

## SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

*Fifth Avenue · New York City*

**Sunday, September 08, 2024**

The Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost

**Festal Evensong**

4:00 pm

+

A Sermon by

The Rev. Canon Carl Turner, *Rector*

+

### **A song keeps the story alive.**

Boys, there was once a wealthy man who lived in a huge mansion in the Hamptons, but he was rather eccentric, and he kept a great white shark in his swimming pool. He published a challenge that anyone who was prepared to swim one length of his pool with his great white shark would be given his spectacular house, or inherit half of all his wealth, or have the hand of his beautiful daughter in marriage. Years went by and, no one ever took him up on the challenge. One summer evening, the Choir of Men and Boys had sung a concert in that town, and the eccentric rich man hosted a cocktail party for Dr. Filsell and the gentlemen of the Choir. The rich man told Dr. Filsell and the gentlemen how nobody had ever taken up his challenge when, suddenly, there was a huge splash. Everyone turned to look at the pool and saw one of the gentlemen of the choir swimming frantically down the length of the pool. The shark was taken completely unawares, but was now in hot pursuit. As the shark closed in on its victim, the gentleman of the choir, having those few seconds of extra time, managed to climb out of the pool just as the jaws of the great white snapped shut, barely missing him. Everyone ran over as he stood there dripping wet and breathing heavily. “My goodness!” said the eccentric rich old man, “I keep my word. What would you like as your reward? My beautiful house?” “No!” said the gentleman. “Then, do you want half of my fortune?” said the old man “No, I do not!” he said, still dripping wet. “Ah!” said the rich old man, “You want the hand of my daughter in matrimony.” “NO!” he exploded, “I am already married.” “Well, what *do* you want then?” said the rich old man. “I wanna know the name of the guy who pushed me in!”

For those of you who are new members of our Choir School, or returning for your second year, you may sometimes feel that you have been pushed into the deep end of a swimming pool. There is so much to learn; so much to master; and not just on your own, but as part of a team – the choir as a whole. You see, singing in a choir is very different to singing solo. During your time with us, you will all probably get to sing a solo or a verse, and the particular character of your voice will shine; on those occasions, Dr. Filsell will want to hear *your voice* singing brightly, confidently, even loudly – though I always remember what Dr. Filsell’s predecessor, Daniel Hyde’s, used to say when it came to choirs and volume: phrase when it came to the choir and volume: “*Never louder than lovely.*” Singing in a choir is an art in itself, for it requires listening as much as producing sound. When I first learned to sing and joined a choir, I was taught that if I could not hear the voices of the people around me, then I was

probably singing too loudly. Each of you has a particular voice just as you each of you have a particular name, particular (perhaps peculiar) tastes in food, TV, sport, books, or even music itself! But just as you form a family in our choir school, so in choir you form an ensemble in which the blending of your individuality creates a harmonious sound.

And what do we sing together in church? Notes? Chord progressions? Rhythms? Of course, we need to know the notes and we need to watch the conductor, and we need to understand the tempo and the dynamics that the composer has written but, above all, we need to know the story of what we are singing and why we are singing it. Now, when you sing the psalms, that's pretty obvious isn't it? The psalms are ancient songs about every kind of thing on earth – history, creation, praise, sadness, sickness, marriage, the royal family, forgiveness, stillness, evil, good, and even, occasionally (though the worst ones we don't let you sing) cursing. But this is also true of our hymns and songs, our anthems, motets, our responsorial singing, and our canticles. We need to know the stories behind them.

We heard a wonderful story in our first lesson today – the Exodus – the formative event for Jewish people still remembered thousands of years later as the Jewish Community celebrates the Passover each year. Now, I asked Fr. Preston to read an extra verse at the end of the account of the crossing of the Red Sea. Did you hear the first thing that Moses and the people did after crossing the Red Sea? What might you have done? Collapsed in a heap? Had a feast with your family? Posted images of the dead Egyptians on Facebook? Listen again to how the Hebrew Tribes responded to their rescue from slavery in Egypt and their deliverance at the Red Sea:

**“Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the LORD.”**

They composed a song. Immediately they put the story into song. And after they had sung the song, they sang it again! Only, this time it is not Moses who led, but his sister Miriam:

*‘Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron’s sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing.*

*And Miriam sang to them:*

*“Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously;*

*horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.”*

(By the way, there is a carving of Miriam and her tambourine somewhere close to where you are sitting – perhaps Mo. Turner or Fr. Preston will help you discover it this term).

You see, by singing we make the story more memorable and it also makes it a community act – everyone can learn the song and be taught the song, thereby remembering the story. It can be handed down to children, and they can teach it to their children. The song keeps the story alive. That's why folk melodies in many different cultures are so important, and why it is so important that we teach children to sing and to learn the melodies of their culture. And in church, as in the synagogue, or the Sikh Gurdwara for that matter, singing the songs has a spiritual dimension also. Church choirs don't perform, any more than the cantor in the synagogue performs – choirs minister; they sing to help those assembled to pray better. Although he didn't ever say it like this, he just hinted *at it*, St. Augustine

is attributed with this phrase: *“The one who sings prays twice.”* There is something powerful about taking words and putting them to music.

I love to share this quote of the American musician, Marty Haugen every year around this time. He said, *“This is the first reason we sing. 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.”*<sup>1</sup>

To our new boys – welcome! You have an exciting year ahead. To our new members of faculty – welcome! I do hope that you will see that what the choristers do here in church is not an added extra or, worse, an after-school activity, but what gives our school its unique character. You will always have a place among us as the boys sing the stories of our faith. To the new gentlemen of the Choir – welcome! I hope that your time with us will be rewarding and fruitful. To our new organ scholar – welcome! I hope that your organ playing goes from strength to strength as you are mentored by our fine organists.

I hope that all of us will treat our singing with the respect it deserves, remembering always that it is a means to an end and not an end in itself. The music serves the liturgy, just as the Choir School serves the Choir, not the other way round. Our singing connects us with myriad stories of our faith and we bring our own stories too, by using our voices together to make music.

Let me end with another story related by Marty Haugen: He said, *‘Pia Moriarty, an anthropologist, related a story to me about the Hmong people who come from the highlands between Laos and Cambodia. When missionaries first made contact with the Hmong, the Hmong told the missionaries rich stories of his history and vision. Because they had no written language, the missionaries said, “We can help you develop a written language so that you can put these stories down into books.” The Hmong replied, “We used to have books, but one day the books fell into the rice and we ate them.” The missionaries, not quite understanding, said, “It’s too bad that you ate your books.” “No” the Hmong told them, “now we have eaten the words, so we can tell the stories to you.”*<sup>2</sup>

All references from *‘Worship and Music: Keeping the People’s Song Alive’* A paper delivered to conference for the ELCA in 1998

---