

## Programme 3 The Metrical Psalm “Make a joyful noise.”

### Broadcast Dates

Programmes are broadcast on BBC 2 in Northern Ireland on Thursday mornings from 10.50-11.20am.

| Programme | Title              | Broadcast Date            |
|-----------|--------------------|---------------------------|
| 1         | The Pipe Band      | 9 <sup>th</sup> November  |
| 2         | The Harp           | 16 <sup>th</sup> November |
| 3         | The Metrical Psalm | 23 <sup>rd</sup> November |
| 4         | The Uilleann Pipes | 30 <sup>th</sup> November |

### Programme 3 – The Metrical Psalm

By Rev. Robert Tosh

### Learning Objectives:

At the end of the programme pupils will have:

- Developed some awareness of the tradition of singing metrical psalms unaccompanied.
- Learned about the Reformed Presbyterian community and the social and spiritual significance of the psalm singing tradition.
- Gained an understanding of the importance of the singing and the content of the psalms to individuals within that community.

### About the Programme

The programme looks at Reformed Presbyterians, of different ages in rural North Antrim, who are all involved in singing the metrical psalms. It shows them singing at home, in church and in a special choir made up of members of different churches in the Northern Reformed Presbytery. The roots and history of the tradition are explained along with the reasons why Reformed Presbyterians sing as they do. The deep significance of the psalms for all the contributors is highlighted - not just through the obvious pleasure obtain in singing them - but also in the ways their spiritual content speaks to the people and sustains them. There is also some explanation about plans to revise the Psalter. The programme gives a fascinating insight into the ethos and structure of a small, and relatively little known, Christian Community in Northern Ireland.

### Background

The Book of Psalms in the Old Testament has been used in worship for centuries. Anglicans chant the Psalms, using prose translations. Roman Catholics sing them antiphonally, with a sentence or antiphon sung between the different verses. They use plainsong, plain chant or modern settings, like those of Joseph Gelineau. Presbyterians have tended to sing the psalms in the metrical version. The Psalms have also been the inspiration for many great traditional hymns, like *Praise*

*my soul the King of Heaven* and are still the basis of modern hymns and songs, like *I lift my eyes to the quiet hills*.

The Psalms were, of course, first used in Jewish worship and they still are, in the Hebrew language. They are of different literary types: for example laments and psalms of thanksgiving. They express the entire range of human emotions: elation, rejoicing, anger, depression. One of the Church Fathers, St. Athanasius (born about 296; died, 373) said that the Psalter is *a' book that includes the whole life of man, all conditions of the mind and all movements of thought.*'

The Psalms are poems but not poetry as it would now generally be recognised. In the original Hebrew, the rhyming of words plays no part. The poetry is found in the reinforcement or contrast of *ideas*, known as parallelism. So in Psalm 103, the thought of the first line (*Praise the Lord, my soul!*) is repeated in the second (*All my being, praise his holy name*). Or the ideas contrast as in Psalm 1.6: *The righteous are guided and protected by the Lord* and then there is the contrast in the next line: *but the evil are on the way to their doom*.

Before the Protestant Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the psalms would have been sung in Latin and to plainsong, the sort of music still used in many monasteries and which has become quite popular lately with large sales of CDs. But because medieval church music was in Latin, which few worshippers understood, and because the music was complicated, singing tended to be left to trained choirs.

One of the aims of the reformers was to allow the whole people of God to sing together in worship. Thus, Martin Luther, the German Reformer, developed the tradition of the German chorale which had a huge influence on the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. The French Reformer, John Calvin, in his work in Strasbourg and Geneva encouraged the use of psalms in metrical forms. Calvin wrote: *We will find no better nor more appropriate songs than the Psalms of David, which the Holy Spirit dictated and gave to him*. He also disapproved of organs because they tended to take the worshipper's attention away from the words they were singing.

