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THE CHRISTIAN USE OF
THE PSALTER

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Содержание

PREFACE	5
LECTURE I	6
PART I. GENERAL PRINCIPLES	6
PART II. DIFFICULTIES	13
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	17

A. R. Whitham

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PREFACE

This little book, based on three Lectures delivered to the S. Paul's Lecture Society in January, 1908, is not intended so much for the scholar as for the plain man who goes to Church and loves the Prayer Book, but finds the Psalms sometimes puzzling. They are certainly the most difficult, though the most characteristic, part of the daily offices of the Church. What has been attempted in these Lectures is not to explain them in detail, but to suggest the broad lines of interpretation which seem always to have been in the mind of the Church in her use of the Psalter. A few additional helps have been suggested in the Notes.

CULHAM, 1908.

LECTURE I

PART I. GENERAL PRINCIPLES

*Haereditate acquisivi testimonia tua in aeternum:
Quia exsultatio cordis mei sunt.*

The Christian use of the Psalter is as old as Christianity itself. The new-born Catholic Church, returning from her earliest conflict with the kingdoms of this world, found the most natural expression of her faith and her need in the words of the 2nd Psalm:

Why did the Gentiles rage,
And the peoples imagine vain things?
The kings of the earth set themselves in array,
And the rulers were gathered together,
Against the Lord, and against His Anointed.

(Acts iv. 25, 26, R. V.)

Before this, on the very birthday of the Church, the chief of the Apostles had appealed to the witness of "David," for the Resurrection and Triumph of the Holy One (Pss. xvi., cx. in Acts ii. 25-8, 34, 35). And even earlier, during the ten days of waiting, the great Psalms of righteous wrath (thought so impossible by many to-day) had supplied the prophecy of the fall of Judas:

Let his habitation be made desolate,
And let no man dwell therein;

and the justification of the election of Matthias:

His office let another take.

(Pss. lxix. and cix. in Acts i. 20.)

So harmoniously did the praise-book of the Jewish Church pass into the service of Christ; so clearly did the first believers recognise that the Spirit of Christ was the same Who had spoken by "David." This immediate appropriation of the Psalter as a book of Christian witness is remarkable evidence to the felt unity and continuity of the two Covenants. No book of the Old Testament, with the exception of Isaiah, is so frequently quoted in the New as the book of Psalms.

But still more remarkable is the influence of the Psalter on Christian *worship*. The Church exists in the world not only as the teaching, but also as the worshipping community. As the ages pass she ceases not to bear the witness of her praise and thanksgiving to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. From the beginning she showed a tendency to do this in ordered and liturgical forms. The Apostolic Church continued steadfast in "the prayers" (Acts ii. 42, R. V.). The expression implies not merely a daily gathering for worship, but the offering of that worship in a fixed and orderly manner, suggested, no doubt, by the existing Jewish services. Whatever may have been the actual form of "the prayers" in the first age of the Church, or whatever stages they may have passed through, there can be no doubt that they are the germ of all the rich later developments of the liturgy of the Church, such as are represented in the Middle Ages by the Missal and the Breviary, and to-day by our own Book of Common Prayer.

The regular services of the Church fall naturally into two classes. The Eucharist, the service of the Altar, took the place of the sacrificial worship of the Temple. The Divine Office, the service of the Choir, may have been suggested by the services of the Synagogue. But if so, there is one most significant difference. The Christian Church made a much fuller public use of the Psalms than the Synagogue ever seems to have done.¹ The Psalms in the Jewish Church seem to have been adjuncts or embellishments of the service, rather than its central feature. The Divine Office of the Christian Church practically is the Psalter. The readings from other parts of Scripture, so prominent in the Synagogue service, fall now into a secondary place. The recitation of the Psalms, which appears from very early times as the characteristic Christian devotion, became the very centre and core of the sevenfold daily Choir Office of the mediæval Church. The whole Psalter in theory was said through once a week, mainly at Mattins (the midnight office), while selected Psalms formed the chief part of the subsequent services of the day.² The English Reformers, however hastily and trenchantly they may have cut down and simplified these services of the Breviary, showed the true Catholic instinct in this at least, that they provided as the leading feature of Morning and Evening Prayer an unbroken and systematic recitation of the Psalms. In this respect their claim was justified that they had provided an order "much agreeable to the mind and purpose of the old Fathers."³ It was a return from mediæval complications to a more primitive ideal.

