

THE JOY OF THE PLYGAIN SERVICE

by HYWEL PARRY SMITH

It's early January and most of us are recovering from Christmas and New Year celebrations. However for some in Wales, the celebrations will only now be in full swing as the traditional Plygain services take place. Dr Hywel Parry-Smith, a singer from Bro Madryn ministry area, describes what these unique services are all about.

From being almost forgotten about by the 1970s, except in rural pockets of mid and north Wales, the traditional Welsh 'Plygain' service making a quiet but significant come back today.

The word "plygain" or "plygien", depending on dialect, is derived from the Latin words for cockcrow: 'pulli cantos'. The services started as watchnight services on Christmas Eve. They have now mostly shifted to post-Christmas and can be held until the end of January.

The form of the service is simple, with a few variations depending on local custom and church tradition. After a pared-down version of Evening Prayer and a congregational carol (or a hymn, reading and prayer in non-conformist chapels) the Plygain is declared open. By convention children are the first to sing, followed by adults from the hosting congregation and then anyone else who wants to join in. Only one carol is offered, unaccompanied, without a conductor but always from a copy of words with or without the music. They are all in Welsh. There is no pre-arranged order and the same carol should not be offered twice in the same service. Singers need therefore to have a decent repertoire in case their first or second choices have already been sung.

Once everyone who wants to has had a chance to sing, silence descends on the congregation and whoever is leading the service judges it time for another congregational hymn or carol. After this the second round begins, following the same order as the first. Usually the last carol is sung by all the male carollers: 'Carol y Swper', sung to the tune Difyrrwch Gwyr Bangor. After the blessing, supper is served in the vestry or hall or sometimes nearby farm. Carollers are served first!

Very few of the carols are known outside Plygain services. Many date from the 18th and 19th centuries, some from the 20th and a couple seem to have survived from before the Reformation. A few families of singers still jealously guard their

own carol, although I can think of almost 100 that are now available in print. The carols are bursting with theology, written in metre, and recount not only the nativity of Christ but go on to Jesus' death and resurrection and the Second Coming. Many a line urges us to amend our lives whilst we still have the opportunity.

On the whole the carols are sung to old ballad tunes, in major and minor keys, and like the old ballads have many verses; usually only a handful are chosen but the option is always there to sing all of them. Although women are now in carols arranged for four parts, trios of baritone with tenor and bass are particularly appreciated. The lines can be changed to suit the numbers and voices available. Parties are not usually more than eight. It is often difficult to squeeze more than that on to the chancel steps or into a chapel's Set Fawr. Soloists will get up and sing too.

The singing is not polished and is not expected to be; these are not art-songs. The carols are offered in an act of worship, not on the stage of an eisteddfod. The words are all important, as is taking part - singing ability is not judged. A tuning fork to pitch the carol is still used more often than a note from piano or organ. If singers miss the note and have a false start, nobody bats an eyelid. Some of the carols have one voice to start and the tune is thrown to and fro between the different voices but all join in harmony before the end. A refrain is very rare. I've yet to sing in a Plygain service without electric light, although candles and lamps usually burn somewhere in the church or chapel. It's difficult to imagine what the services looked like when lit by scores of candles. They were a noted feature of these services. In Llanfyllin candles were made especially for Plygain. Plygain services are now held in many areas of Wales and by Welsh exiles in London. The well known Mallwyd Plygain is yet to come, held on New Year's Eve of the Old Welsh Calendar - January 13. A plygain at Llandeilo Fawr has been held for about a decade now on the last Sunday of January.

Ask around and see if there is one being held near you. You don't have to understand every word, although that helps. The atmosphere of these dignified and joyful services, which are unique to Wales and have remarkably survived the centuries through adaptation, will surely affect you. Wear warm clothing, beware of the candle flames and listen as the Christian faith is proclaimed afresh to each generation. Be challenged and amazed at "the Divinity in Mankind, wearing the nature of Man", and ponder on "The Heir of Heaven, God of Hosts, and no less". Followed by food, fellowship and fun.