



## Ancient roots, timeless prayers: Evensong at Saint Mark's Cathedral

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Evensong – choral evening prayer – prayers ancient and modern prayed twice through singing – this is worship that St. Augustine would have been proud of. The service of Evening Prayer in our tradition goes back a long way. It was already present in the English Book of Common Prayer, published in 1662. Anglican Morning Prayer followed the Roman Catholic form of Matins, the first of eight daily prayer services that comprised the 'Divine Hours'. In a similar way, Evening Prayer followed the

form of Vespers, held traditionally before Compline at the 'lighting of the lamps'.

Certainly, regular usage of Evening Prayer at many of the major Anglican cathedrals in England predates the 1662 prayer book by hundreds of years, inherited from the Catholic faith. In University chapels at Oxford and Cambridge, in addition to the Chapels Royal, daily Evening Prayer was also almost entirely sung (and still is today). During the reign of Elizabeth I, some of the greatest choral music ever written (take, for instance, some of the movements from the *Great Service* by William Byrd) was intended for the purpose of being sung at Evensong. Fortunately for composers such as Byrd and Thomas Tallis, they were highly revered (and even highly paid) by the Queen for their efforts.

Five hundred years later, the tradition of Evensong continues. At our own cathedral, one of four different choirs offers its collective voice in prayer every Wednesday at 6:45 p.m. from September - June. These choirs are the Gallery Choir, the Women's Choir, the Youth Ensemble, and the Boys and Girls Choir. Naturally, this service becomes a musical extension of Evening Prayer, prayed beautifully every weekday of the year by both regular and visiting parishioners, and maintained by Sue Tait and Russell Campbell. The order of service appears in two

different Rites in our Book of Common Prayer, 1979. While the essential form is similar between the two, Rite I follows the more traditional language derived from the 1928 Prayer Book. Each of Saint Mark's Wednesday choirs are used to singing both Rites.

Although it can technically be followed by the mysterious Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament (rarely observed in the Anglican Communion), there is no consumption of bread and wine inherent in Evensong, and rarely any talk or song of it. The service is not a Eucharist, but rather a collection of canticles, readings and devotional prayers, immediately identifiable by their ancient roots, but also by their timelessness. After a suitable opening prayer and congregational hymn, a set of Preces and Responses is sung. A Psalm for the day is also sung, followed by Canticles interspersed with assigned daily readings from Holy Scripture. While our prayer book permits some variation, the preferred Canticles (as they also were in the Renaissance) are the Magnificat (Song of Mary) and Nunc Dimittis (Song of Simeon). The Magnificat has been set chorally by composers for centuries - Monteverdi's famous setting was published in his *Vespers* of 1610. In the history

of the Anglican Church, the Magnificat has generally been composed in pairing with the Nunc Dimittis. Countless settings of the 'Mag and Nunc' have been written in both England and the United States since the Victorian era, and the tradition of composing on these sacred poems continues today.

Yet still thou goest on,  
And now with darkness closest weary eyes,  
Saying to man, It doth suffice:  
Henceforth repose; your work is done.  
Thus in the Ebony box  
Thou dost enclose us, till the day  
Put our amendment in our way,  
And give new wheels to our disorderd clocks.

From the sonnet, *Even-song*  
By George Herbert (1593-1633)

Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace:  
According to thy word;  
For mine eyes have seen they salvation,  
Which thou hast prepared before the face of they  
people Israel;  
To be a light to lighten the Gentiles  
And to be the glory of they people Israel.

Glory be to the Father  
And to the Son and to the Holy Ghost:  
As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,  
World without end. Amen.

Nunc Dimittis, (1928 Prayer Book)



My soul doth magnify the Lord :  
and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.  
For he hath regarded :  
the lowliness of his handmaiden.  
For behold, from henceforth :  
all generations shall call me blessed.  
For he that is mighty hath magnified me :  
and holy is his Name.  
And his mercy is on them that fear him :  
throughout all generations.  
He hath shewed strength with his arm :  
he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.  
He hath put down the mighty from their seat :  
and hath exalted the humble and meek.  
He hath filled the hungry with good things :  
and the rich he hath sent empty away.  
He remembering his mercy hath holpen his servant Israel :  
as he promised to our forefathers, Abraham and his seed for ever.

### Sacred Poems of Comfort and Promise

While the office of Compline highlights the Nunc Dimittis, the Magnificat is not part of its order. It is the service of Evensong alone that heralds the Song of Mary. In the first chapter of Luke, a narrative recounts the Virgin Mary, pregnant with the baby Jesus, visiting her cousin, Elizabeth, who was at the same time pregnant with John the Baptist. Filled by the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth proclaims in a loud voice to Mary, "Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb." In reply, Mary delivers her song in admiration and gratitude, "My soul doth magnify the Lord. And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior...." Later on, she says, "He hath put down the mighty from their seat: and hath exalted the humble and meek. He hath filled the hungry with good things: and the rich he hath sent empty away." Today, these words can continue to resonate deeply within us, helping us find our way on a rocky path, and perhaps in a more eternal way, inspiring us in our care for others.

The second of the two canticles, the Nunc Dimittis (Song of Simeon), comes from the second chapter of Luke. Simeon was a devout Jew who had been promised by the Holy Ghost that he would not die until he had seen the Savior. When Mary and Joseph brought the baby Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem for the ceremony of consecration of the firstborn son, Simeon was there, and he took Jesus into his arms and said, "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace: according to thy word." As "work is done" and "darkness closest weariest eyes", Simeon's song reflects the most essential attributes of Evensong: end of day, gratitude for God's abundance, restoration of spirit, and prayer for healthy rest. As the service also supplies the comfort and promise of a new day, Simeon represents the promise of peace at the last. As the old man fulfills a prophecy through divine inspiration so that he can "depart in peace", so should we be inspired to redeem ourselves in this world, so that we will be redeemed in the next.

Following the Canticles, the Apostles' Creed is chanted followed by several suffrages, responses, the Lord's Prayer, and three collects. Then, as the 1662 Prayer Book puts it, "In quires and places where they sing, here followeth the anthem." The 'anthem' is a distinctly Anglican term referring to an often elaborately composed piece of music that generally uses a sacred text. The selection of anthems is largely modeled around the church seasons, although an anthem can always be chosen for some other purpose, such as the devotion of a particular Saint. After the anthem, the service of Evensong concludes with a closing prayer, a congregational hymn, and an organ voluntary.

### A service of sung prayer

While Evensong clearly has its challenges, the opportunity provides choir, conductor, organist, and congregation alike an opportunity to worship as artisans through music that is unified with some of the most profound texts that a Christian can possibly offer to God and to each other. Our gain is a continuation of musical growth, rich theological understanding, and a genesis for active prayer both personal and communal. From time to time, perhaps you might want to share in the elegance of Evensong at Saint Mark's – even for just one Wednesday evening from 6:45-7:15, it might become your Ebony box.

*Evensong happens at Saint Mark's during the program year from September through May. In its place, evening prayer is said during the summer months. The complete text of this article is available on our website at [www.saintmarks.org/Worship/AboutEvensong.php](http://www.saintmarks.org/Worship/AboutEvensong.php).*

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