What, then, was this book of praise and worship which the Catholic Church found ready to hand, and made unhesitatingly her own, and which has set the standard and provided the chief material for her continual voice in the ear of God? The Psalter, as we know it now, had been for some time before Christ the recognised praise-book of Israel. Its Hebrew name is simple and significant—*Tehillim*, "praises." Its historical origins and growth are still indeed wrapt in obscurity, and to discuss them would be alien from our present purpose. Suffice it to say that there seems no conclusive reason for discrediting the universal Jewish and Christian tradition that the Psalter begins at least with David. Some of the earlier and more personal psalms are naturally felt to reflect his character and youthful struggles. Nor is it unreasonable to believe that the later historical books are substantially correct in making him the founder of the Temple choir (1 Chron. xv.; Ezra iii. 10). Doubtless the majority of the Psalms belong to a later age, and their collection is due to the scrupulous care and reverence of the period of Jewish history which begins with Ezra. The singers of the Temple after, perhaps even before, the Captivity formed various collections of sacred lyrics, which passed under characteristic names, some being entitled "Psalms of David" (though not of necessity all his work); others bearing the names of ancient leaders of the Temple choir, like Asaph, or of the guilds of singers, like "the sons of Korah." Another collection with a distinct individuality would be the "songs of degrees" or "ascents" (cxx.-cxxxii.), the pilgrim-songs of the faithful Israelites as they journeyed from their homes to keep the annual feasts at Jerusalem. At some unknown time these different collections, or selections from them, must have been brought together into one. Many scholars consider that the compilation cannot have been complete before the age of the Maccabees, as more than one Psalm is thought to refer to the agonies of faithful Israel during that great national crisis (e.g. Pss. xliv., lxxiv., lxxix., lxxx.). But it must have been substantially complete by the time that the Septuagint translation was made (in the second century B.C.); and so ancient then were the titles of the Psalms in the Hebrew that these Alexandrine scholars seem to have been frequently puzzled by them.

This collection of 150 Psalms, whenever precisely it may have been made, was divided into five books, each ending with an outburst of praise to the God of Israel.⁴ The key to this somewhat

¹ Note A, p. 101.

² Note B, p. 102.

³ "Concerning the Service of the Church," the original Preface to the Prayer Book.

⁴ xli. 13, lxxii. 18-19, lxxxix. 50, cvi. 46, cl.

artificial arrangement is no doubt to be found in the desire to make the Psalter correspond with the Pentateuch. "Moses," says a Rabbinical commentator (Midrash *Tillim*), "gave five-fifths of the Law, and correspondingly David gave the book of *Tehillim*, in which are five books." Of this Dr. Cheyne says, "The remark is a suggestive one: it seems to mean this—that the praise-book is the answer of the worshipping community to the demands made by its Lord in the Law, the reflexion of the external standard of faith and obedience in the utterance of the believing heart." This criticism is so illuminating that it may well suggest the first great principle in our own Christian use of the Psalter.

I. The Psalter is the inspired answer of praise which human faith is privileged to make to God's revelation. It is the "new song" put in the mouth of humanity by its Creator. "Thou preparest their heart, and Thine ear hearkeneth thereto" (Ps. x. 19).

