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## PSALMS AND HYMNS AND SPIRITUAL SONGS - I

On this Sunday called SEPTUAGESIMA (Latin for "seventieth", because it is approximately the seventieth day before Easter), we begin our preparation for the observance of our Lord's Passion and Resurrection. In token of this preparation, the hangings are violet, Alleluia is not sung, and we begin a three-sermon series on Creation, Sin, and the way of Redemption in the Old Testament and New.

The Protestant reformation of the 16th century brought many great gifts to the Catholic tradition. In doctrine, it taught with new emphasis the all-sufficiency of Christ's atoning work upon the cross, the priority of divine grace to all human willing, and the necessity of a lively faith as the means by which we receive the benefits of salvation. In external forms of worship, it brought the Church a new emphasis on the Bible, read and studied by all Christians in the vernacular; a new emphasis on the doctrine of the Bible preached in sermons and taught in catechisms; a new use of the vernacular for public worship, and, not least of all, the congregational hymn.

We take it for granted that we should sing together in church, though in fact we rarely do so anywhere else. To see why it is not to be taken for granted, read Thomas Day's witty and perceptive book, *Why Catholics Can't Sing*. (Apparently it is the fault of the Irish, but I will let you read it for yourselves.) My copy, alas, has gone astray, but in one of the passages that sticks in my mind, Day, who is himself a Roman Catholic organist, asks why it is that a small cluster of elderly Presbyterians can make more joyful noise together than a vast congregation of able-bodied Roman Catholics. Day shows us what a remarkable phenomenon the Protestant tradition of congregational hymnody is.

There were hymns before the Protestant reformation, but by the High Middle Ages, the ancient tradition of congregational chant and song had been squeezed out by the elaborate development of (absolutely gorgeous) art music - melismatic chant and polyphony. Popular hymn-singing in the late Middle Ages - the chorale and carol - was done outside the formal liturgy.

It was Martin Luther who about the year 1523 first harnessed this

tradition of popular singing to the evangelical doctrine of the Reformation, brought it into the Church's liturgy, and triggered an explosion of hymn-writing, hymn-publishing, and hymn-singing that marked Protestant worship and spirituality ever since. Drawing upon a wealth of medieval melodies, both ecclesiastical chant and popular folk songs. This body of music was enormously expanded in the next two hundred years, by Luther himself, a host of others, and the great composers Praetorius, Schutz, and Bach. Yet the German chorale retains the freshness, directness, strength, and warmth of its roots in chant, carol, and folk-song.

Much of it is still too little known. Miles Coverdale (translator of the 1535 Psalter in the Prayer Book) tried to introduce the Lutheran chorale into England in the 16th century, in a book with the wonderful title of *Ghostly Psalms and Spiritual Songs*, but it was not until the 19th century translations of Catherine Winkworth and Frances Coxe that it began to find acceptance in Anglican worship. In the USA, the best known of these is the translation of Luther's *Ein' feste burg*, "A mighty fortress" (#551), by Frederick Henry Hedge, but the 1940 Hymnal has a good selection of others. Two of them are the highlight of our Christmas services at St. John's: Luther's *Vom Himmel Hoch* (#22 and 23) and *Quem Pastores* (#35). Last week we sang "How bright appears the Morning Star" (#329) for Epiphany; and soon we shall be singing the great Passion chorals, "Ah Holy Jesus, how hast thou offended" (#71) and "O sacred head, sore wounded" (#75). There are many more!

Though Luther and the German chorale was the beginning of Protestant hymnody, it was from Calvin's Church at Geneva that English-speaking Christians learned the joys of congregational singing. While sojourning at Strasbourg, Calvin had been greatly impressed by the singing of chorales and metrical psalms which he heard there, and it was at his instigation that the Psalms of David were translated into French metrical paraphrase, largely by the poet Clement Marot, and set to music composed by Louis Bourgeois and Claude Goudimel. Unlike the freely-composed lyric of the German chorale, this Huguenot psalter was closely tied to the scriptural text of the Psalms, but it had the same directness and rugged strength which made the chorale so popular. And it was this metrical psalter, heard by English exiles in Geneva during the reign of "Bloody" Mary, that was to shape English singing for the next two hundred years or more, as we shall see next week.

"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord" (Colossians 3:16). This text is a kind of charter for congregational singing as a means of participation in the saving Word of God. It should be read with the parallel passage in Ephesians 5:19, wherein the emphasis is upon the grace of the Holy Spirit: "be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess, but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to Lord". At its best, the congregational hymn is not emotional indulgence, but a corporate experience of sober spiritual ecstasy that takes us out of ourselves, and our narrow pre-occupations, into the work of God in Word and Spirit. To be continued...

**The Rev'd Gavin G. Dunbar**

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