that the word has gone out, not just to the House of Israel, but to all lands. And we recall that Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles, whom he proclaimed also to be the seed of Abraham, not in the flesh, but in faith. This is one level of attentive listening to the Bible as worship. My point is emphatically not that we can make the scriptures say what we want them to say, but that they will say different things to us at different times, and the very fixity of the liturgical year and 'givenness' of the texts of the Divine Office make possible this fruitful and edifying interplay of associations.

My second suggestion is that we must remember that we never pray the psalms in the Office as individuals, but together as the Body of Christ—even when we are praying the Office by ourselves. As I have just indicated, it is the nature of the liturgy that we do not get to choose which texts we will use. I may have to sing a song of praise when I am depressed, or a psalm of complaint when I know full well how little I have to complain about. But if I look beyond myself to the wider Church, I can pray with my brothers and sisters in their joys and afflictions. We sang in tonight's psalm, 'It is good for me that I have been in trouble : that I may learn thy statutes' (119:71 BCP). The Church rejoices in its afflictions because, as we have just heard St Paul writing to the Colossians, we are participating 'in our own flesh' in the sufferings of Christ (cf. Col. 1:24), the sufferings through which God's righteousness is truly revealed. And in this way, this psalm is also the prayer of Christ himself: 'The congregations of the ungodly have robbed me : but I have not forgotten thy law. ... The proud have imagined a lie against me : but I will keep thy commandments with my whole heart' (119:61, 69 BCP).

The contents of this paper are the views and expressions of the author.

The contents may not be used without the permission of the author, more information can be obtained from chapel@joh.cam.ac.uk

© Jesse D Billett

Image © St John's College Library (MS D.30 f.97v)



25 January 2009
The Conversion of St Paul
Choral Evensong
Ecclesiasticus 39 vv. 1–10
Colossians 1 v. 24– 2. 7

This leads me to my third suggestion, which is that we must read the psalms always with Jesus in mind and in view. As I have already suggested, in some of the psalms this seems much harder to do than the rather hopeful Christological readings of the early Church Fathers would have us believe, as when we seem to ask that God will fall in vengeance on our enemies, so that the righteous man may ‘wash his footsteps in the blood of the ungodly’ (Ps. 58:9 BCP). It is understandable that such verses are often omitted from the Divine Office these days. But ancient Israel did not see fit to purge the psalter of these texts. Such sentiments were set down as ‘genuinely faithful human communication’ with God, rising out of honest human anger and fear (Brueggemann, *Spirituality*, p. 33). And it is God from whom vengeance is demanded: even in the face of injustice, the conversation remains between humanity and God. As Christians, we know that the psalms of cursing, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, ‘lead to the cross of Jesus, and to the love of God which forgives enemies’ (*Psalms*, pp. 58–59). God’s answer to our demand for blood in which to wash our feet is found in the Lamb of God in whose blood we have been washed clean (cf. Rev. 1:5; 7:14).

Hildemar says that the power of the psalms enables us to perceive and enjoy God’s ‘Invisible Light’. Glimpses of that invisible light are offered even to a rank beginner, as I can attest. Their beauty alone is sometimes enough: as the psalmist says, ‘O how sweet are thy words unto my throat : yea, sweeter than honey unto my mouth.’ But Hildemar urges me to a deeper understanding than I have so far attained. In speaking of God’s Invisible Light, Hildemar is alluding, I suspect, to the *Confessions* of St Augustine (VII. 10), which speak of God’s Light becoming visible not by our journeying up to heaven, but by our allowing God to guide us deep into ourselves. Through the psalms, we encounter our raw humanity, and there, to our surprise, we discover Christ. And in his light, we find ourselves able to offer the great prayer with which we conclude every psalm:

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost : As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

FURTHER READING

- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *Life Together*, trans. by John W. Doberstein (London: SCM, 1954; repr. 2008), pp. 30–35.
- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *Meditating on the Word*, trans. by David McL. Gracie (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 1986), esp. pp. 84–96.
- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible* [trans. by James H. Burtneiss] (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1970).
- Bradshaw, Paul F., *Daily Prayer in the Early Church: A Study of the Origin and Early Development of the Divine Office*, Alcuin Club Collections 63 (London: SPCK, 1981).
- Brueggemann, Walter, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1984).
- Brueggemann, Walter, *Spirituality of the Psalms* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2002).
- Expositio Regulae ab Hildemaro tradita*, ch. 19, ed. by Rupert Mittermüller, *Vita et Regula S.S. P. Benedicti*, III (Regensburg: Pustet, 1880), pp. 314–318. (Hildemar’s fascinating commentary on the Rule of St Benedict is available only in the original Latin, and only in this scarce edition.)
- The General Instruction on the Liturgy of the Hours*, III. 1: ‘The Psalms and their Close Relationship with Christian Prayer’ (§§100–109), in *The Divine Office: The Liturgy of the Hours According to the Roman Rite, I: Advent, Christmastide & Weeks 1–9 of the Year* (London: Collins, 1974), pp. liii–lvi.
- Harper, John, *The Forms and Orders of Western Liturgy from the Tenth to the Eighteenth Century: A Historical Introduction for Students and Musicians* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).
- Merton, Thomas, *Praying the Psalms* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1956).
- RB 1980: *The Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English with Notes*, ed. and trans. by Timothy Fry and others (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1981).
- The Rule of the Master*, trans. by Luke Eberle, Cistercian Studies 6 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1977) (chs. 47–48 are found on pp. 205–208).
- Taft, Robert, *The Liturgy of the Hours in East and West: The Origins of the Divine Office and its Meaning for Today*, 2nd rev. edn (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993).
- Vogüé, Adalbert de, *La Règle de Saint Benoît*, VII: *Commentaire doctrinal et spirituel* (Paris: Cerf, 1977), pp. 184–221 (ch. VIII, §§1–2). (An English translation, by John Baptist Hasbrouck, is available as no. 54 in the Cistercian Studies series, Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1983.)

The contents of this paper are the views and expressions of the author.

The contents may not be used without the permission of the author, more information can be obtained from chapel@joh.cam.ac.uk

© Jesse D Billett

Image © St John’s College Library (MS D.30 f.97v)