

text reminds us that the needs of a stranger—whoever that stranger might be—go beyond mere survival to such notions as love and friendship, dignity and respect.

The Gospel of Luke records a story about hospitality and strangers, a story of two disciples walking the Emmaus Road after Jesus' crucifixion. They were despondent about the seeming failure of Jesus' mission. It was as if Jesus' life and death had meant nothing—the world had changed hardly one whit for the better. But then a stranger came upon them and joined in their conversation. When they arrived in Emmaus, the disciples invited the stranger to stay and have a meal with them before he continued on his journey. As they sat at the table, the stranger "took the bread and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them" (Luke 24:30). Even though he was the guest of the disciples, he became their host. Through that encounter "their eyes were opened" (24:31) and they

discovered that the stranger was none other than the risen Lord.

Our fear of strangers is easily identified in a society where we are mostly strangers to one another. Yet when we allow that fear to take us over to the point where our hospitality contracts into the exchange of trivial pleasantries among like-minded people, there will be no encounters with the risen Lord as occurred for the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. It was only because they engaged an unidentified stranger in a dialogue about the very grounds for hope and trust, and then insisted that the stranger join them at the table, that they were able to have their eyes opened to see that the Lord truly lives.

When we say to a world torn apart by envy and hostility, to people alienated and isolated to the point of doubt and despair, "We are Christians here," may that be a sign that in our midst they will be welcomed and befriended as if they were members of our own family. For in a profound way, they are. ■

# Christus Victor

## Bach's *St. John Passion*

Calvin Stapert

This past summer, while I was studying Bach's *St. John Passion* in preparation for teaching it, I was also rereading St. Augustine's *Confessions*. When I came to a prayer in Book X, it immediately struck me as containing the sum and substance of the *St. John Passion*. What Augustine said so eloquently in the *Confessions*, Bach, with equal eloquence, magnified in the *St. John Passion*.

How hast thou loved us, O good Father, that hast not spared thine only son, but hast delivered him unto death for us wicked men? How hast thou loved us, for whom he that thought it no robbery to be equal with God, was made subject unto death, even the death of the cross? He that was alone free among the dead, that had power to lay down his life, and power to take it up again: for us was he unto thee both the Victor and the Victim, and therefore Victor, because the Victim: for us was he unto thee both the Priest and the Sacrifice, and therefore the Priest, because the Sacrifice: of slaves making us thy children, by being born of thee, and by becoming a servant unto thee. (X:43)

Bach's obituary tells us that he wrote five passions. Two—those according to Matthew and John—have

survived complete. A *St. Mark Passion* survives in text only and, if the obituary is correct, two are completely lost. However, we need not be too distraught that three of Bach's passions are unavailable to us because the two that have survived would seem to be unsurpassable, if not unmatched, even by Bach himself. Furthermore, the two that survive complement each other beautifully. It has long been noted that the *St. Matthew Passion* is more meditative and contemplative whereas the *St. John Passion* is more dramatic. But beyond being complementary in character, the two passions, as Jaroslav Pelikan has recently shown, complement each other in theological emphasis. The *St. Matthew Passion* emphasizes the satisfaction theory of the atonement, the *St. John Passion* the *Christus victor* theory. Thus Bach's two surviving passion settings stand as musical monuments to the two main ways by which the church has sought to explain the mystery of the atonement.

That Bach made his *St. John Passion* into a paean on the *Christus victor* theme was no accident; he got the theme from John. John's Gospel consistently portrays the power and glory of Jesus the King. Already the first chapter rings with that theme: "We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace

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and truth" (vs. 14). Later in the chapter we hear Nathanael declaring, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel" (vs. 49).

In the passion narrative John relates several details that again serve to emphasize Jesus' power and glory. He begins by telling us that Jesus went to a garden, a place that was familiar to Judas. Raymond Brown, in the Anchor Bible Commentary, points out that among the evangelists "John alone draws the logical inference that Jesus' habit enabled Judas to know where to find him" (p. 807). A bit later John, again uniquely, relates two more details that reveal Jesus' power. When his assailants were coming, Jesus did not wait for them to arrive; instead he went out to meet them, and when he identified himself to them "they drew back and fell to the ground" (18:6).