So the Psalms were rendered into rhyming verse with strict metre. Calvin was involved in the publication of a volume containing 17 psalms in French, published in Strasbourg in 1539 and by 1562, there was a complete French metrical Psalter. The first English versions were produced in Geneva in 1556 for the use of English Protestant exiles there. With additions, this was to be the basis of the first *Scottish Psalter* produced in 1564. This was the praise book of the Scots settlers who came to Ireland at the time of the Plantation. From this early period comes the version of Psalm 100 (*All people that on earth do dwell*) by William Kethe. The tune to this (OLD 100<sup>TH</sup>) was in fact composed for Psalm 134.

For the next 150 or so years, all sorts of people, including King James I tried their hands at producing metrical psalms or revising the work of others. In 1650 another edition of the *Scottish Psalter* was produced and it is from this book that many of the psalms heard on the programme come. *The Lord's my shepherd* (Psalm 23) is the best known example from the 1650 *Scottish Psalter*. Metrical psalms were also used regularly in Anglican worship until they were superseded in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by chanted psalms and hymns. They used either the version of Sternhold and Hopkins or the *New Version* produced by two Irishmen Nahum Tate and Nicholas Brady in 1696.

During the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries metrical psalms were the staple diet, and in many places, the only diet, of Presbyterians in England and Scotland when they worshipped. Three or four would have been sung without any instrumental accompaniment, with the note being given by a precentor using a tuning fork or pitch pipe, or, when there was no precentor, the people would have had to manage as best they could. The number of tunes used was very small, in many places, no more than ten or twelve, so that the singing must have been monotonous. Before it was sung, the minister would have 'expounded' the psalm, often at great length and the precentor would have 'lined' it by chanting one or two lines in a monotone, before the people joined in. This arose because of some degree of illiteracy and an absence of books. This habit of 'lining' died out in the 19<sup>th</sup> century but it can still be found in the ways psalms are sung in Scottish Gaelic in parts of the Highlands and Islands, although in that type of singing there is so much ornamentation that it is often difficult here to recognise the tune.

In the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was great debate and controversy about the use of hymns and organs in Ireland and Scotland. Those opposed to the use of organs argued that, while instruments were used in the Jewish worship of the Temple, the New Testament failed to give any sanction for their use by Christians. Hymns were rejected by many on the grounds that only the Psalms were "inspired by God" and that hymns were prone to error. There was fierce argument about what St. Paul meant when he spoke of hymns and psalms and spiritual songs in Ephesians 5. In the programme, you can hear the reasons why Reformed Presbyterians continue to sing only unaccompanied psalms.

The result of the debate was that the larger Presbyterian Churches, like the Church of Scotland and the Presbyterian Church in Ireland introduced hymns and organs, later to be followed by a plethora of other instruments while some of the smaller Churches, like the Free Church of Scotland and the Reformed Presbyterian Church, continue to use only metrical psalms without accompaniment. They are not alone in rejecting instruments, in many branches of the Eastern Orthodox Church, all the singing is unaccompanied.

It is not quite correct to say, as one contributor hinted in the programme, that metrical psalms are no longer sung in the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, but there is no doubt that their use has diminished greatly. Fifty years ago, it would have been normal to have had at least one, possibly two, at most services, but it would not be uncommon now to find services without any at all. This Church in 1880 produced a *Revised Psalter* based on the 1650 Scottish book, when archaic words and clumsy expressions were, where possible, changed and a number of new metrical versions were added. The Reformed Presbyterian Church still uses the 1650 volume but it, too, has added other versions, some of them from America and, as was shown in the programme, that Church too is at present, revising the Metrical Psalter.

The earliest metrical Psalters had a tune set to each psalm and tunes with the name OLD in them (like the OLD 100<sup>TH</sup> or the OLD 124<sup>TH</sup> come from that period, usually composed in Geneva. Different editions of the 1560 *Scottish Psalter* introduced new tunes like FRENCH (usually sung to Psalm 121: *I to the hills will lift my eyes*) or MARTYRS composed in the Dorian Mode. Tunes which involved repeating lines, or with lines sung only by one group of singers, became popular, probably to increase the variety of the singing. Because the metrical psalms are in strict metre, it

means that any tune of the same metre can be used and this is why a split leaf book, as shown in the programme, is used.

