

# A GUIDE TO EVENSONG



## INTRODUCTION

This guide aims to give you a brief overview of what each part of the Evensong service means. Everyone is always welcome to College services, whatever their faith or beliefs. We hope you find Evensong a refreshing and restful way to set aside the worries of the day, buoyed up by music and the Word.

‘Choral Evensong’ is simply an evening prayer recited by a group of people with a choir. The origins of Evensong date back to Christian and Jewish prayers at the end of the day; the shape of our current service was first set by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer in the *Book of Common Prayer*, based on the offices (daily services) of Vespers and Compline, and has been sung in this college since the 1500s.

Evensong combines music with the spoken word. Music has always had a key role in Christian worship: The Scriptures record how the early followers of Jesus would sing together; the monastic traditions of the patristic and medieval periods developed the communal chanting of psalms and set prayers; and the early modern period onwards has seen the flowering of choral and congregational church music. The role of music in worship reflects the idea, as expressed by St. Augustine of Hippo (354–430), that ‘they who sing, pray twice.’

Reading from Scripture has always been at the heart of Christian worship. The early followers of Jesus read Scripture and prayed together as a way to build up community; and the early church arranged practices to read through the Bible in daily prayers. Eighty percent of the text of the Book of Common Prayer is composed of passages from the Bible.

The structure of Evensong draws heavily on monastic spirituality. Evensong can be seen as a Reformation project of making this profound Christian practice of evening prayers (Vespers & Compline) available to everyone. In turn, monastic worship derived its form and content from the worship of the earliest Christian communities as well as the recitation of psalms and prayers used in Judaism at the time of Jesus. Praying Evensong in this Chapel connects us all, then, to over two millennia of prayer offered for the glory of God and for the common good of humankind, as well as to centuries of worship in this College. We hope this short guide will help you feel more connected with College worship, and so with God and with one another as children of God.

## PARTS OF THE SERVICE

### *Organ Voluntary/Introit*

It is no easy thing to move from the noisy activity of our daily lives to the quiet stillness of Evensong. The music before the service helps us downshift into a lower gear, where we can ‘be still and know that God is God’ (Psalm 46.10)

### *Introductory Sentence*

The officiant reads a sentence from Scripture. This passage from Scripture varies according to the season, and helps set the tone for the evening’s prayers. Many of these sentences evoke the change from day to night, or God’s presence even in the midst of darkness.

### *Confession and Absolution*

The general confession comes at the start of Evensong, as a way to set aside the mistakes and sins that we all carry. Confession is not meant to make us feel miserable, but allows us to begin our prayer renewed and forgiven. We say the confession together, an acknowledgement that some of our sins are communal rather than individual, as well as making an egalitarian statement that none of us are above the need for confession. The absolution makes clear that it is God, not the minister, who grants forgiveness.

### *The Lord’s Prayer*

In the Gospels, the disciples ask Jesus to teach them how to pray. It is this prayer that Jesus gives to his disciples in response (Matthew 6.9-13 & Luke 11.2-4). Across the many divides of Christianity, Jesus’ prayer unites all Christians. In its simplicity and directness, the Lord’s Prayer touches both on our material and our spiritual dependence on God—and our hope and expectation in the great vision that God has for our world.

### *Preces and Responses*

*Preces* is simply Latin for ‘prayers.’ These prayers, sung by the choir, mark the beginning of the service proper, as we ask God’s guidance for our prayers (‘O Lord, open thou our lips’). At the end of these prayers is the doxology—from the Greek *δοξολογία*, ‘word of glory.’ A tradition derived from the *kaddish* ending many prayers in the synagogue, the doxology is a brief expression of praise to God appended to the end of prayers and hymns.

### **Psalms**

The Psalms are the ancient hymns and poetry of Judaism, and have a central place in Christian worship. The founding light of Christian meditative prayer and monasticism, Anthony the Great (c. 251–356), commended a spiritual practice of ‘singing psalms before sleep and after sleep.’ In Anthony’s time, at some services the entire Book of Psalms would have been recited, sometimes throughout the night until

they were completed at dawn. The psalms are chanted by the choir in a style native to England known as Anglican Chant, developed during the English Reformation out of the plainchant tradition. When singing in Anglican chant, the natural rhythm of the words governs how the music is fitted to the words.

