

PSALMS: THE PRAYER BOOK OF JESUS

Session 9: Psalms in the Anglican
Tradition



PSALM 6:1-7, *Venite*

O come, let us sing unto the Lord; *

let us heartily rejoice in the strength of our salvation.

Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving *

and show ourselves glad in him with psalms.

For the Lord is a great God *

and a great King above all gods.

In his hand are all the depths of the earth *

and the heights of the hills are his also.

The sea is his, for he made it, *

and his hands prepared the dry land.

O come, let us worship and fall down, *

and kneel before the Lord our Maker.

For he is our God, *

and we are the people of his pasture,

and the sheep of his hand.

PSALMS IN THE ANGLICAN TRADITION

- The Psalter is the heartbeat of Anglican worship. Cranmer's genius was not to invent new prayers, but to order ancient ones for daily use. Nowhere is this more apparent than in his abundant use of the Psalter.
- Thomas Cranmer ensured that the entire Psalter would be read or sung each month in the 1549 Book of Common Prayer.
- "The Psalter shall be read once every month, as it is there appointed, both for Morning and Evening Prayer." Thomas Cranmer, Preface to the Psalter, 1549 BCP
- His purpose was to return Scripture—especially the Psalms—to the lips of ordinary Christians, "that the people (by daily hearing of holy Scripture read in the Church) might continually profit more and more in the knowledge of God."

THE PENITENTIAL PSALMS

- The Psalms and the Daily Office
 - Morning and Evening Prayer (Matins and Evensong) are saturated with the Psalter.
 - Morning Canticles (Venite – Psalm 95, Jubilate – Psalm 100) are directly from the psalms.
 - The psalms are said in a 30-day cycle (adaptable to a 60-day cycle in the 2019 BCP).
- The Psalms in the Eucharist
 - The Gradual Psalm between the Old Testament and Epistle lessons, the Offertory sentences and Communion antiphons all draw on the Psalter.

THE COVERDALE PSALTER

- Miles Coverdale was a former friar who had caught the embers of the Reformation and, like Luther before him, resigned from the Augustinian order.
- He assisted William Tyndale with his rendering of the New Testament and Pentateuch and, after Tyndale was arrested, took it upon himself to complete the work.
- Coverdale's knowledge of Hebrew and Greek was rudimentary, so he worked primarily from Latin and Luther's German translation.
- However, as a poet, what he lacked in his Greek and Hebrew proficiency, he more than made up for in his immaculate, beautiful English.

TO THE BOKE, *Miles Coverdale*

Go lytle boke, get the acquaintaunce
Amonge the louers of Gods worde
Geue them occasyon the same to auaunce
And to make theyr songes of the Lorde
That they may thrust vnder the borde
All other balettes of fylthynes
And that we all with one accorde
May geue ensample of godlynes

Go lytle boke amonge mens chyldren
And get the to theyr companye
Teach them to synge ye comaundementes ten
And other balettes of Gods glorye
Be not ashamed I warande the
Though thou be rude in songe and ryme
Thou shalt to youth some occasion be
In godly sportes to passe theyr tyme.

THE COVERDALE PSALTER

- Working mainly in exile on the continent, Miles Coverdale completed the first English Bible in 200 years.
- After Henry VIII's infamous spat with the pope finally divorced the Church of England from Rome, many Protestant reformers returned to England, including Coverdale, who quickly found work.
- King Henry commissioned his new Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer, to authorize an English translation of the Bible to be used in churches for the first time. Building on subsequent edits by John Rogers, the new edition, called The Great Bible, would be Coverdale's own new revision of his and Tyndale's work. The second edition of this Bible would feature a foreword by Cranmer.

THE COVERDALE PSALTER

- As he developed the Book of Common Prayer, Cranmer took the seven (originally eight) monastic prayer offices and reduced them to two: Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer.
- They were said primarily in churches, but also in homes, and they were loaded with scripture. Two readings in the morning, two in the evening, plus a selection from the Psalms and two canticles (also from scripture).
- Coverdale's Psalter was (and continues to be) used in these services, though not included in the Prayer Book (except where the Canticles drew from the Psalms).
- When the Prayer Book was reissued in 1662, most scripture readings were changed to the KJV (replacing the readings from The Great Bible used in previous editions). However, Coverdale's Psalter was kept, and while used in services for well over a century, it was included within the printed corpus for the first time.

