

## Lectures for St. Luke's 200th Spring Series 2020



### Anglican Canticles in the Gospel of St. Luke V.K. McCarty

With the excitement in the air about the upcoming 200th Anniversary of Saint Luke in the Fields, it is fascinating to look at our patron saint, Luke the Evangelist. We have Luke to thank for his careful artistry in describing the birth of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke—in many ways, his unique gift given to us in this Gospel—and for providing the glorious moments when his characters break into song in the Canticles to express their thanks to God. So, today we are going to look at the Canticles Luke offers us in the Gospel. We will examine how he has knitted them into the story of God's salvation and how we as Anglicans make use of them praying the Daily Office.

The chances and changes of liturgical church reform have bequeathed to us morning and evening church services of such beauty and orderly balance that many Episcopalians begin the day with Morning Prayer and its crowning Canticle, the *Benedictus*, and end it with the *Magnificat* and the *Nunc Dimittis* in Evening Prayer. The appeal of the Canticles can often be seen bringing new Episcopalians to the fold, when they have first come to visit a special Vespers service at

St. Luke's and remember it with such delight, even from several years ago. The Canticles in the Gospel of Luke are satisfying to the ear and nourishing to the spirit on first hearing; yet, they prove fresh with emotional depth and theological nuance with hundreds, even thousands of prayerful repetitions, if you pray with them often. Ultimately, they breathe the Spirit of Jesus.

The early chapters of Luke—the Birth Narratives we hear at Christmas-time—form a threshold, a thin place, a divine thin place, bridging the Old and the New Testaments. In them, Luke presents us with two parallel, profoundly important birth stories, placed side by side in the early part of the Gospel. They invite us as listeners to engage with them and participate by comparing and contrasting the stories, meditating on them, so that we will arrive at a conclusion with Luke of the powerful significance of the Incarnation. From the Virgin Mary is born the Savior of the world, and to herald this remarkable event, a new prophet bursts onto the scene, born to preach repentance and the coming of the Messiah.

As one component of the special sanctity of this, God's action, Luke crafts as the centerpiece of three of these episodes in the Birth Narratives a splendid hymn. These three Gospel Canticles, as we call them, praise God's mercy and God's gift of salvation. In their intentionally old-fashioned style, Luke harkens back to the voice of the Prophets of old—to Samuel and Isaiah—and forward as well to a new beginning for Israel, for God's People.

Both the author of Luke's Gospel and his audience were likely non-Jewish; nevertheless, in these early chapters which contain the three Gospel Canticles—the *Magnificat*, the *Benedictus*, and the *Nunc Dimittis*<sup>1</sup>—Luke is teaching like a good rabbi. The Greek he uses to tell the story is spare and sophisticated, yet, throughout these early vignettes, it features “a Semitic coloration.”<sup>2</sup> For here, Luke knits together the birth of Jesus into the larger story of Israel and God's People. All three Canticles work to answer the question: What will the birth of John the Baptist and of Jesus mean for Israel?<sup>3</sup>

It may be a happy glimpse into the mind of Luke the Evangelist that within the space of 60 verses in the Birth Narratives, Luke provides four hymns of consummate praise for the miracle of the Incarnation—the *Magnificat*, the *Benedictus*, the *Nunc Dimittis*, and also the *Gloria* which the host of angels sang, calling the Shepherds to the Nativity. What an effective strategy he has chosen to bring into focus these remarkable divine events, and how fortunate we are that our beautiful Anglican Morning and Evening Prayer services claim and highlight these joyful Canticles.

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<sup>1</sup> Note that the titles of the *Magnificat*, the *Benedictus*, and the *Nunc Dimittis* come from the first word or words in the Latin Vulgate translation of the Greek text.

<sup>2</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), pg. 201.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 211-212.

