Bible Study 85

# July 12, 2023

The Book of Common Prayer (continued….)

The Psalter

From BCP 585 we have all 150 of the Psalms of the Old Testament. We do not know when or how the Psalms were composed only that they were written down during the time of the Great Exiles. More than likely the Psalms were used in oral form for Jewish/Hebrew liturgy and worship services. We can see immediately that there are psalms for several occasions.

There are Psalms of praise to God.

Psalms of Thanksgiving.

Psalms petitioning God for favors.

There are Psalms in time of peril and distress especially defeat by an enemy.

These include Psalms begging for forgiveness and to abate God’s anger.

Psalms that curse an enemy.

Psalms of longing for peace and God’s mighty salvation.

Psalms more than likely were sung. From the earliest of monastic times Psalms were used in Christian monasteries and incorporated into Morning and Evening Prayer.

Between 1545 and 1565 the Roman church held its Council of the Church at Trent in Italy. The Council of Trent was the Catholic response to the Reformation. It’s first job was to seek reform of many of the grievance’s Protestants had so accurately pointed out since 1517.

One of the first of these reforms was to take stricter control of clergy, religious and monks and nuns under vows. For this reason, the church structured all religious and dioceses to build Seminaries and Houses of Theology and formation for the proper training of Priests, Deacons and everyone under vows.

Second, every religious and clergy must under penalty dress in accordance with their Order or Clerical rank. Priests must wear black and wear a collar that identified them

Third: all must pray the Breviary, daily. (A book containing all the Divine Offices of the Church—Morning Prayer; Noon Day Prayer; Vespers; Compline; Evening Prayer and set readings for the day.) Much of the Office was made up of Prayer, Psalms and scripture readings. Whether individually, or as a community ALL must complete this obligation under penalty of mortal sin.

The church was thus determined to turn its clergy into men and women of prayer.

Anglican and many other denominations followed suite. So beside the Book of Common Prayer every member of the Episcopal Clergy is given a copy of the Episcopal Divine Office to pray each day.

Monasteries and Convents found that they could sing the Office in choir using Plain Chant and Gregorian Chant. This had been handed down since around the Twelfth Century and can be found in a book named “The Liber.” Those who know how to read music will nod with the familiarity of Plain Chant. First thing to notice is that the notes are square and not round. It is one of the earliest ways or forms of writing music down. Given a simple set of rules it is easy to follow. Plain Chant is still used today, not just by religious but by professional choirs performing classic works by the great composers of the past.

Psalms provide us with prayer for all occasions and are used in the Eucharistic liturgy and Sacramental liturgy widely. Psalms are quoted and are described by scripture scholars as one of the Five Great Books of Wisdom of the Old Testament.

Lastly, Psalms from the Psalter have been used as hymns, often with many tunes. A case in point being Ps. 23 “The Lord’s my shepherd.”

In Holy Week Thursday, Friday and Saturday, all Monasteries rise early and perform a ceremony called Tenebrae. A word that means ‘darkness’ or ‘shadows’. Here they light the Seven Branch Candlestick one at a time. Each candle is accompanied by Psalms and a lesson reading. The candles are lit and then extinguished one at a time; giving us fourteen readings and fourteen Psalms. It represents the Death and Passion of Christ from his trials to his death on the cross. Often sung, the church is left finally in darkness representing Christ in the tomb as we wait for the Third day and his Resurrection.

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