THE JESUS PSALTER

BY

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THE popularity of this prayer in the books of times earlier than ours is well shown in accounts of the lives and deaths of the English Martyrs, that is, of those saints who were put to death for their Faith between the years 1535 and 1681. In those days, when the alleged activities of the Stationers' Company made all Catholic printing and book-selling contraband, we find repeatedly that '*Manuals of Devotion*' were found in the presses of the intrepid printers, or that in the search through their houses the pursuivants found 'divers psalters'. So it was with Carter and Webley, with Collins and Duckett; all truly martyrs. The books were often proclaimed our Lady's psalters, meaning what were also called Books of Hours; perhaps because the new man-made religion so ignored our Lady that her faithful children were all the more dedicated to her service. Often too the books used by these hunted Catholics had in them the Psalter of Jesus, in English as we have it now. In the less persecuted but still unsure days of the early nineteenth century it found its way into the first *Key of Heaven*, *Flowers of Nazareth*, and so into many lesser known books such as *The Treasury of the Sacred Heart*, in the later days of the century, when we came into the open again. It was not in the first edition of *The Garden of the Soul*, and when Douay men asked good Bishop Challoner the reason for this striking omission, he answered in his precise and formal way that his book was 'primarily designed rather as a kind of compendium for lapsed Catholics' or those unable to practise religion. Fervent Catholics would not only know the Jesus Psalter but know it by heart, and so not require to read it in his book. Except for liturgical prayers, such as the Rogation Litanies, and developments of them, the Jesus Psalter is the only form of prayer in the vernacular which has so persisted through the dark and dreary times of the Church in England.

The reasons for this popularity become apparent on analysis of the Psalter itself. They are concerned chiefly with the appeal of any kind of psalmody, the attractiveness of participation in vocal prayer, and a comprehensiveness of doctrine recognisable as a direct effect of the scholastic training and the even then wide influence of St Thomas Aquinas. We shall deal with all three points in turn.

Psalmody as such was always attractive to the English mind, in addition to its place as the official language of the Church. The

balance of strophe and anti-strophe, alliteration and assonance, all find a welcome in early English poetry, which took syllables into account, but depended largely on quantity for its metrical life. When therefore the sonorous Latin chant of Christianity's *Opus Dei* became the staple form of regular prayer, it too was very much loved. Any collection of English Psalters, such as that shown in 1946 at St John's College, Cambridge, will at once convince us not only that the Psalms were known and said or sung in all devout families and homes, but also that much loving labour was expended on them, systematically and willingly. To those who object that the interest was imported, and not indigenous, we have to answer that in the great days of learning, particularly in the thirteenth century, no narrow bounds of district or nationality obtained, and what Europe knew was known to England, from the time of Bede and Alcuin to the day of More and Fisher.

This being so, a transition to an English form of the same type of prayer, though homely and not inspired by God in the way the Scriptures are, is easy to understand. Its date is not so easy to find. If by the middle of the sixteenth century its popularity was so firmly established, it must have been known and used for at least a generation before that; but not many English forms of prayer have come down to us from that time, only Latin prayers or translations of the classics among them, such as the *Imitation of Christ* or Thomas à Kempis on the Passion. The absence of archaic turns in the Jesus Psalter makes it modern and familiar to us, but its firm summary of Christian aspiration points to a much earlier origin even than the second generation of the sixteenth century. We can only surmise that it belonged to a lost vernacular cult dating from the late fifteenth century. The fact that the Psalter itself is a survival shows how strong was its hold upon the mind both of its own day and later; just as the Penitential Psalms find their place in every prayer-book, and the Psalms of Praise are included in the *Garden of the Soul*. So much for the appeal of psalmody in general.

In particular, the Jesus Psalter combines all the elements dear to vocal prayers of earlier days and of our own. It is arranged in a formation of threes and fives, just as the Rosary is made up of three sets of five Mysteries each. The Psalter carries this formation into its component parts also, having the same beginning for each and the same little chorus at the end of the five petitions forming one part. The beginning is that eulogy of the Holy Name of Jesus which all Catholics would know from the Scriptures used at Mass: 'In the Name of Jesus let every knee bow. . . .' It adjures every tongue to 'confess' and at once the response is evoked, 'Jesus, Jesus, Jesus . . .' with a petition each time. The devotion to the Holy Name, as in the

prayers of St Bernard and again of St Bernardine of Siena, was very strong in England. The vocative case was especially appealing. The martyr priest, Roger Cadwallador, in his extremest agony, which was that of being drawn and quartered while yet able to feel this torture, could only exclaim, *Jesu, Jesu, esto mihi Jesu . . .*' familiar prayer and dear, even in this terrible plight not leaving him without comfort. Of Richard Herst, the layman martyr of Lancashire, the records say, 'and *Bone Jesu* were the last words heard from his mouth. . . .' Of many other martyrs, old and young, substantially the same is true. Well would the English people answer to the invocations of the Jesus Psalter, indeed.

