

Bach's Sermon

J.S. Bach Cantata BWV 106 "Gottes Zeit ist die allebeste Zeit" Actus Tragicus

Most of the commentaries on Bach's cantatas seem to be written by professional academic musicians who write appreciative lectures.

Among other things I am a retired pastor, not a musicologist. And I do sermons, not lectures. I am somewhat familiar with Lutheran theology — well my version of it — but I don't read the subtleties of musical theory, so I am responding to the cantata as a person who loves the cantatas and listens to a few every week. I have been in a choir for a few of them and form impressions of what they are saying to me as they meet my faith. So this will be one person's response to the message of the cantata. You will do the same thing in a little while.

For this cantata is an amazing sermon, a better one than most of the ones I have heard though my life.

In 1707 Johan Sebastian Bach was 22 years old, unmarried — actually his wedding to Maria Barbaras came a couple of months after he composed this. He had just begun playing the organ at Muhlhausen, he wasn't getting on particularly well with the unmusical pastor. He was asked to compose this cantata for a funeral — maybe the funeral of his Uncle Tobias.

The previous century, the 1600s, had been horrific for people in Germany and all over the world because of a sudden change in climate. There were various factors — no sunspots for a century, huge volcanic eruptions — the end result was that the planet became cooler. Venice and the Bosphorus froze. There were years without summers and rotting harvests, plague, horrific civil war in England, violent change of regime in China and the 30 Years' War and then 7 Years' War in Germany — one-third of the population of Germany died.

There was an explosion of Lutheran hymn writing in Germany, and the main theme of chorales was the presence of Jesus in the midst of tragic loss.

But I don't think young Johann Sebastian Bach was reflecting on the tragedy of 17th century Germany or his uncle Tobias. Thirteen years earlier, when he was nine, his mother died, and then nine months later so did his father. We can imagine the pain — what is incredible is what arose from this as it was met by Bach's life long trust in the promises of God. The Gospel turned everything, even death into dancing.

This cantata arose out of loss, out of tears and pain and despair; but it does not end where it began — it takes us on a journey to an amazing destination.

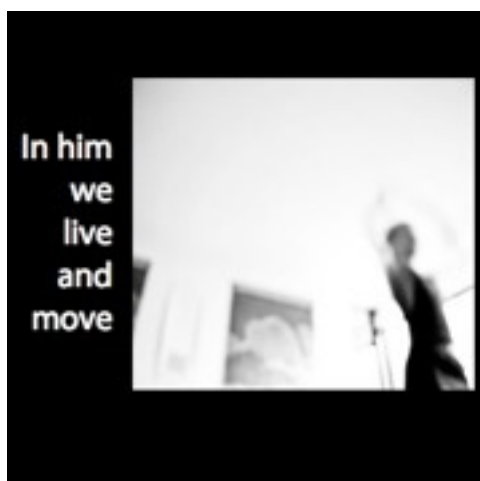


There are many tasks and challenges for us as we journey through life. The developmental psychologist Erickson tried to list them: infants have to begin to trust; teenagers have to work out their identity, young adults tackle intimacy; and the last task of life is the need to assure ourselves that our lives have been worthwhile.

You hear this in the opening instrumental movement. As always in Bach, there is a steady relentless beat; but this is not a gloomy death march — this is a heart beat for a steady reflective walk. Then the two flutes break in and lift our eyes from our plodding feet — they play mostly together in unison and then one drops out: they separate, there is a time of tension, and then they come together;

confusion and conflict are resolved, and the walk goes on. This is life — mostly plodding step by step through the routines of each day: breakfast, kids, work, washing, football, TV sleep. Every now and then something catches our attention; there are moments of tension, often (though not always) resolved.

A sense of incompleteness — even at the best moments, life is not complete. Things happen which are good, even amazing and wonderful, but are they enough? Surely there must be more? Where do I go from here? How do I get my bearings for the journey? Is there a point to it all?



And the choir comes in giving a perspective for what will follow.

My times are good, but God's time is the very best time, the best of all times.

Times filled with God at the centre are the best times: times of security and peace and love. The view of the life with God from the outside looking in is very different to the way it feels inside.

Sometimes people looking in see God's people doing good things and assume it is because God will hit them if they don't — God is the ruthless ruler in the heavens corrupted by power like all earthly rules; a kill joy determined to

make life miserable with lots of rules and laws.

But on the inside, to those who have tasted the goodness and love of God, the security of being in God's care is pure delight. The choir then does a stately promenade around God's throne making a strong confession, with a lot of emphasis on the fact this is the best time to be in.

