



## 4. What Makes A Gradual Hymn Gradual?

The hymn sung immediately before the reading of the Gospel is called a 'Gradual'. This does not mean that it has to be sung very slowly. The name 'gradual' is derived from the Latin word 'gradus', meaning a step. So 'gradually' originally meant 'step by step'.

You will have noticed that our church floor rises in a series of steps, with the altar higher than the chancel or choir, and the choir higher than the nave or body of the church. This is partly for practical reasons of visibility, and also because in the symbolism of mediaeval times increasing height denoted increasing importance and sanctity. The sanctuary at the east end of the church was the holiest place, so it was the highest; the clergy provided an interface between the people and God, so they were elevated midway between the two.

St Mary's is built according to the ideas of the Victorian church architects, who followed what they took to be the best ancient practices. This causes problems for us today, when modern worship focussed, not so much on a distant God, away out of sight, but on 'God with us', whose Holy Table is spread in the midst of his people.

In the very earliest churches, there was a raised pulpit (called an ambo) on either side of the sanctuary. The Epistle was read from one, and the Gospel from the other. After the Epistle had been read, the Gospel would be brought to the altar, censed, and blessed, then taken in procession, with lights and incense, to the ambo. While this was happening, a cantor would lead the people in the singing of a Psalm or Antiphon from the step (gradus) of the ambo. So this psalm was called the 'Gradual'. When ambos went out of fashion, the Epistle was read, and the Gradual was sung, from the Chancel step.

In St Mary's, our Epistle or other reading is taken from the Lectern, which is raised slightly above the floor of the nave, or from the pulpit, which is higher. We sing a hymn, not a psalm, before the Gospel; but we still refer to it as a Gradual Hymn.

Our Gospel procession is with lights but no incense, and takes us to the middle of the nave, to signify the proclaiming of the Gospel to the people of God. Lights would have been partly to help the reader to see, partly to signify the holiness of what was being

read. Incense, too, would have signified holiness, but also had a practical function - in mediaeval times, most of the congregation would probably not have washed or bathed for a considerable time!