This is surely a very great thought. The Old Testament is the record of God's gradual unveiling of Himself to His elect, whom for the world's sake He had chosen out of the world. The revelation was not indeed to them alone. God had spoken in many ways, more than even the Church yet recognises, to the heathen world. Yet to Israel God gave that highest privilege of receiving and keeping the true knowledge of Himself, of His unity, His universality, His moral being, His holiness, His love, and of the demand which this knowledge makes on human conscience. The unknown author of 2 Esdras, looking back on history after the great blow had fallen on Jerusalem, has expressed this in vivid and pathetic language: "Of all the flowers of the world Thou hast chosen Thee one lily: and of all the depths of the sea Thou hast filled Thee one river: and of all builded cities Thou hast hallowed Sion unto Thyself: ... and among all the multitudes of peoples Thou hast gotten Thee one people: and unto this people, whom Thou lovedst, Thou gavest a law that is approved of all" (2 Esd. v. 24-7). In the Psalter God has provided, as it were, for His people the words of praise in which their thankful hearts may express their love and loyalty to what He has revealed.

This feature, the glad response to revelation, is stamped upon the Psalter from end to end. Thus the 1st Psalm describes the secret of human blessedness:

His delight is in the law of the Lord:
And in His law will he exercise himself day and night.

The 9th Psalm is an outburst of thanksgiving to "the Name" of God, Who is revealed as the moral Governor of the world. The 19th couples the self-revelation of God in nature, God Whose glory the heavens declare, with the revelation given in the Law, which is, as it were, the sun in the moral world restoring the soul and enlightening the eyes. The 25th reads like a comment from man's heart on the great proclamation of God's Name given to Moses in the "cleft of the rock"—"The Lord, the Lord, a God full of compassion, and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy and truth" (Ex. xxxiii. 19, xxxiv. 5-7). So the Psalmist prays, as it were, in answer:

Call to remembrance, O Lord, Thy tender mercies:
And Thy loving-kindnesses, which have been ever of old.
O remember not the sins and offences of my youth:
But according to Thy mercy think Thou upon me, O Lord,
for Thy goodness.

The 40th offers the response of a converted will to what is found and recognised in the Law:

In the roll of the book it is written of me:
I delight to do Thy will, O my God.

(R. V.)

The 78th recounts the long history of rebellious Israel as in itself part of the "testimony" of God. The mingled record of deliverance and failure, of judgment and hope, is in itself "a parable," a "dark saying of old," which faith can read and make answer to. The 131st expresses the very fundamental spirit of faith, the essential temper and attitude of the Church, the spirit of humility, of intellectual submission, of obedience, which is the same under the Gospel Dispensation as under the Old Covenant.

Lord, I am not high-minded:
I have no proud looks.
I do not exercise myself in great matters:
Which are too high for me.

But the most remarkable illustration of this characteristic attitude of the believer is the 119th Psalm. It is like a piece of music, every verse a subtle and harmonious variation on one dominant theme. It is the voice of the converted soul, learning the one lesson which man must learn in this world's school, if he is to attain his true being—learning to be ever turning away from self, from one's own doubts, troubles, persecutions, sufferings, to rest on what God has revealed in His statutes, His judgments, His testimonies, His laws. Nor is it without a subtle propriety that this Psalm is arranged as an acrostic under the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. These letters are, as it were, the rudiments out of which man is enabled to exercise his characteristic gift of articulate speech; and in the acrostic Psalms they are visibly consecrated to His service Who made the mouth of man. And each part of the 119th Psalm consists of eight verses, a significant Hebrew number, the symbol of the Resurrection and the restoration of all things in that eighth day, the octave of eternity, which is yet to come, and will complete the work of the seven days of the first creation.

This Psalm, which expresses the unchanging spirit of true religion, was most naturally appropriated by Christian devotion to form the services for the working part of each day, beginning at Prime, when "man goeth forth to his work and his labour" with that benediction which comes on labour done with a pure motive in God's Name:

Blessed are those that are undefiled in the way:
And walk in the law of the Lord,

and ending at None, the hour of the death of the Lord, when day visibly declines, with the confession that the worker, as he looks back, must always make:

I have gone astray like a sheep that is lost:
O seek Thy servant, for I do not forget Thy commandments.

