

Date Preached	27-Feb-2022	Date Initiated	15-Feb-2022
Where Preached	SAK	Appointed Readings	Epi Last, Yr C (Tom's farewell)

" And all of us ... are transformed ... from one degree of glory to another "



The Transfiguration: always the last Sunday lesson before the beginning of Lent, and always a lesson of seemingly endless meaning. ¶ God the Father reveals to humanity, in the form of the Disciples Peter, James and John, the full glory of Jesus the Christ. ¶ Jesus is aligned with ... but also differentiated from ... the great prophets of Israel, in the form of Moses and Elijah, who have gone before Him. ¶ The Father announces to us the complete divinity of Jesus—"this is My Son"—and commands us to listen to Him, as His word is the full and final will of God.

As sketched in today's collect, the Transfiguration reveals Jesus' glory so that we, enlightened by His Light, we may bear the cross of discipleship and be changed into His likeness. What takes place on the high mountain this day is not only a transfiguration—a changing; a metamorphosis—of Jesus, but also of *us*. Our eyes are opened ... our hearts are filled ... our faith is confirmed and strengthened. As we stand in the swirling cloud of God's glory, we are, as St Paul puts it, "transformed into the [image of Christ] from one degree of glory to another": "changed from glory into glory, till in heaven we take our place," as we all sang last week.* In the Transfiguration, the People of God, already dwelling in the glory of God, *encounter* God's glory and are thus *transformed*: transformed by the knowledge that, in and through Christ, there is no longer any separation ... any gap or distance ... between humanity and the Divine.

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Transfiguration. Transformation "*from glory into glory*." I can think of no better theme for the day on which we bid farewell to a beloved church musician: For isn't the power ... the unseen, but very *real*, essence ... of music in worship ↓ transfiguration? **Sacred** music transforms **sacred** worship from one degree of glory into another. To be sure, if no one ever sang or played or chanted a note in our liturgies, God would still be worshipped, and we would still readily and reliably experience the sacramental grace of God. But the addition of music to sacred worship deepens ... enriches ... *seals* ... worship as the ineffable encounter of the faithful with the One in Whom our faith resides. Music is, to mix our metaphors, the final brushstroke that completes the painting ... that last blossom or sprig that fulfills the arrangement.

It's always a risk to try to analyze and explain the mystery of ritual, but a day like today, I think, behooves us to ponder the three discrete, yet complementary, ways in which sacred music engraces divine worship:

- First, and largely unseen by the vast majority of worshippers, sacred music fires the imaginations of those who lead liturgy. An organist chooses and prepares repertoire that will gather, connect and then send forth those who assemble. A

* Hymn 657, "Love divine, all loves excelling." The words are Charles Wesley's.

priest and a musician pick up and put down six or seven ... or even ten or twelve ... different hymns before landing on the three that sing the tenor of the day most compellingly. The choir director sifts the library for the one anthem that will illuminate the Word of God, read and preached, still further in the hearts of those who've heard it ... and the choir grapples with how to shine this light most brightly: transcending mere pitch and rhythm to harness a spectrum of physical, artistic emotional powers that will join the fire of the music to that of the Holy Spirit.
>> The glory of the music written on the page begins to find a voice.

- Then, every time we, as the Body of Christ, sing a hymn or a canticle ... every time we chant a psalm or intone a great "Amen" ... we *ourselves* are swept up in—and *transformed by*—the glory of sung praise. We worship more wholly: more bodily, more directly, more human-ly. We set inert words-on-a-page ringing through creation. We proclaim what we believe with our fullest faculties. Our faith transcends both the physical and the intellectual boundaries of our heads, to vibrate and pulse and resonate through our whole bodies. During the few brief moments of a hymn or a psalm or a *Sanctus*, our faith kindles every fiber of our being ... plucks every note of our compass.
>> The glory embedded in the words and music we sing and hear seizes our spirits and climbs us to heaven.
- And then ... lifted by the glory in and of the music we are making; ascending to the supernal ... the most glorious transformation of all: Opened by a sacred power we know, but cannot name ... guided by a divine force we sense, but cannot control ... we encounter the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. When, in our playing, our singing, our chanting, our listening, we pierce the drab limits of decorum and propriety that burden and ground so much of our daily existence ... ¶when we risk playing a piece that's maybe a little too difficult ... ¶when we commit to an anthem we may not really care for ... ¶when we belt out a hymn with unalloyed joy, its verbal and tonal images mutually carrying and crossing and consummating ... then—*then*—we burst the rigid shells of our too-human reserve, and the Holy Spirit floods our whole being, in wave after glorious wave. We are the angels in the Bethlehem sky ... and surrounding the throne of Christ in Heaven:
>> We transcend the flattened, stifled reality we call "time" and burst into the infinite, swirling cloud of God's glory, echoing ethereally throughout all times and all places.

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Every single day for the last 10-plus years ... and longer still at both Kent School and South Kent School ... Tom Holcombe has devoted his energy, his training, his talent and his artistry to liberating the transfigurational glory ... at once, both transformative and transcendent ... of liturgical music for those gathered for divine worship. He has selected and rehearsed, composed and arranged, practiced and learned, taught and shaped and honed countless preludes, postludes, anthems, psalms and hymns not only to give glory to God ... but also that God's people might be transported—transposed—into the glory of God.

He is too self-effacing to say it and perhaps too humble even to think it, but Tom's tireless endeavor ... his discerning taste ... and his always-positive disposition have made St Andrew's, in particular, a place where, in and through music, we have transcended the limits of our earthly existence and danced, however fleetingly, upon the ephemeral edges of the grace of God, eternally gifted us by Jesus the Christ. I can think of no higher calling than lifting people's hearts to the Lord ... of giving them the wings of angels to soar their Savior's glory. And I can think of no servant who has done so with more intent or dedication than Tom.

Tom, may the transfiguration you and your music have worked in all of us be the highest achievement and happiest legacy of your long and successful career; and may God's glory accompany you every bit as fully as you have enabled us to dwell in it, transfigured and transformed.



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