. . . the reaction of falling back in confusion at Jesus' answer is not simply spontaneous astonishment. The adversaries of Jesus are prostrate on their feet before his majesty, and so there can be little doubt that John intends "I AM" as a divine name. . . . The Johannine scene illustrates that Jesus has God's power over the forces of darkness. . . . (Brown, p. 818)

The chorus that opens the *St. John Passion* picks up John's emphasis on the power and majesty of Christ with all its "Herr [Lord]" words and with its clear reference to the first verse of Psalm 8.

*Herr, unser Herrscher,  
diesen Ruhm in allen Landen herrlich ist!  
Zeig' uns durch deine Passion,  
dass du, der wahre Gottessohn,  
zu aller Zeit,  
auch in der grössten Niedrigkeit,  
verherrlich worden bist.*

[Lord, our master,  
whose fame is glorious in all lands!  
Show us, by thy Passion,  
that thou, the true Son of God,  
hast for all times,  
even in thy deepest lowliness,  
been glorified.]

The choral shouts acclaiming Jesus as "Herr [Lord]," however, are not what we hear first. The orchestra begins the Passion without the choir. A heavy pedal point in the bass instruments, an incessant, repetitious sixteenth-note figure in the strings, and the long, sustained lines full of piercing dissonances in the oboes all contribute to a picture of turmoil and anguish, of suffering and grief. The orchestral opening reveals to us the human misery that reaches its nadir in Jesus' passion, in his "deepest lowliness."

It is in the midst of this anguish that the choir enters with powerful, chordal acclamations of "Lord," and then continues by transforming the strings' restless sixteenth-note figures into a grand, rising sequence. The choir makes it clear that the Lord to whom and about whom this work is sung is not merely a suffering man; he is the Son of God, a member of the Trinity who is worthy of being

addressed three times in this movement with threefold shouts of "Lord."

*Christus victor* is thus clearly portrayed by the choir in the opening movement. But by putting it in the context of the orchestra's anguish, Bach avoided glossing over the suffering that Christ had to endure in order to accomplish the victory. This was no empty victory over an inconsequential foe. The music, like the text it sets, has it right: Christ's lordship, power, and glory come through his passion and are seen in his greatest lowliness.

Bach's setting of the words of Jesus keeps before us the power and majesty of *Christus victor* throughout the *St. John Passion*. Jesus' voice is always strong and controlled in contrast to the confused, frightened, or cynical voices of the other characters around him. A particularly good example of this is the contrast Bach brings out between Pilate and Jesus during the trial. It is worth noting here that the main issues of the trial are kingship and power and that John, by omitting the interrogation before the Sanhedrin, made this into *the* trial. At the end of the trial, Jesus says, "in solemn and poetic diction" (Brown, p. 868),

"My kingship is not of this world.

If it were, my servants would fight  
to prevent my arrest by the Jews.

But now my kingship is from another place." (18:36)

Bach's music beautifully supports both the diction and the structure of this response to Pilate's questions. The strong leap of a fourth on the word "kingship" to the highest note of the section gives the first phrase an authentic note of power and authority. In contrast to this the fanfare-like melisma on "fight" sounds pompous but empty and ineffectual, a contrast that is reinforced by a return to the range and melodic shape of the opening phrase as Jesus rounds out his response by repeating, "my kingship is from another place."

Another way in which the *St. John Passion* emphasizes the *Christus victor* theme is by means of the role it gives to Jesus' enemies. The *Christus victor* theory of the atonement requires that the enemies of Jesus play a prominent role. The danger is that this theory could turn into a full-fledged dualism. But even the New Testament, in order to stress the power of evil, uses

such phrases as "the prince of this world" (John 16:11) or even "the god of this world" (2 Cor. 4:4) as titles for the devil. These titles press the power of evil to the very outer limit of faith in the unity of God; and repeatedly, in moments of personal tragedy or social crisis, Christian language and thought have crossed that outer limit and have come up with a full-blown dualism. So it was with Luther, who described the human condition as one of being poised delicately between the two, with the question of which would win always in the balance—in the balance existentially, in the concrete struggles of existence, but not in the balance ultimately, because God was still God and because the power of God in Christ had conquered the powers of evil. That made "Christus victor" indispensable to Luther's faith.