It was like a stream of water, crossing unexpectedly a dusty way—*mirabilia testimonia tua!* In psalm and antiphon, inexhaustibly fresh, the soul seemed to be taking refuge, at that undevout hour, from the sordid languor and the mean business of men's lives, in contemplation of the unfaltering vigour of the Divine righteousness, which had still those who sought it, not only watchful in the night, but alert in the drowsy afternoon.⁵

We can scarcely exaggerate the value, in our own time especially, of this use, not only of the 119th Psalm, but of the whole Psalter, as the response of the Church and the human soul to the revealed word of God. These times of Christ have indeed filled and enriched the early conception of "the Name" of God. We have learned to see in the Trinity the justification of belief in the Divine

⁵ Walter Pater, *Gaston de Latour*.

Unity; we have learned more of the Fatherhood of God in the face of His only Son; we have learned that the Cross is the key to human suffering; we have learned the Catholic nature of the Divine sovereignty: nevertheless the foundation teaching of the Psalmists as to the relation of the creature to his Creator remains unchanged. We still find in the Psalter a guide for our uncertain footsteps in our journey back to God. Is not the answer to every problem of faith, even such mysteries as the existence and continuance of evil, or the calamities that fall on the just, still to be found as the author of the 73rd Psalm found it, in returning and rest upon the God Who has made *Himself* known to suffering man?

My flesh and my heart faileth:
But God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever.

The prevailing thought of the 119th Psalm, that God's revelation is fixed and permanent and the law of human life, marks the great separation between the world and the Church. Such a belief is abhorrent and distasteful always to the natural mind, while it is familiar to and welcomed by the Catholic Church, as it was by the Jewish. The Church's witness to the world is of a revelation from above: she has *received* it; she may not alter it without apostasy. Her mission in the world is not to be the mirror of each succeeding phase of human thought, nor merely the consecration of human aspirations, but rather to speak with a supernatural authority, to tell men what God is and what is His will, "whether they will hear, or whether they will forbear." And the Church can only deliver her message aright, in the face of the frowns of the princes of this world, so long as worship gladdens and confirms her witness, so long as she herself finds her joy in contemplating her treasure and returning thanks for it to the Giver.

As the devout Israelite found in the Psalter the natural expression of an intelligent devotion to the God Who had revealed Himself in Law and Prophets, so the Christian Church, with no break of continuity, found the Psalter still adequate to express her joy in her fuller knowledge. For that fuller knowledge was strictly in line with the old. The faith of Israel had not been changed, but carried forward, developed, illuminated. In the Law the Gospel lay hid, and the Christian Church felt in the old words of devotion no outworn or alien accents, but living utterances of the Spirit of Life, which renewed their youth with hers. So from the beginning she found strength and comfort in her warfare for the truth, in the praises of Israel. From the beginning she based her ordered worship on the services of Temple and Synagogue. The choirs of the Catholic Church find their most lasting and characteristic voice not in hymn or anthem, but in—

"The chorus intoned
As the Levites go up to the altar in glory enthroned."

II. A second great principle of the Christian use of the Psalter will be found in its humanism. The Psalms are profoundly human. They sympathise with the soul of man in all his varied efforts after God. They find a voice for him in his battles for truth and right, in his moments of defeat as well as his victories, in his doubts no less than his certainties. They put words into his mouth as he contemplates the variety, the beauty, and the law of nature, or the injustice, the obstinacy, the treachery of men. The Psalms make his bed in his sickness; they strengthen him in the inward agonies of faith; they go with him to the gates of death, and farther still, even to God's "holy hill and His dwelling"; they point him to the eternal morning, when he will wake up and be satisfied with God's likeness (*cf.* Pss. civ., x., xli., lxxvii., lxxxviii., xliii., xvii.).

