

[send this](#)[bookmark](#)[print](#)[close](#)

# The Parish Paper

OF  
ST. JOHN'S CHURCH  
SAVANNAH, GEORGIA

Vol.39 No.26

The First Sunday after Trinity

05/25/08

## MUTUAL PROVOCATIONS

The custom of reciting the psalms in alternating verses is an ancient one. When the prophet Isaiah saw a vision of the Lord in the temple, surrounded by adoring seraphim, he heard that "one cried unto another" – that is, in alternation, "and said, Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord God of Hosts: the whole earth is full of thy glory" (Isaiah 6:1-3). The worship of angels being a model for the worship of the church, Saint Paul alludes to the practice in the Epistle to the Colossians (3:16): "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". And as early as the second century, Pliny the Younger reported to the emperor that the Christians in his province had been found to "praise Christ with hymns as a God, secum invicem, 'one to another among themselves'."

This scriptural and traditional practice was retained in the 16th century Reformation of Anglican worship, and was defended against Puritan criticism by the Elizabethan divine, Richard Hooker, in his Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity (V.39). In recent years at St. John's we have resumed this practice, reciting the psalms either "responsively" (priest and people alternating verses) or "antiphonally" (one side of the church alternating with the other side). And I must say I think the congregation does this very well – neither rushing ahead, nor lagging behind, but keeping together in a disciplined and impressive way.

Some of you have asked me about the rationale for this practice, and for an answer, I have printed an extract from Hooker's commentary. Be warned, however: Hooker's long sentences demand the exercise of an attention span which the staccato soundbites of modern media have attenuated! (Explanations of his allusions appear in square brackets.)

"And if the Prophet David did think that the very meeting of men together, and their accompanying one another to the house of God, should make the bond of their love insoluble, and tie them in a league of inviolable amity [Psalm 55:14]; how much more may we judge it reasonable to hope, that the like effects may grow in each of the people towards every one of them, between whom there daily and interchangeably [i.e. alternately] pass, in the hearing of God himself, and in the presence of his holy Angels, so many heavenly acclamations, exultations, provocations, petitions, songs of comfort,

psalms of praise and thanksgiving: in all which particulars, as when the pastor maketh their suits [prayers], and they with one voice testify a general assent thereto [by saying 'Amen']; or when he joyfully beginneth, and they with like alacrity follow, dividing between them the sentences wherewith they strive which shall most show his own and stir up others' zeal, to the glory of that God whose name they magnify [i.e. the psalms, each of which finishes with 'Glory be to the Father']; or when he proposeth unto God their necessities, and they their own requests for relief in every of them [i.e. the versicles and responses]; or when he lifteth up his voice like a trumpet to proclaim unto them the laws of God [the rehearsal of the Ten Commandments], they adjoining though not as Israel did by way of generality a cheerful promise, "All that the Lord hath commanded we will do" [cf. Exod. 19:9 et al.], yet that which God doth no less approve, that which savoureth more of meekness, that which testifieth rather a feeling knowledge of our common imbecility [i.e. weakness], unto the several branches thereof, several, lowly and humble request for grace at the merciful hands of God to perform the thing which is commanded ['Lord have mercy upon us, and incline our hearts to keep this law']; or when they wish reciprocally each other's ghostly happiness ['The Lord be with you'; 'And with thy spirit']; or when he by exhortation raiseth them up, and they by protestation of their readiness declare he speaketh not in vain unto them ['Lift up your hearts'; 'We lift them up unto the Lord']: these interlocutory forms of speech what are they else, but most effectually partly testifications and partly inflammations of piety?"

Hooker discerns that these "inter-locutory forms of speech" render the Word of God a dramatic exercise in mutual provocation to virtue (Hebrews 10:25). In a common life of mutual exchange and reciprocity, of mutual dependence in charity, which is the very essence of our communion and fellowship in the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12-13), each of us has some-thing from God to say, and something from God to hear; some good to give and some good to receive, "partly testifications and partly inflammations of piety." The alternate recitation of the psalms not only shows us the nature of our common life in Christ: it also makes us partakers of it, if we come to it with open hearts. "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".

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

send this

bookmark

print

close

[Report Errors](#) | [Comments](#)

Copyright 2003 - 2004 St. John's Episcopal Church in Savannah, GA. All rights reserved.