

## **The Psalms**

**For us today, the psalms at the Eucharist are used to illustrate and develop further the theme of the readings and the seasons of the Church's year. In this second series, we hope to look at a number of psalms, which were not included in the first series, two per week, and to see their relevance for us today.**

**The Book of Psalms, or the Psalter, has been at the centre of Jewish and Christian worship for over 2,000 years, and has been in constant use as a prayer book. We in the Anglican tradition have been familiar with the psalms in the Book of Common Prayer, the Alternative Service Book and now in Common Worship, with revision of the translation in each case. The word 'psalm' comes from Greek, and means 'a song sung to harp music'.**

**There are five main types of psalms:**

**1. Hymns. These focus on God, who God was and is, and what he has done. There are hymns of Zion (eg. Pss. 46 and 48), directed to Zion, the dwelling place of God, and so they are praises of the presence of God in Zion.**

**Some psalms are enthronement psalms, where the procession bearing the ark approaches the temple, and the people praise God's sovereignty.**

**A number of psalms form parts of liturgies, as in our liturgy today.**

**2. Laments These are either individual or communal. They include a plea for God's help in disaster, for example, despair, illness or conflict.**

**They express their faith in God in the midst of all that is going on around them. There are also songs of confidence, when anguish and fear of alienation from God are relieved by confidence that God has delivered and will deliver them again.**

**3. Thanksgiving Psalms. Thanksgiving psalms give thanks to God for what he has done to help, and may have been used along with a sacrifice of thanksgiving in the temple.**

**4. Royal Psalms.** Royal psalms are about kings, they praise God for the king, celebrate what he has done and pray for him. Psalms such as Ps. 72 see the king as the representative of God on earth, the human agent through whom God's justice reaches the nation.

**5. Wisdom Psalms.** These psalms focus on the importance of wisdom as a way of looking at the world. They stress the fear of the Lord, contrast the behaviour of the righteous and the wicked, and present a better way of living.

### **Authorship**

It has been often thought that the author of the psalms was David. This cannot be maintained. It is now thought probable that the majority of psalms were composed in pre-exilic times for use in worship during the period of the monarchy. However, as today, they would be adapted and revised according to changing circumstances, so they may, for example, have been sung by the exiles to express their despair at being far from Jerusalem and their longing to return home (eg. Ps. 137). They speak out of genuine experience, and still do today.