

Let Everyone Find Their Voice: Re-imagining the Psalms for worship and devotion Lezley Stewart, Saint Andrew Press, 2020. ix +130pp. £14.99 paperback ISBN 978 0 7152 0984 4.

The Society has already heard Dr Stewart on this subject – at the Annual Meeting in Greyfriars Kirk in 2016. Now we see the flowering of the project then in progress she described as ‘re-imagining the psalms’.

Being appointed associate minister at Greyfriars Kirk put the author in direct descent from its innovative if controversial 19th century incumbent, Dr Robert Lee, a key member from the beginning of the Church Service Society. Lee sought to counter the somewhat chaotic and impoverished worship of the Presbyterian denominations of the time with a set order which would be full and also properly devotional. For this, he went not to the ancient liturgies but to Scripture, and in particular to the Psalms, which he described as ‘the grand magazine of devotion for the Church of God in all ages.’ On this he based his (subsequently titled) *Order of Public Worship*.

This book is based on a modern day project in which Dr Stewart and the congregation tested Lee’s contention that the psalms were such as could open up avenues to God. Their aim was to see if these ‘soul songs of the Bible’ still connected with the heights and depths of human experience today. The book affirms that the answer was positive.

Six themes are taken: refuge, created, lament, centre, pathway, refreshment. Within the theme three initial psalms are offered, each psalm followed by questions to aid contemplation. Suggestions follow to enable a group to plan an order of service, and this is followed by a liturgy ready for use, where carefully selected psalm verses both lie behind the leader’s words and form the words the congregation themselves utter. There is also a short, reflective liturgy for Communion.

However, the surprise gift in this book is its ‘re-imagining’ of the 18 psalms used for contemplation, each quite unmistakably a sibling of the psalm chosen but in every case a striking remaking of that psalm.

Take Psalm 84:

How lovely is your dwelling place,
O Lord of hosts!
My soul longs, indeed it faints
for the courts of the Lord;
my heart and my flesh sing for joy
to the living God.
Even the sparrow finds a home..

This becomes:

O God, you are my centre.
I seek you in the unfolding of each day.
For this I long –
to be where the Spirit is living
and know my place is there.
Doesn't everyone seek such a space?
A place to thrive and be.
Happy are those who find this gift.

The project was carefully researched through the medium of recent academic writing, including the knowledge that, while we have 150 psalms, there were likely some which dropped out and others written too late. So the book includes a handful of new psalms, like the others pastorally perceptive and beautiful to read and reflect upon.

They work in worship too, as the Society found in its recent Study Day on technology, where three were used (prior to publication) in the opening worship, the ancient office of Terce. These skilful remakings felt natural in the ancient setting but they also managed to resonate with the ultra modern themes that were engaged with during that day.

In this book, these 'words to God and words from God' speak in the individual but also in the worshipping community, capturing for those who struggle with an ancient faith in an uncertain age the emotion, the immediacy, and the poetry of the originals.

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