

Anatomy of an Evensong

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Introduction

In a recent book, Eamon Duffy, the British Catholic historian writes,

“Anglican Choral Evensong is to my mind the greatest liturgical achievement of the Reformation, a perfect blend of noble prayer in memorable language, interspersed with the reading of two extended passages of Scripture, all set to glorious music.”

Choral Evensong represents a living tradition of engaged devotion. It is a continuum of musical prayer teeming with quicksilver vitality and artistic richness, serving as an instrument of grace consecrated to the sanctification of time and all the souls gathered through song and prayer into the Body of the Church.

Mediated through the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, resonant throughout the English-speaking world, and newly restored to the Catholic Church in the Book of Divine Worship (used in the Anglican Use parishes of the Roman Rite), the tradition of Evensong condenses and distills the legacy of the ancient Jewish synagogue, the Divine Office of the early church, the Benedictine canonical hours and the medieval breviaries, all combined with the sober biblical piety and rich hymnody of Protestant devotion. The Prayer Book office of Evensong is a work of immense poetic beauty and devotional artistry; it is a cultural monument of the English patrimony of worship; and it is the centerpiece of the Anglican choral tradition. Next to musical settings of the Catholic Mass and Latin Vespers, Evensong is the pre-eminent religious service that has attracted the talents of some of the world’s great composers for the last four hundred years. In the English tradition, it holds pride of place and has occasioned some of the finest choral achievements of musicians from Thomas Tallis in the sixteenth-century to Herbert Howells, John Taverner, and a host of contemporary composers writing and performing today.

That choral Evensong so richly lends itself to musical treatment testifies to the deep and abiding connection between singing and praying, a connection that the Prayer Book offices continue to inspire and manifest. St. Augustine famously said that he who sings prays twice. In the Old Testament, most especially in the Book of Psalms, worship is quintessentially music and prayer is most characteristically expressed as song. “Sing we merrily unto God our strength; make a cheerful noise unto the God of Jacob,” says Psalm 81, and Psalm 95, the Venite begins with the imperative, “O come, let us sing unto the Lord; let us heartily rejoice in the strength of our salvation.”

Throughout Scripture, music and song punctuate and heighten significant moments in the story of God’s relationship with his people. According to the writer of the Book of Job, at the creation of the world, “the morning stars sang for joy”. At the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt, Moses and Miriam sing songs to the Lord. It is the singing of the angels that heralds the birth of the Christ child. And in the life of the world to come, there will be no end to the singing around the throne of the Lamb. The Book of

Revelation paints a vivid picture of the singing of the saints in heaven as one, big eternal choral Evensong! As the Bible makes clear, it is through sacred music and prayerful song that we are transported beyond ourselves to be caught up into the deeper experience of the presence of God.

Beyond Scripture, this tradition of sacred song acquires further authority with the medieval inheritance of Platonic and Pythagorean ideas of the mystical significance of music. The creative love of God turns the stars and planets and makes the music of the spheres. According to medieval and Renaissance doctrines of mystic harmony, hearing that cosmic music and attuning ourselves to its rhythms is the very mode of our participation in the life of God. This is the understanding that inspired the flowering of monastic chant, the music of Hildegard von Bingen, and the tradition that comes down to us in Renaissance polyphony. It is also the tradition that informed the making of the Book of Common Prayer and its musical settings in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Church music, wrote Sir Thomas Browne in the middle of the seventeenth century, moves us to contemplate and share in the divinity of “the First Composer” and to hear “his melodious love.”

When the soul’s address to God and God’s address to the soul take voice in music and assume form in poetry, the ritual act of worship acquires the character of a work of art. According to Evelyn Underhill, the music and poetry of the Divine Office, as represented in choral Evensong, work as art to register “the soul’s deep and awestruck apprehension of the numinous” and to provide “a powerful stimulant of the transcendental sense.”

The Structure of Evensong

The daily offices of Morning and Evening Prayer have their roots in the synagogue worship of the ancient Hebrews and are directly descended from the daily cycle of prayer in the Middle Ages known as the canonical hours. Formulated in the early church, codified in the sixth century with the Rule of St. Benedict, and later enshrined in the medieval breviaries of the secular and monastic clergy of the Latin Church, the Divine Office provided, together with the Eucharist, the traditional locus and center of Christian worship. This tradition of worship developed over the course of a thousand years and underwent rich and intricate elaboration until the tragic dislocations of the Protestant Reformation.