We have all no doubt felt something of this abiding sympathy of the Psalter. Dean Church expressed it very remarkably in a letter written by him shortly before his death:

The thought of what is to take the place of things here is with me all day long, but it is with a strange mixture of reality and unreality, and I wish it did me all the good it might. Books are not

satisfactory—at least, I have always found it so. It seems to me that there is nothing equal to letting the Psalms fall on one's ears, till at last a verse starts into meaning, which it is sure to do in the end (*Life and Letters*, p. 409, ed. 1897).

The Psalter has in this way endeared itself to many generations of struggling and dying men, and appealed even to many who were alien from its spirit. It has interwoven itself with striking scenes and moments of history, as when Hildebrand chanted "He that dwelleth in heaven shall laugh them to scorn" (ii.) before the encircling hosts of emperor and anti-pope; or when S. Athanasius, on that night of fear when the imperial soldiers had blockaded the doors of the church, and the fate of the faith of Nicæa seemed to hang in the balance, bade the deacon intone that Psalm which tells of God smiting great kings, "for His mercy endureth for ever" (cxxxvi.); or when Henry V. turned his face to the wall and died, confessing that his ideal was unfulfilled, and that God, and not he, must "build the walls of Jerusalem" (li.).

This humanism of the Psalter makes it pre-eminently a Christian possession, for Christianity is human through and through. It is the religion of "the soul which is by nature Christian." It redeems and consecrates, as no other religion could ever dare to do, all the fulness of man's being. And why? Here we touch the innermost secret of the Psalter. It is the book of the Incarnation. "The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us." God Himself has taken to Himself a human soul and spirit as well as a human body. And the Incarnate Word found on earth the voice of His communing with the Father, as the faithful of His own adopted nation did, in the words of the Psalms. These words rise naturally to His lips in the supreme agony on the Cross; they must have provided His prayers and thanksgivings, we may reverently imagine, not only in the public services which He attended, but in His home at Nazareth, and in His lonely vigils of prayer. He gathered together in Himself all the human experiences of the past which are reflected in the Psalter. Hence the Psalter is also the characteristic voice of His Church, that Church which was founded by Him, and is united to Him, and is the assembly of the first-born of humanity calling Him "Lord" and Mary "Mother."

The consideration of these great truths will be reserved for subsequent lectures; but it would be impossible to speak of general principles in our Christian use of the Psalter without pointing out on the very threshold its indissoluble connection, historically and doctrinally, with the "Author and Finisher of our faith," and with His Church "the household of faith."

III. Once again, the Psalter is appropriate for Christian use because it is the book of Hope. The world estranged from God is without hope. The heathen looked back to a golden age; Virgil stands almost alone in his dream of its possible return.⁶ The Israel of God is the fellowship of the future. It feels itself in harmony with an increasing purpose of God. The great revelation to Moses of the Name of God, "I will be that I will be" (Ex. iii. 14, R.V. marg.), left its mark on all subsequent history. So the Old Testament writers, under every imaginable difficulty and persecution and reverse, among the treacheries of friends, as well as the attacks of a hostile heathen world, are ever straining forward to a coming of God and a Kingdom of God. Like the spirits in Virgil's vision:

Stabant orantes primi transmittere cursum,
Tendebantque manus ripæ ulterioris amore.⁷

The Psalms throughout delight in this attitude. The most casual reader is struck by the constancy with which an outlook of hope and joy succeeds to the sorrow and stress of the opening verses of Psalm after Psalm. Even the darkest have their gleams of promise. And so the Christian Church, having learned what the hope of Israel meant, found the Psalms come naturally to her lips. She could

⁶ Virgil, *eclogue* iv.

⁷ Virgil, *Aeneid*, vi. 313, 314 (*cf.* Heb. xi. 13): Praying, they stood with hands of love outspread, If but that farther shore each might be first to tread.

sing with fuller meaning of the rising up again of the righteous (xli.), of the deliverances from the stormy waters and from the wandering out of the way in the wilderness (cvii.), of the bringing up of the sufferer "from the deep of the earth again" (lxxi.). The Psalter was and is to the Christian not merely the reflection of his characteristic sorrows and trials, but the book of the Resurrection, of the restitution of all things, of the doing away of the imperfect and the coming of the perfect.