“The most valuable thing the Psalms do for me is to express that same delight in God which made David dance.”

– C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*

“The psalms are the deepest wells of English music.”

– Herbert Howells, composer

THE PSALMS IN ANGLICAN CHANT

- Two parallel musical psalm traditions developed:
 - Anglican chant for choral worship (cathedrals, chapels).
 - Metrical psalmody for congregations (parish churches).
- Early Anglicans inherited the plainsong traditions of the medieval church.
- By the 16th–17th centuries, this evolved into Anglican Chant—a way of singing prose psalms to harmonized tones, preserving both meaning and musical beauty.
- Cranmer insisted that the musical setting of English words must serve the clarity of the text, famously asking that there be “for every syllable a note”—a reaction against the florid melismas of medieval chant. This set the stage for a new English chant tradition.

THE PSALMS IN ANGLICAN CHANT

- Anglican chant took the medieval psalm tones and harmonized them for four voices (soprano, alto, tenor, bass). The result preserved the free, speech-like rhythm of chant, but with the richer texture of early modern polyphony.
- This early style developed especially in cathedrals and collegiate chapels, where trained choirs could sustain the complex harmonies.
- Early examples appear in the Elizabethan period (late 16th century).
- Composers like Thomas Tallis and Orlando Gibbons wrote simple harmonized psalm tones for English texts.
- By the Restoration (1660s), this form was standard in cathedrals and choral foundations.

THE PSALMS IN ANGLICAN CHANT

- Anglican chant uses pointing, a system of marks indicating where singers move between the notes of the chant. Each verse of a psalm is divided into two halves, and the chant (often of four or more bars) matches this structure.
 - Single chant: one musical formula for each verse.
 - Double chant: one formula spanning two verses.
 - Triple chant: occasionally used for longer psalms.
- This flexibility allows the text to flow naturally, neither rigidly metrical nor amorphous, preserving that unique Anglican balance of order and freedom.

THE PSALMS IN PARISH MUSIC

- While cathedral choirs cultivated Anglican chant, ordinary parishes relied on metrical psalmody—the Psalms paraphrased into regular poetic meter and rhyme, suitable for congregational singing.
- The Sternhold and Hopkins Psalter (1562) and later the Tate and Brady New Version (1696) were used widely.
- Tunes like Old Hundredth (“All People That on Earth Do Dwell”) became enduring fixtures of Anglican hymnody.

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THE PSALMS IN ANGLICAN WORSHIP NOW

- Today, Anglican chant continues in cathedrals, parish choirs, and even contemporary settings:
 - The Cathedral choral foundations of England (St Paul's, Westminster Abbey, Canterbury) preserve it daily.
 - Anglican chant psalters are widely used from England to North America Africa, and beyond.
- Some modern composers (e.g., John Rutter, Philip Stopford) have written new settings.
- Composers such as Handel, in his Messiah, have specifically used the Coverdale Psalter when quoting the Psalms.
- Even in spoken offices, the Coverdale Psalter's cadence remains: the psalms are recited as though they could at any moment take wing into song.

THE NEW COVERDALE PSALTER

- All American Prayer Books through 1928 featured the classic Coverdale Psalter.
- In the 1979 Prayer Book, the Psalms were freshly rendered in cooperation with modern poets, breaking the five-century tradition.
- For the ACNA's 2019 Book of Common Prayer, the Coverdale tradition was restored to the Psalter, rendered in modestly updated English built upon the unfinished efforts of a team including T.S. Eliot and C.S. Lewis in the mid-20th Century for what would have been a new British Prayer Book.
- Close attention was paid to both fidelity to the original Hebrew (not just Coverdale's rendering of the Latin) and also to preserving Coverdale's cadence and meter so that the musical tradition associated with his psalms could be maintained.