Even as early as the second century, many followers of Jesus were marking the progress of the day with morning and evening prayer services;<sup>4</sup> and we can see the early roots of Christian Daily Office in the ancient foundational texts concerning the Liturgy.<sup>5</sup> The pilgrim Egeria confirms this as well in her well-documented visit to Jerusalem around 385 C.E.<sup>6</sup>

Still, the fact that we as Episcopalians are worshipping with Luke's Canticles today we owe to the faithful master work of Archbishop Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556). He is generally accepted as the chief architect of the first two Anglican Prayer Books.<sup>7</sup> Parts of them were no doubt contributed by others; "nevertheless, the work as a whole betrays both a strong editorial control and the pastoral and theological principles of Cranmer himself."<sup>8</sup> As a result, the artistry of his accomplishment "has been the admiration of succeeding generations."<sup>9</sup>

With his reduction of the Daily Office from eight services to two—and its translation into the vernacular, so everyone could understand the words—it was the wisdom of Cranmer to see the reformed Office as "a vehicle for the recovery of a knowledge of the Holy Scriptures by all of the people of God," and his intentionally parallel structure between Morning and Evening Prayer was intended to assist in "ready and intelligent participation."<sup>10</sup> Thus, the Anglican Daily Office is capable of nurturing not only faithful scholars, but indeed, all the faithful.<sup>11</sup> In fact, Leonel Mitchell has observed that, "in a real sense, we Episcopalians are liturgical theologians."<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the genius of Cranmer's shaping of Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer is that, for Anglicans, the Gospel Canticles are given much greater visibility and emphasis than in the Medieval services.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Marion Hatchett, *Commentary on the American Prayer Book* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1981), pg. 89.

<sup>5</sup> Thus, the early third-century *Apostolic Traditions* of Hippolytus still assigned believers daily prayers more in keeping with Jewish hours; but, by the time of the fourth-century *Apostolic Constitutions*, morning and evening Christian services were defined with prescribed Psalms. Winfred Douglas, *Church Music in History and Practice: Studies in the Praise of God* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), pg. 77.

<sup>6</sup> *Itinerarium Egeriae* 24.5.

<sup>7</sup> Paul F. Bradshaw, "The Daily Offices in the Prayer Book Tradition," *Anglican Theological Review* 95:3 (Summer 2013), pg. 451.

<sup>8</sup> Gordon Jeanes, "Cranmer and Common Prayer," in Charles Hefling, Cynthia Shattuck, eds., *The Oxford Guide to the Book of Common Prayer: A Worldwide Survey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pg. 87. It should be also noted that Cranmer was influenced by the reforming work of Spanish Franciscan Cardinal Francis de Quiñones and his revised Breviary published in 1535.

<sup>9</sup> Massey Hamilton Shepherd, Jr., *The Oxford American Prayer Book Commentary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), pg. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Shepherd, *Idem.*, pg. 1.

<sup>11</sup> Cranmer's reformed Daily Office services clearly "exemplify his concern to simplify the complications of the traditional Office and to establish the centrality of Scripture... Thus, the service became predominantly one of education and prayer, intended to ground a Christian population in the knowledge and practice of their faith." Jeanes, "Cranmer and Common Prayer," pg. 97.

<sup>12</sup> Leonel L. Mitchell, *Praying Shapes Believing: A Theological Commentary on The Book of Common Prayer* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing), pg. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Note that one of the Collects which Cranmer introduced was "from the Byzantine liturgy: the so-called Prayer of St. Chrysostom, which was to become a classic of Prayer Book spirituality—an example of Cranmer's wide reading and ability to adapt from many traditions." Jeanes, "Cranmer and Common Prayer," pg. 78.

The early Bishops and Deans of the Anglican Church and the framers of the early versions of the Prayer Book were quite articulate about the beauty and effectiveness of the Canticles from the Gospel according to St. Luke. A seventeenth-century Dean of Durham Cathedral has written that Saint Luke, “the Reverend Composer” of the Canticles, “like a skilled Physician, has walked in this Garden of God which is stored with remedies of all kinds, and has gathered the choicest and most useful—to bring us to repentance.”<sup>14</sup>

### **The Song of Mary *Magnificat* Luke 1:46-55**

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,  
My spirit rejoices in God my Savior;  
for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant,  
From this day all generations will call me blessed;  
the Almighty has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name.<sup>15</sup>

The occasion of these words is the encounter between two family women. They are getting together for a visit before their babies are born. One is very young and not yet married, and probably not even knowledgeable about the details of marital intimacy. The other is surprisingly old. There might have been quite a bit to talk about between these two kinswomen. What we hear in Scripture, even before the *Magnificat*, is Elizabeth offering a Blessing, one very familiar because we pray it in both the Angelus and the Rosary:

“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.” Note that the first Beatitude in the Gospel of Luke is quoted from the lips of a woman. Furthermore, since Elizabeth discloses in the story something so explicitly physical as the way the baby feels moving inside her, it could point toward a woman among Luke’s sources for the Birth Narratives—perhaps even Mary herself.

