

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, September 10, 2023

The Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Festal Evensong with

4 p.m.

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A Sermon by

The rev. Canon Carl Turner, *Rector*

on

Colossians 3:12-17

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Entering into the mystery through song

Marty Haugen, the American Church Musician often talks about how music makes connections but especially in the context of the liturgical life of the Church, he says:

“We sing to remember who and whose we are. The leader of prayer, the one who reads, and especially the one who sings, must know more than the notes. She must know the stories of our faith as well as the stories of her own community, and she must know how they are brought together in worship.”

‘*she must know more than the notes*’. The bringing of the hours of work into a performance, which is liturgical, is very different to performing on stage. Music in the Christian tradition is bound up with the telling of story and this, in turn, we have inherited this from our origins in the Jewish faith where the saving works of God were celebrated in song in the Temple and in the Synagogue and most especially in the singing of the psalms.

The ancient saying goes “The one who sings, prays twice” – music deepens the proclamation of the Gospel and roots the story in the heart of the believer.

This is expressed through the coming together of various forms – rhythm, melody and texture. The rhythm of music beats with the beating heart of God’s love for the Universe – his often-syncopated rhythm works beautifully around the rhythm of the created order even when humankind misses a beat. The melody is the story line, which runs from the creation of the world and will find its finale in the consummation of all things at the end of time. Even when our human melodies selfishly drown out the principle theme of God’s plan – God’s story – his melodic line brings people back time and time again into unison. And the texture of God’s music is the richness of the harmonies that he has created – weaving our stories with those of others in the past and anticipating those of the future. Even when men and women insert discordant and noisy passages into the world, God’s harmonies are far richer and more sonorous, calling humankind into a new relationship with the Trinity. The Creator of the perfect fifth wants his sons and daughters to recognise that they are made in his image and can resonate with the frequency of his love.

Significantly recorded in Psalm 137, we hear of the power of song and also how the *powerful* can also silence song:

*By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept : when we remembered thee, O Sion.
 As for our harps, we hanged them up : upon the trees that are therein.
 For they that led us away captive required of us then a song, and melody, in our heaviness : Sing us one of the songs
 of Sion.
 How shall we sing the Lord's song : in a strange land?*

Silencing song also silences story. Traditional melodies are the means of passing on story from one generation to another; that is why folk melodies are so important to all cultures, for they bind up the story in the melodies handed down through many generations. To silence such melodies is to silence the telling of the story contained within them.

At the same time, melody and song can also be a means of protest and challenge; whole musical genre have developed out of the marginalization of people and from their desperation comes melodies and musical forms from the past and deep within the soul; jazz, gospel, African American spirituals – these are but three examples of the way that songs can be of protest and also solidarity.

Our role as musicians in the liturgy is to aid the telling of the story of our faith, but also to enter more deeply into the mystery of what we are singing.

St Augustine said that “*we are an Easter People and Alleluia is our song.*” The Alleluia is the response to the greatest of all stories. Whereas many parts of the liturgy have had music composed for them to cover a particular liturgical action, the singing of the Alleluia before the Gospel has always been sung as an end in itself. It is a response to what St Paul proclaimed to be at the heart of our faith “*if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.*” (Romans 6:8) For this reason the Alleluia, for centuries, has included some of the most complex melodies and produced some of the most elaborate music. The groups of notes in plainsong notation- the neumes - also have a special name when they are grouped together as in the Alleluia; they are known as the *jubilus* which means *rejoice!* (From which comes the word *jubilant*). They are not there to test the ability of the singer – or even the skill of the Director of Music to read them in the first place - they are there to enable those singing and those listening to enter more fully into the mystery; as St. Paul says to the Colossians, singing sacred songs so that we are filled with grace. (Colossians 3:16). Entering so deeply into one syllable of a word so that the reality of the story takes root in our hearts:



That's 43 neumes for one syllable: -ia!

Sicardus of Cremona in the 12th century said “*the Alleluia is short in word and long in neum, because that joy is too great to be expressed in words.*” or as another 12th century Benedictine said, “*Jubilamus magis*

quam canimus: We rejoice rather than sing and prolong the neums, that the mind be surprised and filled with the joyful sound, and be carried thither where the saints rejoice in glory” (Rupert of Deutz (Rupertus Tuitiensis), O. S. B)

At the heart of Christian worship, then, is a community of Faith re-telling its story in many different ways, but above all using the gifts of music and of singing in particular, to engage the mind with the soul and proclaim that our lives are transformed by the power of God. Our singing and music-making reflects our life with God and our commitment to one another. We sing because we have a story to tell – a story of which we are a part and on which each of us needs to reflect. Our music takes us deeper into that story– that is why we lift our voices in joy and praise today because, as John Wesley put it so much better, we sing to remember who and whose we are so that we may be:

**“Changed from glory into glory,
Till in Heav’n we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before Thee,
Lost in wonder, love, and praise.”**