In England, much of the Catholic liturgical heritage was overturned, lost, and wantonly destroyed, but much was also preserved and translated into the vernacular idiom of reformed worship. When Thomas Cranmer, the Protestant Archbishop of Canterbury set out to compose the first Book of Common Prayer, adopted in 1549, he borrowed liberally from the Roman Rite and its traditional English variations in the Sarum Missal and Breviary. His translation and radical simplification of the Divine Office entailed regrettable losses as well as notable gains. Following the precedent of Francisco Cardinal Quiñone’s revision and truncation of the Roman Breviary, first published by authority of Pope Paul III in 1535, Cranmer reduced the canonical hours from eight to two daily offices; he combined Matins and Lauds to produce Morning Prayer and conflated Vespers and Compline to fashion the office of Evening Prayer. Cranmer omitted from the reformed offices the antiphons to the Psalms, and he also jettisoned the traditional anthems to the Blessed Virgin together with the rich repertory of Latin metrical hymns. Despite these losses, the Prayer Book daily offices achieved a practical simplification of their format, and with their translation into English he rendered the essential content of the old Latin breviary accessible to the laity. While Cranmer may have been a man of dubious character and waffling theology, he was indisputably a brilliant linguist and a superb stylist. He seized the full resources of the English language

at a remarkable stage in its development to fashion a robust and enduring language of corporate prayer. With its strong, poetic clarity, its slightly archaic and elevated diction, its solidly biblical emphasis and resonance, together with its sonorous prose rhythms, the Prayer Book has provided generations with a distinctively English vehicle for communal worship, a manual of lay spirituality, and a primer in practical divinity. By the time of its definitive revision in 1662 the Prayer Book was to draw from many sources, including the Roman, Gallican, and Eastern rites, to create a singular synthesis and distillation of the Church's patrimony of worship and devotion. It was G. K. Chesterton who observed that the Prayer Book is not only the first great Protestant book of devotion, it is also the last great Catholic book of worship, and it incorporates between its covers an entire resume of Christian liturgy with strata drawn from the whole sequence and history of its development from patristic to modern times.

The daily offices of Morning and Evening Prayer, though distinct in tone are parallel in structure and exhibit a certain rhythm and design of movement built out of the elements of versicles and responses, psalms, canticles, scripture readings, prayers and collects, further enriched with the musical framework of hymns and anthems. The two offices of Morning and Evening Prayer share a common fourfold sequence: First, there is a penitential introduction, moving from the opening sentences through the exhortation, confession, and absolution, culminating with the first recitation of the Lord's Prayer. The Psalter then forms the second section of the offices and provides a rich range of images and emotions, leading to the third movement that rehearses salvation history in scriptural lessons and canticles. Fourthly and finally, the offices conclude with the confession of faith in reciting the Creed and with the measured flow of petitionary prayer linking the personal concerns of the faithful with the common supplication of the Church throughout the ages.

Despite these structural similarities of Morning and Evening Prayer, there are notable differences. Where Morning Prayer is characterized by the intensity and vigor of consecrating the new day, the Evening service breathes a tranquil spirit, which is well embodied in the soothing mood of the Song of Simeon, the *Nunc dimittis*, with its confident assurance of salvation in the gathered church.

Like the morning office, Evensong begins with a summons to worship followed by a penitential rite, figured in the General Confession. After the declaration of Absolution with its assurance of divine mercy, the service moves swiftly through the *Preces* to acts of praise in the words of the Psalter. Up to this point, as Massey Shepherd observes, the office moves primarily in the direction of man to God. Then with the lessons from the Old and New Testaments, the movement is reversed and moves from God to man in recounting the story of God's revelation in the course of sacred history. The first canticle, the Magnificat, sung between the lessons, serves to link the two covenants. The Gospel canticle sung after the second lesson, the *Nunc dimittis* offers a summary response of praise for God's revelation to us and his redemption of us. Here the office makes another transition to a final man-to-God direction, consisting of the declaration of faith in the recitation of the Apostle's Creed, the suffrages and responses, together with the prayers, the so-called "collects" which gather together or collect the petitions and supplications of the faithful offered up to the Father in the name of Christ the redeemer.