Responding to Elizabeth’s pronouncement, Mary offers an overjoyed hymn of gratitude. While quoting several phrases from the Song of Hannah (1 Sam. 2:1-10), Luke’s Cantic is startlingly dynamic in the Greek. Several of the lines begin with verbs describing the continuing action of God: the one who looked (*epeblepsen*), blessed (*makeriousin*), scattered (*dieskorpisen*), lifted up (*hupsosen*), filled (*enepleesen*), and has done great things (*epoiesen megala*). This is theology conveyed in high drama, to be sure, which gives it a universal and liturgical quality—so, we are

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<sup>14</sup> Thomas Comber, “A Companion to the Temple,” in J. Robert Wright, ed. *Prayer Book Spirituality: A Devotional Companion to the Book of Common Prayer Compiled from Classical Anglican Sources* (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1989), pg. 149.

<sup>15</sup> I must admit that the words of the *Magnificat* especially are a touchstone of prayer for me; different phrases become enflamed with meaning as my prayer unfolds; often I use it as a meditation source. Note that the text for the Canticles from the Gospel of Luke is that of the Book of Common Prayer 1979.

certainly not to spoil this transcendent moment by asking how young Mary could have memorized so much of the Prophet Samuel in order to express her gratitude.<sup>16</sup>

The *Magnificat* has been offered in the Evening Prayer service—often called Vespers or Evensong in its sung version—since at least as early as the time of St. Benedict, when he “appointed it as the climax of the Vespers Office.”<sup>17</sup> The significance of this Gospel Canticle in the evening liturgy is signified by special designated antiphons often attached to it, front and back, and by the censuring of the altar at Solemn or Festal Evensong. It is easy to hear that the text of the *Magnificat* (Lk. 1:46-55) shows a marked resemblance to the “Song of Hannah” (1 Sam. 2:1-10) and also to other references in the Old Testament.

The Dean of Durham in the 1670s, Thomas Comber, said of “this sacred hymn,” that it “breathes forth such lovely mixtures of Faith and Fear, Humility and Love, Charity and Devotion...this hymn will teach us to turn the Old Testament into Gospel.” In the *Magnificat*, “our praises will be short, but they must be real...[for then] the whole inward Christian shall be ravished with the beautiful Prospect, and every Faculty of the Soul shall unite into a devout Celebration of the Divine Mercy.”<sup>18</sup>

Many people make the Sign of the Cross as the *Magnificat* begins, and this is to signify its status as a Gospel Canticle; so, that would apply to the *Nunc Dimittis*, and also to the *Benedictus* in the morning. Though all devotional gestures are optional, some even reverence at the phrase, “and holy is his name.” Possibly in response to criticism of Roman Catholic-like Marian devotion, the *Magnificat* was not included in the first American Prayer Book in 1789; but, it was restored in the 1892 edition.<sup>19</sup>

Liturgical scholar Massey Shepherd, reflecting on it, says, “The Song of Our Lord’s mother... Cranmer fittingly set in a position where it links the lesson of the Old Testament with that of the New. For it is the loveliest flower of Hebrew Messianic poetry, blossoming on the eve of the Incarnation. Its direct model was the Song of Hannah, but its several phrases are a mosaic of allusion and quotation of the whole range of the Old Testament.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Richard B. Vinson, *Luke* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc., 2008), pg. 41.

<sup>17</sup> Shepherd, *Oxford American Prayer Book Commentary*, pg. 26.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Comber, “A Companion to the Temple,” in Wright, ed., *Prayer Book Spirituality*, pg. 156.

<sup>19</sup> *The Hymnal 1940 Companion* (New York: The Church Pension Fund, 1951), pg. 357. As Massey Shepherd explains, because “the Puritans had a strong distaste for the use of the Gospel Canticles, even though they were part of Holy Scripture... in 1789, the strength of Puritan prejudice was sufficient to cause the elimination of the *Magnificat* and the *Nunc Dimittis* from the American Prayer Book... Fortunately, the decision was made, in the 1892 revision, to restore the Gospel Canticles.” Shepherd, *Oxford American Prayer Book Commentary*, pg. 26.