Thou shalt shew me the path of life; in Thy presence
is the fulness of joy:
And at Thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore.

(xvi. 12.)

Thus the Psalter is ours, for it is the new song of gratitude to Him Who has given us the Catholic Faith; it is ours because it is the book of Him Who has redeemed us by making Himself one with us, and "taking the manhood into God"; it is ours because it has not merely the human consecration of ages of Christian use, but it is the channel which the Holy Spirit, Who dwells in the Church, seems deliberately to have chosen in which to make His ineffable intercession for the sons of God who wait for their adoption, "the redemption of the body" (Rom. viii. 19-27). Appreciation of the Psalter grows with the devout use of it. The obligation to recite it month by month in the daily office is one of the best gifts the Church has given to her priests; and both priest and laity alike will find increasingly that the Psalms need no apology. They are the noblest and most comprehensive form of public worship; they are the most truly satisfying book of private devotion.

PART II. DIFFICULTIES

Servus tuus sum ego:

Da mihi intellectum ut sciam testimonia tua.

Besides general principles, we are also to consider some of the general difficulties in the use of the Psalter as a Christian book. The Psalms are certainly not easy. Nothing as great as they are ever could be easy. None of the books of the Bible yield their secret except to labour and prayer, and the Psalms present special difficulties of their own. These are of various kinds and need various methods of approach. There is a difficulty inherent in the very origin and history of the Psalms. They are translated somewhat imperfectly from an ancient language, not akin to our own—a language which, if not difficult in itself, is rendered so by the comparative scantiness of its literature. The Psalms, humanly speaking, are the work of a race widely different from ourselves in habits and in modes of thought and expression. They contain allusions to events and circumstances imperfectly known or realised to-day. Most of our interpretation of these things is necessarily guess-work. The same Psalm may be ascribed with equal probability, by scholars of equal learning and reverence, to periods many centuries apart. Was the sufferer of Ps. xxii. David or Jeremiah, or is it altogether an ideal portrait? Was the coming of the heathen into God's inheritance of Ps. lxxix. that of the Babylonians in the sixth century B.C. or of the soldiers of Antiochus in the second? Who was the "king's daughter" in Ps. xlv. and who "the daughter of Tyre"? Is the Temple of the Psalms ever the first Temple, or is it always the second? Such problems still wait an answer. Again, there are difficulties inherent in Hebrew thought. It is intensely concrete and personal, in contrast with our more usual abstractions and generalities. The Psalmists speak habitually of "the wicked" and "the ungodly," where we should more naturally speak of the qualities rather than the persons. They ignore, as a rule, immediate or secondary causes, and ascribe everything in nature or human affairs to the direct action or intervention of God. Thus a thunder-storm is described:

There went a smoke out in His presence:
And a consuming fire out of His mouth,
so that coals were kindled at it.

(xviii. 8.)

And thus a national calamity:

Thou hast shewed Thy people heavy things:
Thou hast given us a drink of deadly wine.

(lx. 3.)

Such ways of describing God's work in Nature or His providence are partly, of course, due to the fact (often overlooked by the half-educated) that the Psalms are poetry and not prose. For the same reason inanimate objects are personified: "the earth trembled at the look of Him," "the mountains skipped like lambs"; the mythical "Leviathan" appears both as a title of Egypt (lxxiv. 15) and as an actual monster of the deep (civ. 26). God Himself, again, is spoken of in language that might seem more appropriate to man. He is "provoked," and "tempted." He awakes "like a giant refreshed with wine." He is called upon, not to sleep nor to forget, to avenge, to "bow the heavens and come down."

