

## Conclusion

The writing of a conclusion, though usually welcomed by the reader, poses an acute problem for an author. He can easily be tempted to distort the evidence he has presented in order to fit some preconceived notion about the subject under consideration and bring his work to a neat and tidy end, or to select from the material in an arbitrary manner in order to make some point which he feels to be relevant to the situation of the Church today, and thereby neglect other considerations which may be equally valid, even if they have no such immediate practical application. In one sense, therefore, the evidence must speak for itself, and the reader draw from it whatever lessons seem to be pertinent. On the other hand, one cannot devote years of study to a subject without finding that certain questions are continually raised by it which relate to one's own beliefs and practices. Thus what now follows is not so much a conclusion as an indication of the main issues which have appeared as of significance to the author in his journey through the prayer-life of the Church in the early centuries.

1. The variety of practice in this early period raises the question as to whether any particular authority can be claimed for any specific arrangement of times of prayer. The emergence of the morning and evening hours as pre-eminent was, as we have seen, a fourth-century development which came about partly because of practical convenience and partly because they were seen as the fulfilment of the Old Testament pattern of daily sacrifice. If, however, the Christians of the first three centuries were right in seeing the true fulfilment of these sacrifices in the ceaseless prayer and praise of the Church, is there any particular justification in retaining these two offices as somehow normative for the Church at all times and in all places? Their dominant position has frequently been defended in recent years by the claim that they are the most ancient of the regular Christian times of prayer, but, as we have seen, if antiquity is to be the criterion for selection, then both night and noon have equal claim to be considered as of cardinal

importance. Night prayer in particular, which has so often been neglected in the later traditions of the Church, at least as regards the hour of its celebration, is so intimately related to New Testament eschatological thought that it cannot easily be regarded as of secondary significance in comparison with the morning and evening hours. Similarly the ninth hour, too, cannot be lightly dismissed, since it is the one time of prayer which owes its origin directly to an event of supreme importance to the Christian. Far and above all this, however, what is fundamental to the early understanding of daily prayer is that the real aim is unbroken communion with God, and the adoption of specific times of prayer is only a means to that end. This therefore suggests that there is no particular normative pattern of Christian daily prayer but that the times and frequency of such prayer may very well vary in accordance with the spiritual needs of the Christian, as well as his or her cultural and pastoral situation. Set hours of prayer are not so much an obligation imposed upon us as a guide and aid towards the practice of ceaseless prayer, and when they fail to fulfil this function, their continued use may rightly be questioned.

2. A major characteristic of the set times of daily devotion in the first few centuries was prayer, and especially intercession for the needs of the Church and the world. This may seem too obvious to warrant mention, and yet it is the very element in the daily offices which steadily declines almost to the point of extinction. As often happens in the history of liturgy, secondary elements, in this case psalmody, gradually adopt a dominant role, and what were originally the primary elements assume a subsidiary place, and are abbreviated in order to give more time to the newer additions. In this instance the process was encouraged by the emphasis in monasticism on the office as intended for the individual spiritual growth of those involved in it rather than as a corporate act of the Church for the benefit of all mankind. Recent reforms of the office have not succeeded in reversing this trend, perhaps in part because of a widespread loss of faith in the power of intercession. All too often the concluding prayers and intercessions are regarded as an optional appendage to the office rather than its heart, and are the first thing to be omitted when the service has to be abbreviated or combined with some other rite.

3. The influence of monasticism was also responsible for the emergence of psalmody as the dominant element in the daily

office. This, as we have seen, grew out of a belief in the particular inspiration of the Psalter in comparison with non-biblical compositions and was built upon the Christological interpretation of the psalms adopted by the first Christians. Such an understanding of prophecy and its fulfilment does not easily accord with that commonly held today, and thus it is hardly surprising that the recitation of psalms has been found to present considerable difficulties for contemporary Christian worship, especially since revisions of the office have clung tenaciously to the principle that the whole Psalter must continue to be used in worship, in accordance with the monastic ideal. The problem becomes even worse where those saying the psalms are unaware of the tradition of Christological interpretation, and where no provision is made by way of solo recitation, appropriate congregational response, period of silent reflection and prayer, or concluding collect to express and encourage this attitude towards the Psalter, and thus they are left struggling with the sentiments of many of the compositions as they attempt to see them as articulating their own praise and prayer to God. All this is not to deny that many psalms can still be found to embody profound Christian aspirations, or that the Christological understanding may not be an entirely legitimate way of interpreting some others, and one which has insights to contribute to our apprehension of the nature and work of Christ, but it does challenge both the extent and the method of the use of psalms in Christian daily prayer and their dominance over other sources of meditation and forms of prayer and praise, especially non-canonical poems and hymns.

4. Like the use of psalms, the inclusion of Bible readings in the daily office was mainly the product of monasticism, and especially of Western monasticism, and again like the psalms its place there appears open to question. In the course of our study we have sought to identify three different functions which the reading of Scripture, or of non-scriptural material for that matter, may have, and these we have termed didactic, kerygmatic, and paracletic. The didactic is essentially the orderly study of the Bible, undertaken in order to become familiar with its contents and to interpret its meaning, which in ancient times had generally to be done by public reading aloud, because of the illiteracy of many of the hearers and the scarcity of copies of the text, and for the sake of convenience

was often attached to an act of worship, though it had no intrinsic connection with it. The kerygmatic ministry of the word, on the other hand, uses selected extracts from the Bible within an act of worship in order to express and interpret the significance of the occasion which is being celebrated, and to elicit a response from the congregation, while the paracletic ministry of the word consists again of selected extracts, but this time chosen because of their appropriateness not so much to the particular occasion as to the individual spiritual needs of those assembled together, to encourage and stimulate them in their faith. It is principally the first of these functions which Bible reading in the daily offices was intended to fulfil although the use of psalms there originates from the informal paracletic ministry of the word in the *agape*, and the proper lessons of festivals are the development of a kerygmatic liturgy of the word. In the present day, however, it is doubtful whether this is the most sensible and effective form of Bible study, when copies of the Scriptures are plentiful and illiteracy generally not such the problem that it was in the past, and it may be thought desirable for this to be pursued in other ways and in other situations than that of the daily meetings for prayer, as indeed it was in the secular Church in the early centuries, lest it should overshadow their primary purpose, as it has tended to do in the Anglican daily office. This again is not to deny that there may be a proper place for both a paracletic and a kerygmatic ministry of the word within the office itself, but it does suggest that we need to be more aware of why we are including readings within the daily prayers and consequently of what readings are appropriate in order to fulfil that function, and not simply perpetuate the practice as being a venerable institution handed down from the past.

All these considerations are not meant to be destructive of the daily office but are intended as possible pointers towards its renewal. It is essentially a monastic pattern of office which we have inherited from the past, and so it is hardly surprising that it does not meet the needs of those of us who are not of that tradition, and it may even be doubted whether it accords with contemporary monastic spirituality. We need to discover and create a truly 'cathedral' office, not necessarily by reconstructing what was done at Jerusalem or Antioch or wherever in the fourth century, but by using the insights provided by historical study in order to establish the essentials of our pattern of daily

prayer and spirituality, and then express these in forms appropriate to our own age. If we have the courage to do this in a bold and thorough way, what may emerge may be radically different in outward appearance from what has gone before in both cathedral and monastic traditions, but it may more truly embody the spirit of the practice of daily prayer in the early Church, and thus rescue the divine office from the oblivion into which it is in real danger of falling in many churches, and restore it to its proper place as the backbone of catholic Christianity.