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Sexagesima

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Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs--II

On this Sunday called SEXAGESIMA (Latin for "sixtieth", because it is approximately the sixtieth day before Easter), we continue a three-sermon series on Creation, Sin, and the way of Redemption in the Old Testament and New.

7TH ANNUAL ELLIOTT HOUSE CLERGY SEMINAR

We welcome to St. John's almost twenty priests visiting us for the seventh annual Elliott House Seminar, conducted by Fr Robert Crouse on one of the great works of Western moral theology, Dante's Paradiso. Fr Crouse is Professor Emeritus of Classics at Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, and Visiting Professor of Patrology at the Augustinianum in Rome. Fr Crouse will also be speaking on Friday morning at the Mere Anglicanism conference in the cathedral at Charleston, about the Sacraments in the Church Fathers and English Reformers.

PSALMS, HYMNS, AND SPIRITUAL SONGS - II

That treasure of Protestant liturgy and spirituality, the congregational hymn, has its origins in the popular religious song of the Middle Ages. It was brought into the church's worship, however, by Martin Luther, beginning in about 1523, and German chorales – direct, stirring, powerful proclamations of the gospel and confessions of faith with tunes that drew upon a wealth of medieval chants and carols – marked the Protestant reformation everywhere.

Many of these chorales were free compositions, based on themes of the Church's year, the Sacraments, or the Catechism, but some were metrical paraphrases of the psalms. These inspired John Calvin to instigate the production (from 1539 onwards) of a complete metrical psalter for French-speaking Protestants in Strasbourg and Geneva. Accurately translated into metrical verse by the poet Clement Marot and the scholar Theodore Beza, and set to tunes by Louis Bourgeois and Claude Goudimel, the Genevan psalter had an enormous impact not only on the French reformed churches (the Huguenots, whose

descendants later settled in this part of the world), but also the English. For Marot's translations began to circulate in the English court of Henry VIII in the 1530's, inspiring one of his courtiers, Thomas Sternhold, to begin his own translations, which were eventually completed by others (including one John Hopkins) after his death. During the reign of "Bloody Mary" English exiles in Geneva were inspired to correct and complete this psalter (known as "Sternhold and Hopkins") which was supplied with tunes either from the Geneva Psalter or from English ballads. (As in the Lutheran hymnbooks and Genevan psalter, it also included some metrical paraphrases of non-scriptural texts, including the Athanasian Creed!) Well into the 19th century, English congregations sang "Sternhold and Hopkins", although today the only survival of it is William Kethe's paraphrase of Psalm 100, "All people that on earth do dwell" (#278), set to a Genevan tune by Louis Bourgeois, still known as "Old Hundredth".

Elizabeth I referred to such metrical psalms as "Geneva jigs", an indication that in music as in verse they were rugged and lively, rather than smooth and stately. Smoothness of meter and rhyme did eventually come, in the 1696 New Version of Nahum Tate and Nicholas Brady, represented today by the metrical version of Psalm 42, "As pants the hart" (#450), and the paraphrase of Luke 2, "As shepherds watched their flocks by night" (#13). Later editions marked the first appearance of hymnody that was not a paraphrase of scripture or a Prayer Book text, the hymns composed for private use at morning (#151) and evening (#165) by the saintly bishop of Sodor and Man, Thomas Ken. The doxology (ascription of praise) composed by Ken for these two hymns, and sung to "Old Hundredth" is for many people "the" doxology. We sing it at St. John's at the presentation of alms and oblations most Sundays of the year. (Other doxologies include Gloria Patri, Te Deum, and Gloria in excelsis).

The taste for polished rhymes and tramping or tripping rhythms, typical of most 18th and 19th century hymnody, eventually drove out the rugged rhythms of Sternhold and Hopkins, a loss which educated opinion has often snobbishly rejoiced in. Yet the abiding influence of the "Old Version" can be detected in the huge number of tunes which later hymn-writers reused with new words. In Scotland also, the metrical psalter (in various translations) acquired its own set of splendid tunes, which were combined in 1650 with an excellent new translation based on one made by Francis Rouse. Perhaps the best-known of these Scottish psalter tunes in the 1940 Hymnal is Dundee, now set to Wesley's "Let saints on earth in concert sing" (#397).

In the early 18th century Isaac Watts abandoned strict adherence to the Old Testament text for looser paraphrases overlaid by explicit New Testament interpretations. Thus "Jesus shall reign where'er the sun" (#542) is based on the Psalm 72's prayer for a righteous king of Israel. Watts' break with strict adherence to scriptural texts ignited a second great explosion of Protestant hymnwriting in the 18th and 19th centuries (beginning with evangelicals like the Wesleys but in time by churchmen of all kinds) which eventually drove the metrical psalters out of Anglican use. The 19th century did produce at least one enduring masterpiece of metrical psalmody, "The King of love my shepherd is", a paraphrase of Psalm 23, usually sung either to a sturdy 19th century tune (Dominus regit me) or to a lovely lilting Irish melody (St. Columba). Yet this handful of texts represents only a tiny portion

of the psalter, and in two weeks I shall discuss why the psalm, in prose or verse translation, deserves a larger place in congregational worship.

The Rev'd Gavin G. Dunbar

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