Then the group launches into a frolic, a lilting, joyful, bubbling, and bouncing dance, celebrating life in God's presence. Life is not a vale of tears for a Christian, an ordeal to go through with somber face and clothes and without laughter.

God created us as earthy people; and the incarnation of Jesus is a positive affirmation of our earthly physicality — eating and giving and loving and sexuality and growing things and stories and laughter and sport and study.

In God we live and move.

The parts in the choir intertwine for a few seconds on *leben* — life — trilling up and down after each other with flutes bouncing around like children gambolling without a care in the world in green pastures on a sunny spring day.

Life is full of delights to be enjoyed, shared, and celebrated with each other.

Life with God is Good, because as the choir concludes:

In God we live and move as long as God wills.



And the soprano holds onto “LONG” — on and on for three score years and ten, until the rest of the choir brings life to a conclusion “so long as God wills”.

And the flutes flutter together like a dying, fibrillating heart .

The chorus continues brutally, relentlessly — this is universal , the law of life — everyman and everywoman, not just the body already in the casket. This is unavoidable reality, the blunt truth we prefer not to hear — we would rather talk about people departing, moving on. The “D” word is so confronting, so crude and impolite — four times they sing the words

In him we die, in him we die, in him we die, in him we die

And finally after a pause comes — “when God wills” comes as a full stop, by all the parts singing in the pits like basses: crushed, defeated. This is the end of the discussion — there can be no debate, no negotiation, no deal can be struck.

Life is incredibly fragile as we all discover in different ways — man proposes, God disposes. God always has the last word .

And then the tenor responds in a prayer, with the flutes ascending with his prayer like incense to heaven — a desperately plaintive cry. This is your song and mine, the song of everyman. There is no escape from our destiny — all our journeys through life end up at the same place, so what is the point of it all? Why keep going on a fruitless journey which always comes to a dead end?

Oh Lord teach us, Oh Lord teach us
Oh Lord teach us, Oh Lord teach us
to consider that we must die
that we must die
that we must die
O Lord teach us to consider that we must die.

There is no escape. Death is death, inescapable, brutal. Face it, the Lord says, and prepare to go. And the thought that is emphasised for 6 bars is “You will not remain alive”.



Set your house in order,
set your house in order
for you will die;
you will not stay alive ,
you will die,
you will die,
you will not remain alive,
not remain a-l-i-v-e - (six bars)
not remain alive —
set your house in order!

And the word that is emphasised for 6 bars toward the end is “ALIVE” — It goes on and on for so long, it seems as if it will never end. And the Lord has the last word, the last task to be done — “Set your house in order”. Then the flutes do just that — they do some very

formal structured and orderly business up and down the scales, putting life in order.

Erickson said the last task of life is to decide whether it has been worthwhile. I think there is one more task which Bach is reflecting. A deep Christian truth saying something else. Because you can't take it with you, the last task is to let everything go — give everything up, say goodbye.

It's hard to do. It's never easy — it's sad to see people in the last stage adding rather than subtracting — building a mansion which will be empty because they can, shopping relentlessly,

It's understandable: we are material people, things are important to us, we define ourselves with things. And then there are people — letting go your stuff, letting go of your children when they marry, letting go of friends and neighbours and workmates.

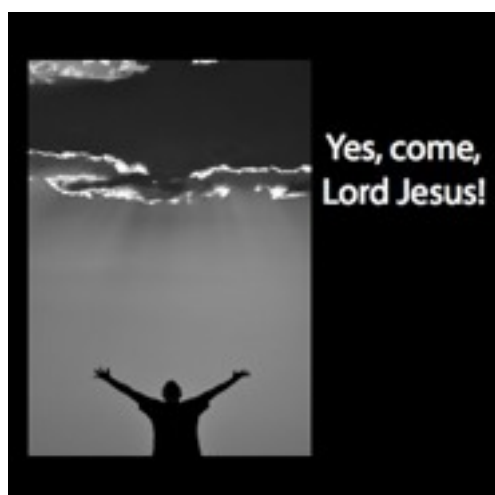
The last stage is for letting go, for simplifying down to what is essential, to begin to look inwards and upwards rather than down and around.

Then back to the brutal reality with the chorus. Six times they tell us

The ancient law is, human you must die, you must, you must die

and the orchestra plays relentlessly under the singers, pounding the truth home, thump thump thump — a relentless and inexorable march to the grave, a clock ticking the seconds away, heart beat which comes to an abrupt end.