The Lord's Prayer, as the model of all our prayers, is prayed through twice in the Evening service; first, it is said by the congregation in the beginning as the culmination of the penitential rite; then toward the end of the service the Lord's Prayer is heard again but this time sung with the choir as a confident response to the affirmation of faith in the Apostle's Creed.

The first movement of Evensong is penitential in character but gives way to praise and thanksgiving with the little litany known as the Preces followed by the Gloria Patri, the so-called “little or minor” doxology that offers a succinct summary of all Christian praise to God in his Triune Being and which properly opens and frames the psalmody of the office.

The Psalms

Next, after the penitential rite, follows the Psalter, appointed in the Prayer Book to be read through every month. From the earliest centuries of the Church the Psalms of David have always provided the core of the Divine Office and with good reason. The Hebrew Psalter, with its great range of devotional expression, covering every mood and insight of the God-desiring soul from deepest abasement to adoring delight, was of course the first, and, as it remains, the greatest hymn book of the Christian family.

As appointed in the Prayer Book, the recitation of the Psalms is framed with the Trinitarian doxology of the Gloria Patri, giving a specifically Christian context to the anguish and joy of David and the Israelites while further enabling the Psalms to speak with the voice of Christ himself, with the voice of his body the Church, and with the voice of every Christian believer. As the seventeenth century Anglican divine and poet John Donne wrote,

“The Psalms are the Manna of the Church. As Manna tasted to every man like that that he liked best, so do the Psalms minister instruction, and satisfaction, to every man, in every emergency and occasion.”

In the same vein, St. Athanasius argued centuries earlier that the Psalter joins the public, corporate prayer of the church with our deepest and most personal cares and longings: “In the Psalter you learn about yourself,” he said. “You find depicted in it all the movements of your soul, all its changes, its ups and downs, its failures and recoveries.” The Psalter has proven so remarkably resonant and so universally relevant on account of its uniquely poetic quality. As C. S. Lewis reminds us, the Psalms are first and foremost poems speaking from the richness and density of their figurative language and constituting the many-stringed harp upon which we can sound all the chords of our prayer life and the deep notes of the human heart.

The Prayer Book uniquely captures the poetic substance and texture of the Hebrew Psalter in its use of the incomparable translation of Miles Coverdale from the 1539 Great Bible, the first complete vernacular Bible in English and the version of the Psalms subsequently incorporated into the Book of Common Prayer in 1662. Though the Coverdale Psalter is by no means the most accurate translation, it is without a doubt the most richly poetic and it is the version that most effectively conveys the resonant parallelism of the Hebrew original.

With the development of the English tradition of choral Evensong there emerged in Anglican chant a perfect musical vehicle for the singing of the Coverdale Psalter and for the inflection of its poetic parallelism. In Anglican chant, as distinct from Gregorian chant or plainsong, the first portion of a line is sung on a sustained pitch with harmonic support, with the final syllables resolving in a short series of chords. Though the origins of Anglican chant are obscure, it was well established by the eighteenth century. Early examples of single chants date from the sixteenth-century and the work of Thomas Tallis and his contemporaries. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, English composers fully exploited

the rich and varied resources of Anglican chant to produce hundreds of expressive musical settings of all the Psalms as regularly sung at Evensong in cathedral and collegiate churches.

The Magnificat

Just after the Psalms in the order of service for Evening Prayer comes the first lesson from the Old Testament and then the first Gospel canticle, the Song of Mary, known by its Latin title as the Magnificat. The reading of the Old Testament lesson leads into and prefigures Mary's rejoicing as the human agent of the Incarnation, inaugurating thereby the New Covenant of the Redemption. Let me quote the words of Massey Shepherd in his commentary on the office of Evening Prayer:

"The Song of our Lord's Mother, as recorded in the Gospel of Luke on the occasion of her visit to the mother of St. John Baptist, has been a canticle in the Church's liturgical offices from at least the fourth century. . . . St. Benedict, following the custom of the Roman church, appointed this song as the climax of the Vespers office, where it subsequently remained in the Roman Breviary. In his conflation of Vespers and Compline to make the service of Evening Prayer Archbishop Cranmer fittingly set the Magnificat in a position where it links the lesson of the Old Testament with that of the New. For the Magnificat is the loveliest flower of Hebrew messianic poetry, blossoming on the eve of the Incarnation. . . . It sums up, in Mary's receptive humility, the hope of the lowly and meek, the hungry and poor for the redemptive fulfillment of God's promises to Israel. In addition, its simple faith, its joyful hope, its humble gratitude, and its calm submission bear eloquent testimony to the character and spirit of her who was chosen to be the mother of God."