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# For us was he unto thee both the Victor and the Victim, and therefore Victor, because the Victim.

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## —St. Augustine, *Confessions*

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Like Luther, Bach took the devil seriously, and therefore, in his cantatas and above all in the *Saint John Passion*, he found in “*Christus victor*” a way of acknowledging the power of evil and the tyranny of death and yet of affirming the sovereignty and the ultimate triumph of Christ in God. (Pelikan, pp. 108, 110)

From the outset of his Gospel John vividly sets forth the confrontation of *Christus victor* with his enemies as a confrontation of light with darkness. “In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness does not understand it. . . . The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world” (1:4, 5, 9).

When he gets to the passion, John brings out the confrontation of Jesus and the forces of darkness . . . with dramatic instinct. Jesus knows what is going to happen and goes to meet his opponents. We have heard him say: “No one has taken it [my life] away from me; rather, I lay it down of my own accord” (x 18). Jesus had given Judas permission to leave the Last Supper to betray him (xiii 27); now he will permit Judas and his forces to arrest him. For John the passion is not an inevitable fate that overtakes Jesus; he is master of his own fate. . . . In John there is to be no physical contact between Judas and Jesus, no kiss as in the Synoptic account. . . . The two sides are divided in warfare. (Brown, 817-18)

The first confrontation between Jesus and his enemies in the *St. John* occurs when the crowd comes bearing “torches, lanterns and weapons” (18:3). John is the only evangelist to mention lanterns and torches; the others mention only the weapons. In the recitative telling of this confrontation, Bach took care to emphasize the words “mit Fackeln, Lampen, und mit Waffen [with torches, lanterns, and weapons]” by setting off the three key words with rests, by setting them to high notes, and by approaching them with upward leaps. By emphasizing these particular words, Bach seems to have caught John’s theological point.

In xiii 27, 30, when we last saw Judas, he had become the tool of Satan and had gone off into the night. This was the evil night of which Jesus had warned in xi 10 and xii 35, the night in which men stumble because they have no light. Perhaps this is why Judas and his companions come bearing lanterns and torches. They have not accepted the light of the world, and so they must have artificial light. (Brown, p. 817)

Bach’s principal means of emphasizing the role of Christ’s enemies is through the *turba* choruses (i.e., the choral pieces that contain the words spoken by groups of people in the story). The *turba* choruses loom larger in

the overall scheme of the *St. John Passion* than they do in the *St. Matthew*, which gives a much bigger role to the meditative ariosos, arias, and chorales. But it is not only by playing a quantitatively larger role that the *turba* choruses stand out in the *St. John Passion*. Their striking character also gives them prominence. Wilfrid Mellers characterizes them as “the voice of a mob, . . . spiritually ‘low’ and a bit inane” (p. 97). And Karl Geiringer has pointed to their “strongly wild, passionate, and disturbing character. They produce a weird picture of human masses gone out of control” (p. 196). In quantity and quality the *turba* choruses of the *St. John* emphasize Jesus’ enemies, an emphasis appropriate to the *Christus victor* theme.

The culmination of Bach’s emphasis on *Christus victor* comes with Jesus’ words, “It is finished.” Bach set these words to a descending line that fittingly depicts the expiration of a dying man. But where, then, is *Christus victor* in this? Why not set these words as a shout of victory? I think Bach wanted to confront us with the reality of the final enemy, death. There will be time for victory shouts, but those shouts will be empty unless we first realize the power of the enemy.

Jesus’ death was real, and so it is appropriate that a sorrowful, meditative aria follows his last words. The musical theme of this meditation is spun out of the descending line to which Jesus sang “It is finished.” But there is more than sorrow in the aria; there are also notes of hope and of peace. The solo obbligato instrument is the viola da gamba, an instrument that even in Bach’s time was fast approaching obsolescence. This is the only place in the work that Bach calls for its unique sound, probably because it was an instrument that symbolized joy in death. Mellers’ analysis gets to the essence of the aria.

