



A MIRROR TO THE SOUL

The RSCM has recently published *A Mirror to the Soul* a collection of hymns written by Bishop Timothy Dudley-Smith that are based on psalms. Andrew Reid interviewed him to find out more.

AR · Why should we sing the psalms?

TD-S · I think we should sing the psalms because they are a part of scripture intended to be sung; they were sung for centuries before they became part of Christian worship and it seems to me it was a right transition that carried them through into the Christian church.

AR · We haven't carried everything from the Old Testament into the Christian church in such an explicit way; is the aspect of a community at song part of the reason?

TD-S · I like to remember, as the gospels tell us, that Jesus and the Eleven sang a psalm on that last night – Pratt Green has a lovely line about it – which suggests that it can't be the first time that they sang a psalm together; in that sense the beginning of Christian psalmody would have been when the Messianic psalms were sung with the Messiah in person. And they obviously meant so much to him.

AR · What do you think is the value of metrical psalms?

TD-S · If I can be personal, I'm careful to stress that what I offer is not an attempt at translating scripture into modern speech – it's a specifically Christian interpretation and of course it will introduce specifically Christian thoughts. The context of the Book of Psalms is originally the worship of Israel; the context of the metrical psalm is the Christian church today. But it's never quite scripture, and in that sense metrical psalms cannot and should not replace the Book of Psalms.

AR · So does that apply in worship; many would sing a metrical psalm between the readings at Eucharist for example – is that adequate?

TD-S · It's fine if the content fits the occasion; I would have no quibble with that at all. What I am saying is that it is no substitute for getting to know the scripture. And the tradition whereby the psalms were said in

church can be of great value today to a congregation that may not feel at ease with chanting. I look back fondly to churches where I have sat in the pew and we have said psalms.

AR · Can metrical psalms carry the diversity of form that the psalms have, or do you have to be selective as a writer?

TD-S · My own view is that you have to be selective. I have written about 60 hymns 'based on' (my phrase) particular psalms, but there are parts of the Book of Psalms that I would not feel skilful enough to manage and clearly there are parts – curses or prayers for the punishment of enemies – that are not suited to Christian worship, though they may have much to teach us in terms of God's hatred of wrong. But otherwise, one of the great things about the psalms is their variety: they can lead us into penitence and lamentation; they can express grief, disappointment and frustration; they also bring us an immense sense of God as creator – 'When I consider the heavens, the works of thy fingers'; and they identify God's ordering of life and the joy and security that he brings us – all these things.

AR · When you write a hymn based on a psalm, what approach do you take to adapting or adding to the psalm words?

TD-S · I'm quite pleased when it is really no more than a kind of Trinitarian Gloria at the end, or making explicit, in terms of Jesus, what was a Messianic promise in the psalm. I'm not a translator; I collect a number of translations of the psalm, I have them in front of me, and I seek the best bits from each and how one interprets another one. I don't mind too much if I skip bits where I am not destroying a train of thought. My choice of metre somehow arrives; when I have a first line, I go on from there.

AR · Can you comment further on the range of the psalms which can be used in Christian worship?

TD-S · I think this requires sensitivity by the person who chooses for worship; it's for him or her to say whether this particular psalm or hymn is suitable for the congregation at this moment. The difference



between the personal and the congregational needs to be taken into account. But we do sometimes need congregationally to be able to express different subjects and emotions, and sometimes there really isn't anything else that does it as well. I think the penitential and lamentation psalms would have to be used with great discretion though I could see the place for them in Lent, for instance. It's not an area in which I recall writing much myself.

AR · Would you then say you are more focused on the praise psalms?

TD-S · I am more focused on the praise side, seeing the psalm as 'enter[ing] his courts with praise', and giving praise for the great acts of God. This is where the Christianizing of the thought can become so much more explicit than what, for the psalmist, was dimly-seen prophesy. We live in the light of the Gospel.

AR · Do you have particular thoughts on matching tunes to your hymns?

TD-S · My policy is that when I have got a first verse, I try to find a hymn tune to which it fits, so that I can have that tune running through my head as I write the succeeding verses. This helps me put the stresses in the same place and make sure that each verse is suitable for the hymn tune. And sometimes I get rather attached to that hymn tune, but when I consult my musical advisors they suggest something else and I am very happy to bow to their judgement. *A Mirror to the Soul*, indeed, owes everything on the music side to my friend William Llewellyn.

AR · How did you start writing hymns based on psalms?

TD-S · I came to metrical psalms through Michael Baughen, who, following the success of *Youth Praise*, produced *Psalm Praise* and asked me to contribute. Years later I had some dear friends; the husband went into hospital and was clearly not going to come out again. His wife told me that when she went to visit him in the evening they would end by saying together a hymn I had written for *Psalm Praise*, 'Safe in the shadow of the Lord / Beneath his hand and power / I trust in him ...'. I was very moved by that.

AR · Do you feel that the psalms are used less in Christian worship now than they were decades ago? And, if so, why?

TD-S · It is a grief to me that many congregations have dispensed with the Book of Psalms in worship and that I do feel is a real weakness. One of the reasons the psalms

are fading as part of the spiritual furniture may be the reverse side of the coin of the immense riches that we have in the different translations of scripture: it is much more difficult for people to remember scripture than when there was just one version. It's more difficult to know by heart words you hear in slightly different translations.

AR · One of the enduring things about the Prayer Book is that the English is so beautiful. In Coverdale's translation of the psalms there is an extraordinary imagination about the words used. I'm told it's not a very faithful translation in several points. And yet it brings out the colour of the meaning in an amazing way. We tend to focus a lot on literal meaning, but meaning is about so much more than literal correctness – it's about the journey of text and the opportunity for words and phrases to speak to the emotions as well as convey literal meaning: isn't that why we have poetry?!

TD-S · I was in Westminster Abbey recently, for the dedication of the stone in Poets' Corner for C.S. Lewis, and Lewis would have echoed, I feel sure, what you're saying about the psalm as a mirror to the soul going well beyond the literal meaning of the words and touching the imagination.

AR · So, finally, why is the collection called *A Mirror to the Soul*?

TD-S · The title, of course, is John Calvin's. It seemed to me to sum up the variety that we find in the psalms. The psalms give us a lamp with which to journey into what is happening in our own souls, to understand it, and to allow the force of it to shape our personalities. If we didn't have this means of expressing these things, or such a mirror in which to see ourselves, we would be more confused than we are!



A Mirror to the Soul will be officially launched at Sarum College in Salisbury on Thursday 20 March 2014 at 4pm, hosted by Sarum College Bookshop and the RSCM. There will be an opportunity to hear and sing some of the new hymns, and to meet Bishop Timothy and William Llewellyn. All are welcome to attend: RSVP to 01722 326899 or bookshop@sarum.ac.uk

Timothy Dudley-Smith's setting of Psalm 103, to music by John Rutter, is included in the current edition (Issue 68) of *Sunday by Sunday* and available to Affiliates/Individual Members for local use on a non-commercial basis in 2014 only under their CCLI MRL licence.