Its first impetration is in each case followed up by an elaboration of the petition: 'Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, grant us grace to love thee . . .' said three times, is then developed into, 'Jesus, grant us grace *truly* to love thee, for thy infinite goodness. . . .' In another part (ninth petition): 'Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, grant us grace to remember death', becomes, 'Jesus, grant us grace *always* to remember *our* death . . . ' and so on, in each section. The sequence is in every way adapted to both the main theme and its development, in a way easy to follow and gripping to the poorest as well as to the most scholarly mentality: 'Thou art our sure rock of defence against all sorts of enemies. Thou art our ready grace, able to strengthen us to every good work. *Therefore* in all our sufferings, in all our weaknesses and temptations, we will confidently call upon thee. . . .' In the rare cases which do not elaborate the petition immediately (fourteenth petition), there is an addition which lends weight to the meaning, so that the meditation may keep pace with the prayer which it is designed to frame: 'Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, grant us grace to fix our minds on thee', is continued by, 'Jesus, grant us grace to fix our minds on thee, especially in time of prayer, when we directly converse with thee'. Most of the petitions are self-explanatory, because of this simple system of leaving the petitioner in no doubt as to the full meaning of his prayer. 'Send us here our Purgatory', is an example: 'Vouchsafe to grant us those merciful crosses and afflictions which thou seest necessary for taking off our affections from all things here below'. The clear, plain, earnest tone is unmistakable; the economy of words is admirable, the slight rocking rhythm of the prose versicles is attractive even to a tired or a distracted mind; while the constant burden of the Holy Name corresponds to the use of the *Gloria Patri* in the Psalms of the Office of the Church.

Lastly, there is the summary of doctrine in the Jesus Psalter, reminiscent of the comprehensive prayers of St Thomas Aquinas, of all such the most immediate and intimate shafts sent directly to

God from the human heart, yet holding all Catholic belief in their wording, fully phrased and omitting nothing. In many places St Thomas prays this full-bodied kind of petition, as 'Do thou order my beginnings, direct and further my progress, complete and bless my ending' (*Prayer before Study*). Or again: '. . . Through the blessed and glorious Passion of thy Son, and through the hope I have had in thine own intercession, thou [here, our Lady] wilt ask for me from him pardon for my sins, and wilt guide me, as I die in the love of him and of thee, into the way of safety and salvation' (*Prayer to the Blessed Virgin Mary*). This was St Thomas in the thirteenth century, we must remember. In the later Psalter we have the synthetic, stair-like movement characteristic of that master mind, bent on stating the truth of God so clearly and so evenly that all must see it, given the light of Faith: 'Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, make us constant. . . . Jesus, make us constant *in faith, hope and charity*. Give us perseverance in all virtues, and a resolution never to offend thee'. Again: 'Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, enlighten us with spiritual wisdom. . . . Jesus, enlighten us with spiritual wisdom, *to know thy goodness*, and all *those things which are most acceptable* to thee'. Verse by verse, portion by portion, we are led up to the climax, where perfect love casteth out fear.

Nor is there wanting that warm glow of love that informs all the shorter prayers of St Thomas: 'Enable us, O God', says the Psalter, 'to work out our salvation with fear and trembling . . .'; and again: 'Then, dear Jesus, remember thy mercy, and turn not thy most amiable face away from us, because of our offences'. And another: 'Make us, O dear Redeemer, seriously weigh those severe words of thine, that he only who perseveres to the end shall be saved'. There is no stinting of the truth of God, no false comfort, no forgetting of 'Through how much pain and how little pleasure thou pressedst on to a bitter death. . . .' Yet the sweet Christian hope is never absent, even from the consideration of the Passion: '*Oro fiat illud quod tam sitio*', sings St Thomas, and the Jesus Psalter says: 'O beloved of our souls, take up all our thoughts here, that our eyes abstaining from all worldly vanities, may become worthy to behold thee face to face in thy glory for ever'.