The [bass] gamba was the last survivor of the viol family, and even in Bach’s day composers—including Bach himself—still wrote for it music of noble spirituality. With its top string tuned a fourth higher than the cello, it had wider range if slighter volume; it sang-spoke with infinite subtlety of nuance, at once humane and ethereal. Its tone heroic yet melancholy, rich yet purged; nothing could be more appropriate to the drooping phrases of this aria. . . . The ritornello theme starts from the simple falling scale, drooping under its own weight, to which Christ had expired. In the aria, however, the rhythm is dotted and this, at the immensely slow *adagio molto* prescribed by Bach, makes the music limp, almost halt, as the pulse falters and blood drains from the limbs. The effect is the more poignant because the dotted rhythm is a heroic convention of the Baroque age. . . . (Pp. 137-38)

So the first part of the aria ends with the death of a hero.

*Es ist vollbracht!  
O Trost für die gekrankten Seelen;  
die Trauernacht  
lässt mich die letzte Stunde zählen.*

[It is finished,  
O comfort for stricken souls,  
the night of sorrows  
bids me count the final hour.]

But Bach knew that this was not the death of just a hero; it was the death of *the* Hero, the Lion of the tribe of Judah. And that death was not a defeat; it was a victory. Bach knew Luther's interpretation of the words, "It is finished." According to Luther,

. . . Christ's suffering is the fulfillment of Scripture and the accomplishment of the redemption of the human race. [The foregoing words were underlined by Bach in his copy of the Calov Bible Commentary.] It is finished; God's Lamb has been slaughtered and offered for the world's sin. The real High Priest has completed the sacrifice. God's Son has given and sacrificed His body and life as the ransom for sin. Sin is cancelled, God's wrath assuaged, death conquered, the kingdom of heaven purchased, and heaven is unbarred. (Leaver, *Scripture*, p. 130)

So the second part of the aria, in startling contrast to the first part, bursts in with a shout of triumph. B minor *adagio* turns to D major *allegro*, and the descending motif of the solo gamba gives way to fanfares in the full orchestra as the alto soloist sings:

*Der Held aus Juda siegt mit Macht,  
und schliesst den Kampf.*

[The hero of Judah triumphs mightily  
and ends the battle.]

Following this outburst the aria's opening music returns and the alto sings once more, "It is finished." But now, after the victorious assurance of the second section, we can more clearly hear its notes of hope and comfort; we can even, with the symbolic gamba, look at death in joy and rest in the peace won by *Christus victor*.

The aria "Es ist vollbracht," then, is the climax of Bach's emphasis on the *Christus victor* theme. The overwhelming, triumphal outburst in the middle of the aria insures that all who have ears to hear will hear "The Hero of Judah triumphs mightily." But Bach was not content to underscore *Christus victor* only in this obvious way. He organized the music so that "Es ist vollbracht" occupies the central place in three different chiastic structures in Part II.

The first of these is small, involving only the pieces immediately surrounding "Es ist vollbracht," and therefore can be grasped quite readily by the listener. "Es ist vollbracht" is immediately preceded by a chorale and a recitative and followed by a recitative and chorale. The second chorale is joined with an aria, but its connection to the previous chorale is clear because they both employ

the same tune. The chiastic structure that results is as follows:

Chorale  
Recitative  
Aria: "Es ist vollbracht"  
Recitative  
Chorale/aria

The joining of the second chorale to an aria slightly obscures the chiasm but in turn it makes two larger chiasms possible, both with "Es ist vollbracht" at the center. The first of these chiasms involves all the solo numbers (arias and ariosos) of Part II, the second all the solo numbers and chorales of Part II.

