

# Sung Vespers for Pentecost

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## A Brief History of Singing the Psalms

The practice of chanting the psalms is an ancient one. We know from scripture that not only were these texts sung liturgically and devotionally by the Hebrews, but that Christ himself sang psalms with his disciples. This tradition was carried on by the early Christians in their own liturgical practice, and was an integral part of Christian monasticism from its inception. The tones used today for the corporate recitation of the psalms that are found in the *Liber Usualis* (the book containing nearly all chants required throughout the Roman Church year) are the result of hundreds of years of practice and theoretical codification.

We know from the *Rule of Saint Benedict*, written ca. 500, that the early monks sang or recited all 150 psalms every day (the Rule expands this timeframe to the span of a week). Within the Rule we also find a rudimentary outline for the office of Vespers:

*Let Vespers service however be arranged with four psalms and their antiphons, after which psalms a lesson is to be said, then a responsory, hymn, versicle, Gospel canticle, lesser litany and Lord's prayer and so to the end.*

We see in this description that the pairing of antiphons and psalms was already an established practice. Antiphons are texts that bookend a psalm that it might be contextualized within a particular celebration or feast day in the church year. This practice results in a profound scriptural exegesis often uniting and harmonizing the New Testament to the Old.

## The Antiphons of Pentecost

The first, third, and fifth antiphons outline the events of Pentecost itself (The Apostles are all in one place, they were filled with the Spirit, and they began to speak in diverse tongues), while the second and fourth antiphons are instead taken from Old Testament indications of the Holy Spirit, linking the Hebrew tradition to the Christian Church.

The first antiphon is taken from Acts 2:1. Alone, this text contains only what seems to be trivial information: that the Apostles were simply together in one place. The psalm (Psalm 109/110) however exposes why this information is crucial to the celebration of the day. The Psalmist speaks of the mighty work of God; how the Divine will conquer all through the establishment of a sacred priesthood, how the establishment of the world will be razed for the exultation of the righteous.

The unity of the Apostles now is now given context and meaning; it is through Jesus' band of followers that this Divine conquest will take place. This conquest is however not one of land, but of sin; bringing about not the destruction of kings, but the destruction of evil. This scepter that will go forth in the midst of the enemy is not wrought of gold wielded by a king for earthly might, but one forged of the flame of the Spirit wielded by the righteous to bring about the kingdom of heaven.

The second antiphon is taken from Wisdom 1:7, an Old Testament reference to the Spirit of God. While this verse is speaking directly of our own wisdom such as it is being a reflection of Divine Wisdom, it is seen also as a prophetic reference to the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church. The psalm (Psalm 110/111) is one of praise, praise for the wonderful works of the Lord and for his gift of wisdom and understanding, intellectual faculties that are often described as being gifts of God's Spirit.

The third antiphon turns attention back to the Apostles and recounts how they were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak. The psalm (Psalm 111/112) begins, "Blessed the man that feareth the Lord: he shall delight exceedingly in his commandments." This pairing exposes a beautiful contrast between the disciples' former gatherings following the Resurrection which are characterized by fear and locked doors, and the current gathering where they are given through the Holy Spirit the virtue of Fear of the Lord which enables them not only to unlock the doors (presumably), but to speak openly of their Lord.

The fourth antiphon is an adaptation of two verses from the book of Daniel (3:77, 79) from the canticle of the three children who were saved from the furnace of King Nebuchadnezzar. The psalm (Psalm 112/113) begins with the words "Praise the Lord, ye children" which becomes especially significant considering of the source of the antiphon. More importantly however is the symbolism of water and movement therein: a reference to the waters of Genesis and the Spirit who moved within it before any creature. The same Spirit has been moving since the beginning, and now in a distinct way on Pentecost, became the life force of the Church; the same moving agent that compelled the waters now behooves the Apostles to quit their seclusion and preach the Gospel.

The fifth antiphon describes how the Apostles were miraculously able to speak in many tongues and thus preach to all who were present regardless of their linguistic background. Psalm 113/114 follows with an account of the joy that pervaded the Israelites after their release from the captivity of Egypt. When the Apostles received the Spirit, they underwent a similar liberation: their hearts were freed from fear, their minds loosed from ignorance, their tongues unshackled from human idiom. As the Israelites centuries before praised God himself for the wondrous works he wrought, the Apostles praise God by action: by turning towards the "Egypt" that held them captive and preaching these works to all people regardless of tongue or race.