<sup>20</sup> Shepherd, *Oxford American Prayer Book Commentary*, pg. 26.

Often, we pray the Canticles antiphonally, singing them side to side by verse, like the Psalms. This is such a natural and harmonious manner of reciting or chanting that its origins as a liturgical style may be earlier than can ever be imagined. There is, however, a charming legend which comes down to us from the Socrates Church History<sup>21</sup> that this style of worshipping—antiphonally—originated in a visionary dream of the Church Father, Bishop Ignatius. He saw a glimpse of heaven. Angels were giving praise to the presence of God, and they were singing Psalms back and forth, side to side; so, he introduced it into his churches in Antioch. And indeed, even the contemporary Taizé Office reminds us that the Daily Office and its Canticles are “part of the heavenly liturgy, part of the Office of Christ and the angels, presenting before the throne of the Father the prayer of the saints, together with their own praise and intercession.”<sup>22</sup>

### **The Song of Zechariah *Benedictus Dominus Deus* Luke 1:68-79**

Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel;  
he has come to his people and set them free.  
He has raised up for us a mighty savior,  
born of the house of his servant David.

According to Luke’s Gospel, the *Benedictus* Cantic is the father’s song celebrating the naming and circumcision ceremony of his new-born son, John the Baptist. It has special poignancy because the father, the priest Zechariah, was said to have been struck dumb by experiencing the vision of an angel of the Lord, Gabriel, predicting the baby’s birth. He was serving in the Temple, waiting for his turn to light the incense in the little room which was the entry-way to the Holy of Holies—and a great honor it was to be put on that rota, to light the incense.<sup>23</sup> However, because he did not immediately believe the word of the Lord, Zechariah had been unable to speak during Elizabeth’s entire pregnancy. Even when a question arose about the name of his child—surely he would be called Zechariah, like his father—he had to write it down: No, the message was: “His name is John” (Lk. 1:63).

The first six verses in the Prayer Book of the Song of Zechariah, the *Benedictus*, proclaim the blessedness and merciful action of the Lord. And here too, as in the *Magnificat*, powerful active verbs sing of God’s work in the world: God came (*epeskepsato*), God set free (*epoisen*), God raised up (*egeiren*). Then, the last four verses address and charge the infant, predicting his future as “the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way;” describing “how God’s salvation will come to the people through John, the sun dawning, shining in the

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<sup>21</sup> Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* VI.8.

<sup>22</sup> *The Taizé Office* (London: Faith Press, 1966), pg. 11.

<sup>23</sup> I can tell you from experience that Zechariah’s hair must have smelled good to his wife when he got home from offering the incense.

darkness, illuminating those in the shadow, and putting them on to the way of peace.”<sup>24</sup> The Baptist will do this by preaching repentance.

In the early Benedictine tradition, the *Benedictus* was used as the Gospel Canticle at Lauds,<sup>25</sup> and this carried over into the Medieval Church, and Cranmer set it as the principle Canticle in the morning service after the second reading. Our Prayer Book gives it a place of prominence, suggesting its use for Sundays and feast-days—and during the week as well, on Wednesday.<sup>26</sup>

The *Benedictus* is also one of the three suggested Canticles in the Burial service, as the body is being carried out from the Church. I will tell you that the early “Prayer Book Studies” days—you know, the Green Book, the Zebra Book—were an exciting time to be a church singer in New York City. Just to demonstrate the power of this canticle, the *Benedictus*, the need was being acknowledged at that time for a Commendation to be added to the traditional Burial Service; because increasingly it was seen that modern-day parishioners were no longer going to the service at the grave-site, where they could hear it and benefit from its sacramental comfort.

Responding to this need, Prof. Tom Talley prepared the Commendation “anthems” which could be added into the service (BCP 483-484, 499-500). In the second and third of them, he eloquently knit the two phrases from the last line of the *Benedictus* into the prayer intention of the anthem. It says:

The Sun of Righteousness is gloriously risen, giving light to  
those who sat in darkness and in the shadow of death.

The Lord will guide our feet into the way of peace, having  
taken away the sin of the world.

Then, the fifth Commendation “anthem” quotes the “In Paradisum.”<sup>27</sup>

It is interesting to note that the Psalm translations in our Prayer Book are nearly all those chosen by Cranmer from the sixteenth-century Coverdale version, and now modified into modern language; yet, the *Magnificat* and the *Benedictus* in Rite II use the texts prepared by the International Consultation on English Texts (ICET), *Prayers We Have in Common: Agreed Liturgical Texts*.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Vinson, *Luke*, pg. 50.