Nor do the Psalms in their literal meaning rise always above the current and imperfect religious conceptions of their time. The moral difficulties involved in this will be considered a little later, but it may be interesting to point out here some examples which bear on the progressiveness of revelation

in the Old Testament by which heathen ideas became, under God's guidance, "stepping-stones to higher things." The Psalms seem sometimes to speak as if "the gods of the heathen" really existed and were in some way rivals of the God of Israel, universal and supreme though He is acknowledged to be. They are spoken of as "devils" as well as idols. They are called upon to "worship Him" (*cf.* cvi. 36, xcvi. 7, 9, cxxxviii. i).

Again, the Psalmists' horizon is, for the most part, limited to this present life, which is regarded as if it were the chief, almost the only, scene in which moral retribution would be worked out. And occasionally there appears the primitive Hebrew idea of the after-world as the vague and gloomy Sheol, like the shadowy Hades of Homer, where the dead "go down into silence," where, instead of purpose and progress, there is but a dawnless twilight, the land "without any order" of Job (xlix., lxxxviii., cxv. 17).

And yet the more one studies and uses the Psalms in the light of other Scriptures and the Church's interpretation, the more it is found that these partial, at first sight erroneous, conceptions have still their practical value for Christians. There is nothing in them that is positively false, and they suggest, on the other hand, aspects of truth which we tend to forget. Thus in the instances given above, by "the gods of the heathen" the Christian may well be reminded of the continued existence and influence in the heathen world of the powers of evil, of the malignant warfare that is still being waged by "principalities and powers" against light and truth. The ancient conception of the shadowy abode of the dead has also its value. Even the Lord Himself could speak of the night coming "when no man can work" (John ix. 4), and such Psalms as the 49th and the 115th may serve to remind us that this life is a time of work and probation in a sense that the life after death is not, that the grave cannot reverse the line that has been followed here nor put praises in the mouth of those who have never praised God "secretly or in the congregation" in this world. And again, the "present-worldliness" of the Psalter may well point the duty of Christians in respect of what they see and know around them here. Many are content, while repeating pious phrases about heaven, to ignore the fact that this present human life is the great sphere of Christian activity, and that whether the Church is able to regenerate human society here or not, it is her business to try to do it, as fellow-workers with Him—

Who helpeth them to right that suffer wrong:
Who feedeth the hungry.

(*cxlvi. 6.*)

Have we not a remarkable witness to the continuity of the Holy Spirit's teaching, and to the fact that not "one jot or one tittle" of the law is to remain unfulfilled, in the way that these apparent imperfections and limitations of the Psalter fall into their place in connection with the later revelation?

Another obvious difficulty of the Psalter lies in the frequent obscurity of connection between verse and verse, in the rapid transitions, in the uncertainty as to the sequence of thought, or the meaning of the Psalm as a whole. This difficulty, as it bears upon the liturgical use of the Psalms, has been increased by the abolition of the *antiphons*, which in the pre-Reformation offices certainly helped at times to suggest a leading thought, or to guide the worshipper as to the Church's intention in the recitation of this or that Psalm. (Note C, p. 104.) Sometimes indeed, the connection between the verses of a Psalm is really very slight, more a matter of suggestion or association than of logic. Such is the case in "proverbial" Psalms, like the 33rd, 34th, and 37th, or the 119th. But in others it is well worth the effort to gain a continuous view of the Psalm as a whole. A simple commentary will give this, or even sometimes the R.V. alone, or the headings in the A.V., such as the very suggestive one prefixed to the 110th: "1 The kingdom, 4 the priesthood, 5 the conquest, 7 and the passion of Christ." (Note D, p. 106.)

There are also difficulties caused by a real obscurity in the Hebrew, or by mistranslations. Here, again, a comparison with the R.V. is of great value. The meaning of the 87th springs to light at once

when we read "This one was born there," instead of the mysterious "Lo, there was he born," etc. The Psalm refers not to the birth of the Messiah, but to the new birth of individuals out of the heathen races who thus become citizens of Sion. "So let indignation vex him, even as a thing that is raw" (lviii. 8), becomes certainly more intelligible as "He shall take them away with a whirlwind, the green and the burning alike" (a metaphor from a traveller's fire of brushwood, blown away by a sudden wind); and even if "the beasts of the people" remains still obscure in Ps. lxxviii. in the revised translation, its "why hop ye so, ye high hills?" is more significant when it is read—

Why look ye askance, ye high mountains:
At the mountain which God hath desired for His abode?