But before the end, the dying soul sings



Ja Komm Herr Jesus Komm — Yes, come Lord Jesus come

Words from the last chapter in the Bible over and over again — 12 times.

Beneath and adding a third layer, the flutes play a typically theology-packed, German chorale by Vulpius, which the congregation would recognise and probably know by heart:

I have left all that concerns me up to God
Let him do whatever he wants with me.
If I continue to live on here still longer,
without striving against him,

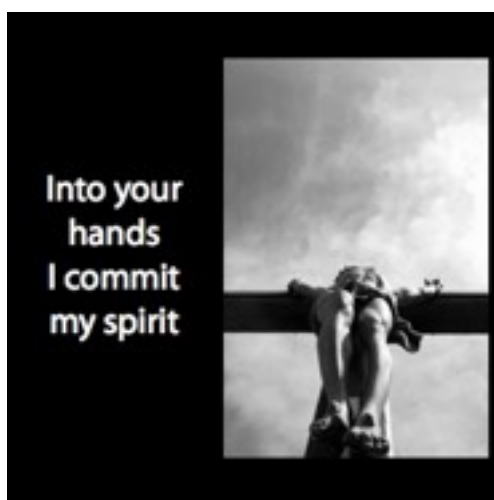
I will surrender myself to his will.

Then the chorus brutally comes in again “you must die” five times: be realistic! Do you know what you are promising? Are you going into this with your eyes open?

The last word is absolutely stunning as the choir and instruments drop out one by one — a cry of trust, faith, salvation, left hanging when all else fades away — a heart felt cry to Jesus:

Come Lord Jesus, Lord Jesus.

Death is not the victor, defeating the soul, snatching it into darkness. The soul is victor, inviting Jesus the Lord of life to come victorious over the grave — the words echoing the final words of Jesus from the cross entrusting himself to the love of God: nothing more is to be done, nothing can be done, the journey is over; it is finished.



Into Your hands I commit my spirit,
You have redeemed me,
Lord, faithful God.

The spirit wings upwards as it places itself over and over in “the hand of God” The viola climbs up notes step by step up Jacobs ladder. The alto soars up into soprano territory, claiming the righteousness of Christ, repeating over and over — “you have redeemed me.”

And the spirit is met with Jesus reaching down with the amazing promise he gave to the man being crucified beside him:

Today you will be with Me in Paradise.

A wonderfully lyrical, almost ecstatic reflection on the promise of paradise life with God.

The promise and the promise of Jesus flows on and on, irresistible and uninterrupted, an endless melody. Underneath, the alto sings, almost chants, Luther’s paraphrase of the *Nunc Dimittis* —

Lord, now let your servant depart in peace
For my eyes have seen your salvation

The spirit makes a solid response to the promise of Jesus continuing to float above it — the rhythm of a cradle being rocked from side to side as a baby falls asleep.



With peace and joy I depart
in God's will,
My heart and mind are comforted

The voice of Jesus drops out, and the soul rests alone in the grave — waiting, softly, trustingly; and the violas wrap a lullaby around it, wavering and fading away with the last flicker of the departing spirit as sleep comes.

Calm, and quiet.

As God had promised me
death has become my sleep.

The last stages of life are over. There are no longer any ties with earth, all is left behind. And the orchestra and

choir explode heavenward in a hymn of praise, a solid, confident rhythm, parts together in harmony — a triumphant victory march.

No; I think more than this. Bach was looking forward to his wedding to his cousin Maria Barbara a month or so later. I think this is the stately walk of a bride toward the altar with the flutes leaping around to express the smile on her face as she sees the groom waiting for her.



Glory, praise, honour, and majesty
be prepared for You,
God the Father and the Son,
for the Holy Spirit by name!

The divine power makes us victorious.

Then suddenly the music explodes into ecstasy and the bride throws restraint to the wind — kicks off her shoes, flings aside her veil, and begins running down the aisle...

Through Jesus Christ, Amen.

A wonderful fugue, with the parts chasing each other and intertwining around Jesus Christ, the centre of everything — the companion on the journey and the host at the end.

The voices become more and more animated, with the lower parts shouting rapid Amens over and over and over. This is the final word of confidence, trust, assurance — the full stop

Amen — Yes, yes, it is so, that's the way it is, that's the truth.

And after this outburst of confident praise, there is stillness...

A quiet Amen, and then a silent one — then nothing.

The joy of the resurrection meets the reality of the occasion — a dear friend has died and we are without him. Alone.