

Why do we sing Psalms in Eucharist?

by Steve Jenkins and The Rev. Jennifer Adams

At a recent "Strategic Doing" meeting, one of the topics raised was the singing of the Psalms at Eucharist. We at Grace have only been singing Psalms at Eucharist since 2012. Now is probably a good time to review what's going on with this part of our prayer. First of all, it's good to remember that psalms are songs. As the introduction to The Anglican Chant Psalter (p. vi) says, "Psalms are hymns or songs. The Harvard Dictionary of Music says, 'In their original form the psalms were not pure poetry but songs, with instrumental accompaniment.' Following the authorization of The Book of Common Prayer 1979, with its restoration of the psalms in Eucharist, the practice of singing the psalms has grown in churches in the United States. Singing leads to a unanimity of sound or utterance which is seldom found in reading and thus provides a corporate experience which is at the heart of public worship."

"To sing well, is to pray twice." You've probably heard a version of this saying at some point. But singing together actually goes much deeper than simply doubling our prayer. Speaking of hymnody, Carl P. Daw, Jr. says "At its most profound, the very act of singing hymns represents a kind of miniature reenactment of what it means for the Word to become flesh: the text and the tune of the printed page are given life and breath, they cease to be merely an idea full of potential and become a present reality." (The Hymnal 1982 Companion, vol. I, 8)

The book of Psalms has been the hymnal, the "present reality," of the Judeo Christian tradition for thousands of years. "Shout with joy to the Lord, you lands; lift up your voice and sing." Psalm 98:4 reminds us. The King James translation puts it this way "Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all the earth: make a loud noise, and rejoice, and sing praise." This suggests that sung praise encompasses all joyful music making together no matter our skills. And Jesus and his disciples most probably sang some of the psalms in their time together.

In the Episcopal church we have a rare heritage that is called Anglican Chant. Anglican Chant was derived by harmonizing ancient Gregorian Chant tones devised to sing the Psalms in community. It first appears in England in the late 16th century. Anglican Chant quickly became a standard usage in England and continues to this day in many Cathedrals there. In the United States, the Episcopal church initially used it mostly to sing canticles in the Morning Prayer Service which dominated the prayer here for many years.

With the restoration of the Eucharist as the principal service of the Book of Common Prayer in 1979, the psalms became part of the weekly Sunday prayer. "Good chanting is essentially good reading on a musical tone," Marian Hatchett wrote in *A Guide to the Practice of Church Music* (1989). Just as with a new hymn, sometimes stopping and listening to the singing can not only be a way of learning the musical tone, it can also be a moment of meditation on the meaning and beauty of what we are singing.

Biblical song has been part of the Judeo Christian experience for centuries. When we pray and sing together, we join all the communion of all the saints and holy people who have ever done so, are doing so now all over the world, and will do so in the future. We join in the "eternal now" of praise. In the words of the hymn, "For All the Saints," (Hymn 287):

*"From earth's wide bounds, from ocean's farthest coast,
through gates of pearl streams in the countless host,
singing to Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,
Alleluia, alleluia!"*

[Rev Jen's added paragraph] If you have trouble singing the psalm, be patient and give yourself some time to learn the tradition. Sit and close your eyes and listen and be carried by the words and the sung prayer when you're ready. Even ask Steve if you'd like a little coaching! Before too long, the practice of singing psalms will become familiar and you'll be surprised when on occasion, they are said.

Thank you, Strategic Doers, for this question