

Sunday, September 07, 2025
Patronal Feast Day
Saint Thomas Choir School Convocation

Solemn Evensong
4:00 pm

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Canon Carl Turner

on
John 14:1-7

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O Sing unto the Lord a new song: A sermon to celebrate our Patronal Feast and welcome Richard Tanner as Organist and Director of Music.

A man arrived at the pearly gates and was greeted by St. Peter. St. Peter began giving the man a tour of heaven, and the man was amazed by all the spectacular mansions. They passed one exquisite palace after another, each more magnificent than the last, all with beautiful lawns and gardens.

Finally, they arrived at a small, rather shoddy-looking shack.

“Wait, what’s that?” the man asks, pointing.

“That,” said St. Peter, “is *your* house.”

The man was bewildered. “But all those others were so grand! Why is mine just a shack?”

“Well,” St. Peter replied, “We just did the best we could with the money you sent us.”

Jesus said to his disciples, “*In my Father’s house there are many mansions,*” which I often think is a rather lovely translation for Episcopalians to use! Of course, the Greek word translated as ‘mansion’ can also be translated as ‘dwelling places’ or ‘rooms.’ In actual fact, the Greek suggests something much more fluid and Michael Ramsey preferred the term ‘staging posts,’ like the inns that a stage coach would stop at to refresh the horses when crossing the Wild West. Jesus is, clearly, not suggesting that we will each have our own special home with a front door that can be locked to keep people out, rather, he is suggesting a sense of movement and growth beyond death – in which people move closer and closer to God and, in so doing, finally create the Beloved Community that they attempted to create during their lives on earth.

Some of you may know of the book by the great 20th century German Protestant Systematic Theologian, Karl Barth, on Mozart which he wrote in 1956. In it, he writes a letter to Mozart in heaven, and there are several delicious lines as he signs off the letter:

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I have only a hazy feeling about the music played there where you now dwell. I once formulated my surmise about that as follows: whether the angels play only Bach in praising God I am not quite sure; I am sure, however, that en famille they play Mozart and that then also God the Lord is especially delighted to listen to them. ^[1]

It is significant, Richard, that the great Miller Scott organ has inscribed on it the words that Bach wrote on all his manuscripts SDG – *Soli Deo Gloria* – Glory to God alone. For whether the Angels play Bach on their own or Mozart as an ensemble, all their music is to the glory of God, which is, of course, is the very reason why we make music here at Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue, and the reason why we asked you to be our next organist and Director of Music; to help us give glory to God and, like the angels in heaven, to make a community where that is possible.

Let me share a quote of Marty Haugen which I have used many times before, but is the first time I can use it for you as we welcome you among us. He says this:

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. ^[2]

Music can connect us to the stories of our community through the coming together of the three basic principles of music-making: 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 principal theme of God's plan – God's story – his melodic line brings people back time and time again into unison. But 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, in the present, 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 him. The Creator of the perfect fifth wants his sons and daughters to recognize that they are made in his image and can resonate with the frequency of his love.

What I have just said, Richard, is, I believe, at the heart of our mission statement: *to worship, love, and serve our Lord Jesus Christ through the Anglican Tradition and our unique choral heritage*. Yesterday, as we gave breakfast to our neighbors, many of whom are homeless, the doors were open and the street was filled with the sound of the boys rehearsing. I find it poignant that the very first soup kitchen at Saint Thomas was the inspiration not of a committee, not even the Vestry, but was the idea of the choristers who saw the homeless on their way to church and wanted to share their own food with them. Yes, music-making is not just about worshipping God or building the beloved community, it can even inspire our service to the poor and the disadvantaged.

As you begin your ministry with us – and it is a ministry (just as the choristers are ministers and are not there to perform or, God forbid, entertain us) we mark a new chapter in the life of our music-making and our unique choral tradition with our collaboration with professional Children's School; the creation of the Saint Thomas Consort over this past summer; the expansion of our outreach to local children through the

Noble Singers and in other ways; and the plan to create a girls' choir in this place. Some have questioned this vision; others have been critical if it; some have, rightly, been a little nervous. Today, the sound of the choir of men and boys should cease all questions about the commitment of this church to boys singing, and our shared vision should create excitement and energy for the way forward. And the inspiration to do this is hidden, believe it or not, in the motto of our Choir School.

The Choir School motto comes from the first line of Psalm 98 – “*Cantate Domino*” – ‘O Sing unto the Lord.’ However, as you know, that is only the first few words of the psalm verse. If we read the full half-verse, we get a powerful visionary statement that echoes back through the Hebrew scriptures and will inspire us and give us confidence for the future: “O sing unto the Lord a **new song**.” The Choir School is part of a *living* tradition that will continue to grow and to change as it always has done. And here, I must remind everyone of Jaroslav Pelikan’s famous definition of the word tradition and the danger of making it traditionalism, much loved by our friend Bishop Michael Marshall. He says, “*Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. And, I suppose I should add, it is traditionalism that gives tradition such a bad name.*”^[3] If we resist change, and if we try to keep everything as it always was, we are in danger of making our Anglican tradition *traditionalism* – fossilizing it through a dead faith.

Richard, under your leadership, the Vestry looks to you to help us preserve this precious part of our unique choral heritage but to remind everyone that this is a living faith handed on to us from those who have gone before us. And we do this not by simply sorting our finances, but by expanding our music-making! Now, this may seem counter-intuitive, my friends – surely we need to *cut* rather than try to do more but, Richard, as you know very well from your own experience as a musician in a number of places – it is by opening up opportunity, sharing what we do best with others, and bringing more people into our orbit that we can preserve that which is core to our mission. As you said at your own interview – “*we need to expand to preserve.*”

And that brings us to back to our New Testament reading again. Jesus said to Thomas, “*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also.*” Our liturgy and music-making, Richard, is one of the ways that we know Jesus and experience the Father’s love by giving him the glory. How interesting, but how deliberate you have chosen today’s repertoire; not only compositions of your predecessors, but the texts themselves. Perhaps the last verse of the anthem we just heard can be the touchstone of your ministry among us – those powerful words of George Herbert:

Sev’n whole days, not one in sev’n,
I will praise Thee;
in my heart, though not in heav’n,
I can raise Thee.
Small it is, in this poor sort
to enroll Thee:
e’en eternity’s too short
to extol Thee.

Richard, in the coming years there will be so much to celebrate and so much joy; there will also be hard work, disappointments, even setbacks. But Thomas, our Patron, experienced all of that and he can be an inspiration to you, too. Jesus said to him, “Thomas, I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” Our music-

making will help many to find their way, discover the truth, and find a new depth of life. So, let George Herbert have the last word from his poem 'The Call:'

*Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life:
Such a Way as gives us breath:
Such a Truth as ends all strife:
Such a Life as killeth death.*

References

- 1 From 'A letter to Mozart' in 'Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart' by Karl Barth, first published in 1956.
 - 2 From a Lecture to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in 1998, 'Worship & Music: Keeping the People's Song Alive.
 - 3 From 'The Vindication of Tradition: The 1983 Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities' by Professor Jaroslav Pelikan, former *Sterling Professor of History, Yale University*
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