### ***Old Testament Reading***

The first reading after the Psalms comes from the Old Testament, also called the Hebrew Bible. This sacred collection of the stories, laws, poetry and prophecies was the Bible as Jesus knew it. The Scripture readings at Evensong are assigned from a lectionary — a set schedule of readings ensuring that we hear the breadth of the Bible rather than sticking only to passages that are comfortable and easy.

### ***Magnificat***

The first of two Evensong canticles, the *Magnificat* is the prophetic poem which Jesus' mother Mary sings out to her cousin Elizabeth (Luke 1.46–55). The canticle's first words in Latin are *Magnificat anima mea Dominum* ('My soul magnifies the Lord'), hence 'Magnificat.' The earliest Christian hymn, Mary's song echoes sacred Hebrew poetry, especially the Song of Hannah (1 Samuel 2.1–10), a song sung by a one woman to another, declaring an unshakable faith in a God of justice and love.

### ***New Testament Reading***

The second reading comes from the New Testament, the books of the Bible, written originally in Greek, that tell the stories of Jesus and the writings of some of his earliest followers.

### ***Nunc Dimittis***

The *Nunc Dimittis* comes from Luke's Gospel (2.29–32), sung by the elderly prophet Simeon when the infant Jesus was presented at the Temple in Jerusalem. As with the Magnificat, its title comes from the first words of the canticle in Latin. Including the Nunc at Evensong draws a parallel between the end of each day and the end of life, inviting us to reflect with hope and joy on our own mortality, and to set aside the cares and worries of the day and embrace the peace of God's rest.

### ***Apostles' Creed***

The word creed comes from the Latin *credo*, 'I believe.' The Apostles' Creed is among the most ancient confessions of faith in Christianity, a summary of the essential teaching of the 12 apostles, Jesus' earliest followers. The theology of the Creed reflects a basic understanding of the Christian faith shared across the centuries.

### ***Lesser Litany***

These prayers, sung between the choir and the officiant (or a cantor), follow a form which neatly encapsulates prayers for community, crown, church, and the individual. The *kyrie* at the start ('Lord have mercy') is the core of the earliest Christian litanies. Cranmer's Litany draws on Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Orthodox prayers. You may notice that the doxology at the end of the Lord's Prayer ('For thine is the kingdom...') is omitted. The use of the doxology comes from ancient Christian practice and is common in Orthodox liturgies and Protestant churches, but not in Roman Catholic liturgy, and is derived from the Old Testament (1 Chronicles 29.1).

### ***Collect***

The collects quite literally ‘collect’ the prayers of the congregation, and are spoken by the cantor or officiant on behalf the whole community. At Evensong, the first collect is one appointed for that particular day or season, and is followed by two collects (For Peace, and For Aid Against All Perils). These collects are especially appropriate at the end of the day, as we seek rest from our labours, and God’s protection though the night.

### ***Anthem***

Throughout the service, we are carried along on a river of music. ‘*Qui cantat, bis orat* (He who sings prays twice).’ Words often attributed to the great North African theologian Augustine of Hippo, they remind us of the spiritual power of music. Music opens us up to an emotional and physical experience of prayer, bringing us closer to those mysteries to which mere words seem inadequate.

### ***Intercessions and Grace***

The intercessions are a time for us pray for particular needs and concerns. The Grace which concludes the prayers comes from the Bible (2 Corinthians 13:14).

### ***Address***

A sermon or address at Evensong is not required by the Prayer Book, but is common practice, especially on Sundays. The preacher might speak on the readings, on a theological, ethical, or spiritual issue.

### ***Blessing or Responses***

Evensong ends quietly with words of blessing, or with sung responses from the choir. The night is at hand and the busy day is at an end. We slip back out into the world for a time of quiet and peace. Even in the rather nocturnal world of College life, the prayers of Evensong invite us to seek out the still small voice of God in the night, found in quietness and rest.

### ***Organ Voluntary***

After Evensong, a piece of organ music known as a ‘voluntary’ is usually played whilst the clergy and choir process out of chapel. The term ‘voluntary’ has an interesting history. During the Elizabethan era of the English Reformation, the role of organ music in a religious service had to be reconsidered, given that the organ had primarily been used to accompany Latin plainsong; in response, the ‘voluntary’, a standalone organ piece in an improvisatory style, was born. Today, the organ voluntary serves as the seamless metamorphosis from the peaceful ending of Evensong to the renewed bustle of College life.