The Nunc dimittis

As veteran choristers are wont to say, we move now from the "Mag" to the "Nunc." Just after the reading of the New Testament lesson, the choir sings the second Gospel canticle at Evensong, the Nunc dimittis, the Song of Simeon, drawn like the Magnificat from the Gospel according to Luke.

The Song of Simeon has been sung at the evening offices of the Church since the fourth century. In the West it became the canticle for Compline in the Roman and Sarum Breviaries. Massey Shepherd observes:

"As the Magnificat looks forward to the Incarnation, the Nunc dimittis looks back upon Christ's advent as an accomplished fact. Thus it appropriately follows the New Testament lesson, as the Magnificat appropriately precedes it. And whereas the Magnificat concentrates its thought upon the coming of Christ as the fulfillment of Israel's hope, the Nunc dimittis contemplates the universal meaning of the Incarnation, not only as the 'glory' of Israel, but also as the 'light' of the Gentiles."

The rest of the service

Originally the Daily Offices ended with the canticles and lessons, but during the Middle Ages it became customary to add to them brief devotions in form of versicles and responses and prayers. In the 1549 Prayer Book Cranmer followed this precedent as given in the Sarum Breviary office of Compline, which concludes with the Kyrie, Lord's Prayer, Creed, and suffrages. However, in the second edition of the

Prayer Book in 1552, the order was changed such that the recitation of the Apostles' Creed came just after the second canticle and before the Lord's Prayer, suffrages, and collects. The change was felicitous and gave to the evening office the coherence and direction of movement it would otherwise lack. In the version ratified in the 1662 Prayer Book, the record of God's revelation in the Scriptures, with the Psalms, Old Testament lesson, Magnificat, New Testament lesson, and Nunc dimittis issues triumphantly in the apostolic Church's symbol of faith, the baptismal creed that entitles the faithful to boldly pray our Lord's own prayer in addressing the Father as adopted sons of God in Christ.

The versicles and responses that make up the suffrages, together with the Lord's Prayer recapitulate the Psalms from which they are drawn and anticipate the prayers of petition and supplication which follow and which thus gather and collect the aspirations of the faithful at the end of day. These prayers consist in the three "collects" that sum up and conclude the office. First comes the Collect of the Day, matching the appropriate commemoration of the liturgical calendar or season of the church year; then comes the Collect for Peace, an exquisitely beautiful prayer translated from the Gelasian Sacramentary and which served as the collect of the votive Mass for Peace in the Sarum and Roman Missals. Last, there is the pithy supplication of the Collect for Aid Against Perils, likewise drawn from the Gelasian Sacramentary and used in the Sarum office of Compline:

"Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord, and by thy great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night; for the love of thy only Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen."

The Anthem

Thus the service of Evensong draws toward its close, but before the so-called prayer of Saint Chrysostom at the end and the concluding Grace or benediction, in the 1662 Prayer Book we come upon an intriguing rubric. Just after the third Collect for Aid Against Perils, we read in italic script and red letters these words: "In quires and places where they sing here followeth the anthem." Owing to the extraordinary ambiguity and elasticity of the English word anthem, this rubric has been read with holiday license by choristers and choirmasters so as to permit the free performance of all manner of sacred music otherwise unrepresented in the service of choral Evensong. The English word anthem was originally synonymous with the term antiphon and could refer either to verses of scripture framing the psalms or canticles or to any of several traditional responsive prayers like those offered to Blessed Virgin at the conclusion of the Catholic offices. However, by the seventeenth century the term came to refer to any musical setting sung by a choir of a non-liturgical text—or for that matter a liturgical text.

It is fitting then perhaps that the balanced order and measured cadences of Evensong, this disciplined exercise in worshipping the Lord in the beauty of holiness, now sometimes spills over with the anthem in a cornucopia of musical invention and ingenuity, making at the end of things a most joyful noise.

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