Sometimes the alteration of a single word makes the difference between obscurity and sense, as in xlix. 5, where "the wickedness of my heels" becomes intelligible as "iniquity at my heels"; or in Ps. xlii., where "Therefore will I remember thee concerning the land of Judah and the little hill of Hermon" is made clear at once by the substitution of "from" for "concerning." The verse is the cry of the exile, who, far away in northern Palestine, among the sources of the Jordan, yearns for the Temple and its services, which he is no longer able to visit.

Doubtless the reasons which prevented the older version of the Psalms being changed in the Prayer Book in the seventeenth century, when other passages of Scripture were revised, still hold good. Neither A.V. nor R.V. are so well adapted for music, nor have they endeared themselves to the worshipper by daily use. Those who have time and opportunity may discover for themselves more exact meanings or clear up difficulties by private study. But even those who have not may find that there are better uses of the Psalter than a merely intellectual grasp of its meaning. Possibly an occasional obscurity may even have a humbling or awe-inspiring effect on the mind. The strange version of the Vulgate of Ps. lxxi. 14, though incorrect, is not without its point:

Quoniam non cognovi litteraturam,
introibo in potentias Domini.⁸

Learning by itself can never lift the soul on the wings of devotion and worship. The unlearned, Christ's "little ones," have in every age found a voice that spoke to them in the liturgy of the Catholic Church, even though its accents were inarticulate, and its message music rather than words. Such considerations may prevent us distressing ourselves because something, perhaps much, in the Church's book of praise is unintelligible and must remain so.

Two practical suggestions may be offered here to those who find themselves hindered in devotion by the difficulties of the Psalter, by its rapid transitions, or its constantly varying tone. The leading purpose of the Psalter in the Church's use is expressed in its Hebrew title, *Tehillim*, "praises." "We shall do well," says Dr. Cheyne, "to accustom ourselves to the intelligent use of this title, and to look out in every psalm for an element of praise." It is good to allow this thought to dominate our mind while the Psalms are being read or sung in the Church's service. For this and for that our fathers in the Faith thanked God; for what He had revealed, or promised or done. And He is the same, He changes not. Ever and anon as the service proceeds, a verse will suggest some ground of thanksgiving for ourselves or for the Church we love. We need to keep our minds, like our bodies, in the attitude of praise and aspiration, like that exiled lover of his nation who wrote Ps. cvi.:

Remember me, O Lord, according to the favour that Thou
bearest unto Thy people:

⁸ "Inasmuch as I know not man's learning, I will enter into the mighty works of the Lord."

O visit me with Thy salvation;
That I may see the felicity of Thy chosen:
And rejoice in the gladness of Thy people,
And give thanks with Thine inheritance.

(*cvi. 4, 5.*)

Not only the attitude of praise should be cultivated, but also that of sympathy. This will be especially fruitful as we take upon our lips these constantly recurring expressions of penitence, struggle, and sorrow. These are certain to be at times unreal to us, unless we can remember that we recite them not merely for ourselves, but as part of the Church's intercession for the world, in which it is our privilege to take part. Others are suffering under the burden of sin and grief, others are overwhelmed with sorrow, racked with pain, harried by the slanderer and the persecutor. It is such as these that we remember before God, as fellow-members of the one body. And will not such a remembrance, such sympathy, bring us very near to our blessed Lord's own use of the Psalter in His days on earth, Who "Himself took our infirmities and bore our sicknesses"?

Yet beyond all these difficulties of language, history, and modes of thought, whether they yield to study or not, there are outstanding *moral*

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