If we look at all the solo numbers of Part II, we find that "Es ist vollbracht" is the only aria that stands by itself. Twice arias are linked to preceding ariosos and twice they are joined by the choir. The result is the following chiasm:

Arioso  
Aria  
Aria/chorus  
Aria: "Es ist vollbracht"  
Aria/chorale  
Arioso  
Aria

Then if we look at all the solo numbers and chorales of Part II, we find "Es ist vollbracht" in the center of two similarly structured sections. Each section is framed by chorales, two at the beginning and end of the first section, one at the beginning and end of the second; each section has a chorale in the middle; and in each section the central chorale is framed by an arioso-aria pair in front of it and a chorus following it.

Chorale  
Chorale  
Arioso  
Aria  
Chorale  
Chorus/aria  
Chorale  
Chorale  
Aria: "Es ist vollbracht"  
Chorale/aria  
Arioso  
Aria  
Chorale  
Chorus  
Chorale

The opening chorus introduced the *Christus victor* theme, and throughout the work Bach brought it out in a variety of ways, both obvious and subtle, climaxing in "Es ist vollbracht." It would be fitting, then, if Bach should round off the work by again calling attention to its main theme. And so he does, but he does so in an unexpected way that etches the theme all the more indelibly on the mind of the listener. After the burial has been narrated, the choir sings a burial chorus, "Ruht wohl [Rest well],"

A particularly fine recording of Bach's *St. John Passion* on compact disc and cassette is the one by John Eliot Gardiner with the Monteverdi Choir and the Early Baroque Soloists (DG Archiv). Gardiner's performance, using period instruments and a choir and orchestra of authentic size, accents the drama of the *Passion* without exceeding baroque scale. The recorded sound is first rate.

—Jon Pott

the type of chorus that normally concluded a passion. But instead of stopping here, Bach added a chorale of great strength, one he had previously used for a cantata for the Feast of St. Michael, archangel. Its opening words, "Ach Herr [O Lord]," recall the opening chorus, and then it goes on to address the Son of God ("O Gottes Sohn") on the throne of grace ("Gnadenthron") whom the believer will praise eternally ("ich will dich preisen ewiglich!").

A second theological theme developed in the *St. John Passion* is the freedom of the Christian. A favorite theme of Luther (see his treatise *The Freedom of the Christian*), the freedom of the Christian is perhaps more obviously a Pauline than a Johannine emphasis. But as Eric Chafe has pointed out, "Luther viewed John through the eyes of Paul" (p. 41). In his *Preface to the New Testament*, Luther listed John's Gospel and Paul's letters as the premier books, containing "the true kernel and marrow of all the books. . . . For in them you . . . find depicted in masterly fashion how faith in Christ overcomes sin, death, and hell, and gives life, righteousness, and salvation" (p. 362).

If Bach found this theme in John through the eyes of Luther and Paul, John at least provided a detail from which to launch the theme. That detail is the report that "the detachment of soldiers with its commander and the Jewish officials arrested Jesus. They bound him and brought him first to Annas . . ." (18:12-13). The binding of Jesus at this time is a detail unique to John's account, and again Bach's music emphasizes the key word. The Evangelist's recitative relating this incident begins with a five-measure pedal point. Nowhere else in the entire passion is there such a long pedal point in a recitative. The "point" is, of course, that the music is "bound" to the one note in the bass and thus the pedal point becomes a musical symbol of binding. The symbol even has a visual aspect—the ties needed in the notation to sustain this long pedal point literally "bind" the notes together. Then, when the Evangelist sings the words "und bunden ihn [and bound him]," Bach emphasizes "bunden" with a dissonant leap to a dissonant note and does it in a dotted rhythm that, in this recitative, is unique to that word.

The aria that follows the binding brings out the theo-

logical point of the episode. Its reminder to us is exactly what Calvin, in his commentary on 18:12, calls us to remember: "And let us remember that the body of the Son of God was bound, that our souls might be loosed from the cords of sin and Satan" (p. 158). So the alto sings:

*Von den Stricken meiner Sünden  
mich zu entbinden,  
wird mein Heil gebunden,  
mich von allen Lasterbeulen völlig zu heilen  
lässt er sich verwunden.*

[From the shackles of my sins  
to unbind me,  
my Savior is bound,  
to heal me fully of the boils of vice  
he lets himself be wounded.]

