

BIBLE SUNDAY 2017: Preparing the Responsorial Psalm

Those who sing the Responsorial Psalm at Mass have a number of things to consider when they are preparing it. For many the first consideration will be getting the notes right and being confident with them. The words may be considered for articulation and clarity of emphasis. Some will spend time thinking about the text of psalm, particularly within its context within the Liturgy of the Word. The following notes will look at these different stages in more detail.

- How do I prepare to sing a responsorial psalm?
- Are there different stages?

Preparing the music

Though it may sound obvious it is important to get the response right. A psalmist should know the response well enough that they can look at a congregation with confidence while they sing it. From a musical point of view any awkward intervals or leaps should be sung clearly so that a congregation can easily pick up the melody. In a similar way responses where the melody moves little should be sung distinctly so people know when to move. Any characterful rhythms should be sharp so that the response does not become a blur. It is possible that the psalm response is what stays with people in the week ahead. The clearer the response is sung the easier it is for a congregation to respond and remember.

Many psalm settings use a 4 line tone for the verses. A simple way of learning a new tone is to sing it to the 'Glory be' so that you do not need to worry about the words.

- Are there any psalm responses you find yourself singing during the week, which come to mind may be unexpectedly?
- What makes it memorable?
- Do the words connect with your experience at the time?

Preparing the text

At the simplest level a psalmist should consider the text and see where the natural emphases are. Particular attention is necessary where the music does not always fit these emphases.

Even without reflecting on the text and looking at the context it is important to recognise that the verses of the majority of Responsorial Psalms offer some sort of narrative or emotional shift. For example, from petition to joy. Even with same music, such as a psalm tone, the psalmist should seek to express this shift. In Psalm 84 on the 2nd Sunday of Advent B this shift is not great but there is a movement from 'God's help is near' to 'mercy and faithfulness have met'. Simply put it moves from hope in God, to fulfilment, then to renewed hope.

The more the psalmist reflects on the text, the easier it will be to articulate and express the sung text.

- How much do you see singing the psalm as reciting an ancient text and how much as a living text speaking today?

Reflecting on the text I

Read the text and consider what speaks to you. A simple way of expanding this might be to consider:

- what the text says to you,
- what it says to your community,
- what it says to the wider world.

Looking at Psalm 84 you might be struck by the promises of peace, the closeness of God, the hopes of a community. You might also reflect on the words of Bl. Paul VI 'If you want peace, work for justice'.

Looking at the context

The psalm has a purpose in the Liturgy of the Word on a Sunday. Usually it is, in some way, a response to the first reading. More than that because the first reading is chosen in the light of the Gospel the psalm will also shed light on that text too. It can help therefore to consider why this psalm and this response have been chosen for this Sunday. To explore this read and reflect on the First Reading and the Gospel as well.

- What similarities do you see, what themes are emerging?
- How does the response offer a response to the first reading;
- How does it make a bridge to the Gospel?

On the 2nd Sunday of Advent Psalm 84 seems as much a continuation and development of the first reading as it is a response. Isaiah is setting the scene for the kingdom (prepare a way for the Lord), the psalm is an image of the kingdom. In the Gospel, John the Baptist proclaims a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin — the psalm response 'Let us see, O Lord, your mercy and give us your saving help.' could be heard as a response to John's proclamation.

Reflecting on the text II

The psalm and the psalm response are often expressed in the first-person singular (I). This is a change of voice from much of the rest of the liturgy which is 'we', an expression of the Body of Christ in common.

It can be helpful to reflect on the 'I' of the psalm, especially the psalm response. To take an example of the 4th Sunday of Advent, Year B the psalm response is:

I will sing for ever of your love, O Lord.

Within the context of these readings and this celebration who might be the 'I' who sings of God's love? The answer is manifold but each brings a new aspect to the text.

- I, the psalmist – in what ways do I want to sing of God's love?
- I, the congregation – they respond together. How is this psalm true for your community?
- I, David, traditionally the singer of the psalm, — how does he respond to God's promise that his throne will be established for ever, that his descendants will include Jesus?
- I, Nathan, the prophet, (it is often worth considering all the different characters in the first reading) — what does it mean to be chosen by God to speak his word?

- I, Paul (in Advent and other seasons all the readings are chosen to form a unity so the second reading can be considered) — I, Paul who gives glory to God for ever and ever.
- I, Gabriel, we think of angels as for ever singing of God's love — what does it mean to be chosen to reveal God's plan for humanity?
- I, Mary, who the Gospel tell us is someone who sings, responds to God's invitation with love

In some of these examples not just the response but also the psalm verses can be imagined as being sung by David, Paul or Mary.

Putting it together

Having considered the text in a variety of ways there is a need to draw it together. These different reflections are not a suggestion to sing the psalm as a character, such as Mary, but to seek new insights. What the psalmist has to decide is what they are communicating when they sing the psalm. As an integral part of the Liturgy of the Word the psalm is about communicating the Good News of God to a particular congregation. In a similar way to how the reader proclaims the first or second reading. People sometimes worry that this is a call to a 'performance' or dramatization, rather it is having reflected on and received the message of the psalm there is a desire to communicate it to others so that they too might sing for ever of God's love for us.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 84:9-14. v.8

**R. Let us see, O Lord, your mercy
and give us your saving help.**

- 1 I will hear what the Lord God has to say,
a voice that speaks of peace,
peace for his people.
His help is near for those who fear him
and his glory will dwell in our land. **R.**
- 2 Mercy and faithfulness have met;
justice and peace have embraced.
Faithfulness shall spring from the earth
and justice look down from heaven. **R.**
- 3 The Lord will make us prosper
and our earth shall yield its fruit.
Justice shall march before him
and peace shall follow his steps. **R.**

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 88:2-5. 27. 29. cf. v.2

R. I will sing for ever of your love, O Lord.

- 1 I will sing for ever of your love, O Lord;
through all ages my mouth will proclaim your truth.
Of this I am sure, that your love lasts for ever,
that your truth is firmly established as the heavens. **R.**
- 2 'I have made a covenant with my chosen one;
I have sworn to David my servant:
I will establish your dynasty for ever
and set up your throne through all ages.' **R.**
- 3 He will say to me: 'You are my father,
my God, the rock who saves me.'
I will keep my love for him always;
for him my covenant shall endure. **R.**

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