Reformed Presbyterians sing the psalms in four part harmony and the Tonic Solfa system they use was invented by a Congregationalist minister in England called John Curwen for people who could not read normal musical notation. It was, at one time, widely used in schools.

Opinions differ widely about metrical psalms; some see the beauty and the message of the Psalter as compromised by trying to force the psalms into a metrical form which was never intended; others would claim that, despite certain limitations, they allow worshippers to sing them easily and with enthusiasm and commitment. At their best, as in Psalm 100 (*All people that on earth do dwell, Sing to the Lord with cheerful voice*), the version is strong and moves quite majestically to the tune. On the other hand many would consider that the beginning of the Metrical Psalm 122 (*I joy'd when to the house of God, Go up, they said to me*) is a poor substitute for the version in the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*: *I was glad when they said unto me, We will go to the House of the Lord.*

It is very clear from the programme that members of the Reformed Presbyterian Church are determined to continue using the Metrical Psalter, not just because it is part of their religious heritage but because they wish to sing and pray the Book of Psalms and so benefit from its spiritual insights.

The Reformed Presbyterian Church is one of Ireland's smaller denominations with over 3000 members in the community, organised into 37 congregations, with most of these in Counties Antrim and Down. It would be theologically conservative and its members are sometimes called Covenanters. The reasons for this have to do with 17<sup>th</sup> century Scottish history. In 1638, in Scotland the National Covenant was signed as a protest against King Charles I and his attempts to dominate the Scottish Church. Five years later, during the English Civil War, a Solemn League and Covenant was made between Scotland and the English Parliament which agreed that, in return for Scottish military support, there would be a reformation on religion in a more Presbyterian direction.

During the reigns of Charles II and James II (and VII) many Scots continued to uphold these Covenants and refused to recognise the authority of the Stuart kings until they would agree to the Covenants. For this defiance, particularly in the South West of Scotland, thousands of Covenanters were imprisoned, deported and executed. When William III became king and established the Church of Scotland as a Presbyterian body, most Scots accepted this except for a few who held out for the re-establishment of the Covenants. They continued to be known as Covenanters and sometimes as Cameronians, after one of their leaders, Richard Cameron, who had been killed in a skirmish in 1680. The Covenanters emphasised what they called "the Crown Rights of the Redeemer" and stressed that Jesus Christ was truly king. Thus the emblem of the Reformed Presbyterian Church is a banner with the words "For Christ's Crown and Covenant"

None of this trouble in Scotland had anything to do with Ireland directly but there were Scottish Covenanters who fled to Ireland, and particularly North Antrim, for safety and there grew up tradition of forming what were known as "Praying Societies" who were visited by Covenanter or Reformed Presbyterian ministers from Scotland. The first regular Irish Reformed Presbyterian

congregation was established near Rasharkin in 1757; the first presbytery or group of ministers in 1763 and a Synod involving all the Irish ministers and a ruling elder from each congregation, in 1811. This Synod still meets each year.

### Classroom Activities:

#### *Compare and contrast psalm singing*

Listen to a number of different ways in which the psalms are sung and compare them.

#### *Sing a psalm*

Try singing a psalm unaccompanied.

### Questions For Discussion After the Programme:

#### *Describe psalm singing*

How would you describe the singing? Give reasons.

#### *Do teenagers want to sing psalms?*

Is it fair to say that most teenagers do not want to sing traditional hymns and psalms? Why do you think that is?

#### *What is enjoyable about singing psalms?*

Why do you think one of the girls on the programme enjoys singing psalms so much?

#### *Should psalms be musically accompanied?*

Would these psalms be better with instruments? Which instruments?