<sup>25</sup> *Rule of St. Benedict* 12, 13.

<sup>26</sup> *Book of Common Prayer 1979*, pg.144.

<sup>27</sup> Hatchett, *Commentary on the American Prayer Book*, pg. 491.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29.

## The Song of Simeon *Nunc Dimittis* Luke 2:29-32

The *Nunc Dimittis* rings out at the end of most Anglican evening services, with Simeon’s faithful assurance that God has sent relief and the consolation of salvation. Its three short verses are often one of the first parts of the service you learn to sing by heart.

With its special connection to the Feast of the Presentation of Our Lord, the Church has used St. Luke’s Canticle of Simeon, the *Nunc Dimittis*, in evening services since as early as the fourth century. It is witnessed as the Canticle in the evening office in the *Apostolic Constitutions*. The *Nunc Dimittis* was prayed, with the use of an antiphon before and after, in Compline in the late Middle Ages, when the Office was moved from the monks dormitory into the church. Then, Cranmer set it in Evening Prayer in the 1549 Prayer Book, making use of the translation from the Great Bible of 1539.

Although it was replaced in a few of the intervening editions, the *Nunc Dimittis* was restored in 1892 revision of the Prayer Book to its “traditional first place among the canticles after the second lesson at Evening Prayer.”<sup>29</sup> It is used as well in the Office of Compline. The translation of the *Nunc Dimittis* to be used for Rite Two Evening Prayer and Compline is that of Canon Charles Mortimer Gilbert, the Custodian of the Standard Book of Common Prayer.

Shall we let one of the eighteenth-century Anglican Divines teach us? Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Secker (1693-1768) taught that:

[The *Nunc Dimittis*] was used by the ancient Church...and expresses the gratitude of good old Simeon, a just man and devout, as we read in St. Luke, and waiting for the consolation of Israel; to whom it was revealed that he should not die till he had seen the Lord’s Christ. Accordingly, he came by the Spirit into the Temple; and when Joseph and Mary brought in the child Jesus, he took him up in his arms—imagine to yourselves the scene, I beg you—and blessed God and said:

“Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace”—that is, in comfort, mind you—“according to thy word; for mine eyes have seen thy salvation which thou hast prepared before the face of all people.” Now, the following sentence, hath a strong appearance of being designed by the Holy Ghost, does it not? For Christ should be the first “to be a light to lighten the Gentiles;” then, afterwards, “the glory of God’s people Israel.” For it needs only be remembered that we, too, “have seen the Lord’s salvation.” For though we have not yet beheld our Savior with our bodily eyes; yet, we may meet him in his church. And this we should think happiness enough for us here, whatever else we want or suffer; and always be prepared and willing to bless God and “depart in peace.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 116.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas Secker, “In Explanation and Defense of the Liturgy of the Church of England,” in J. Robert Wright, ed. *Prayer Book Spirituality: A Devotional Companion to the Book of Common Prayer Compiled from Classical Anglican Sources* (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1989), pp. 175-176.



Isn't he a wonderful teacher?

Of course, not every Morning and Evening Prayer needs to make use of the *Magnificat* or the *Benedictus* or the *Nunc Dimittis*, but the magnificent Canticles provided by St. Luke do complement the service and give voice to our praise. And in fact, for the faithful reciter of Daily Office—which I encourage you to become—it is good to be familiar with the helpful resource on pages 144-145 of the Book of Common Prayer. This table of Canticles is “based upon certain historic associations of canticles and themes with particular days of the week,”<sup>31</sup> and it can add variety to our daily Anglican worship.

One consequence of the Morning and Evening Prayer Offices crafted by Cranmer from the longer eight-fold Medieval services is that St. Luke's Canticles appear now to be illuminated and highlighted in their dynamic lyricism and beauty—don't you think—because the services are shorter. All this means that more busy people every day are able to incorporate them into their personal prayer life, and use the *Magnificat* and the *Benedictus* and the *Nunc Dimittis* as part of their own Anglican Spirituality.

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<sup>31</sup> Hatchett, *Commentary on the American Prayer Book*, pg. 153.

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