Bach's music for this aria is full of graphic symbols of binding and loosing. The basso continuo part is made up of repeated eighth-notes (symbolizing binding) which are broken away from by a pair of sixteenth-notes (symbolizing loosing). The two obbligato oboes begin with twisting melodic lines (depicting the twisting ropes) in exact imitation (another symbol of binding) that produce many harsh dissonances. But by the end of the instrumental introduction, the dissonances have dissolved into parallel thirds that express the sweetness of freedom. These musical motives run throughout the movement, musically illustrating the contrast in the text and expressing the joy of the free Christian as the loosing motives come to the fore when the text is "mich zu entbinden [to unbind me]" and "völlig zu heilen [to heal me fully]."

The climax of the theme of the Christian's freedom comes in Part II, in the midst of what Bach scholars refer to as the *Herzstück* (heart-piece) of the *St. John Passion*. This time the piece that brings the theme to its climax is a chorale, "Durch dein Gefängnis."

*Durch dein Gefängnis, Gottes Sohn,  
ist uns die Freiheit kommen,  
dein Kerker ist der Gnadenthron,  
die Freistatt aller Frommen;  
denn gingst du nicht die Knechtschaft ein,  
musst' unser Knechtschaft ewig sein.*

By thy capture, O God's Son,  
freedom has come unto us;  
thy dungeon is the throne of grace,  
the sanctuary of all pious souls;  
for hadst thou not gone into bondage,  
our bondage must needs have been eternal.]

This chorale, with its important theological theme, is strategically placed so as to stand out. It is isolated by its distance from other chorales. There are twelve numbers between it and the previous chorale and eleven numbers between it and the next chorale. Nowhere else in the *Passion* are there more than five numbers between chorales. But it is not merely its distance from its neighboring chorales that makes it stand out; it is also the nature of the surrounding music. "Durch dein Gefängnis" stands in the

midst of the heaviest concentration of *turba* choruses and its contrast to these raucous cries of the mob makes its message stand out all the more.

Finally, it is worth noting that the words of “Durch dein Gefängnis” are not the words that belong to the chorale tune to which they are set. The text is actually an aria from a passion libretto by C. H. Postel, but Bach, instead of writing an aria, set this text to a familiar chorale melody by one of his predecessors at Leipzig, J. H. Schein. The unfamiliar text with the familiar melody would have alerted attentive worshipers in Leipzig to its central theological message.

As with “Es ist vollbracht,” so here Bach placed a central theological theme in the midst of a chiasmic structure. Here the chiasm is the result of using similar music for different *turba* choruses before and after the central chorale.

Turba: “Nicht diesen”

Turba: “Sei gegrüßet”

Turba: “Kreuzige”

Turba: “Wir haben ein Gesetz”

Chorale: “Durch dein Gefängnis”

Turba: “Lässest du diesen los”

Turba: “Weg, weg”

Turba: “Wir haben eine König”

Turba: “Schreibe nicht”

A third theological theme developed in the *St. John Passion* is discipleship. John provided the impetus for this theme with his emphasis on Christ's obedience to the Father.

“My food is to do the will of him who sent me. . . .” (4:34)

“For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me.” (6:38)

“ . . . the world must learn that I love the Father and that I do exactly what my Father has commanded me.” (14:31)

“If you love my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love.” (15:10)

There is, of course, a relationship between Jesus' obedience to the Father and the discipleship of the believer. That connection is clear in the last verse quoted: the disciple loves and obeys Jesus' commands just as Jesus loved and obeyed his Father's commands. Therefore the starting point for the discipleship theme in the *St. John Passion* is the episode in which Peter strikes Malchus with a sword. Jesus responds by telling Peter to put away his sword, and then asks rhetorically, “Shall I not drink the cup my Father has given me?” Significantly Bach repeats these words, the only time in the recitatives of the *St. John Passion* that words are repeated. Then follows a stanza from the chorale versification of the Lord's Prayer:

*Dein Will' gescheh', Herr Gott, zugleich  
auf Erden wie im Himmelreich;  
gib uns Geduld in Leidenszeit,  
gehorsamsein in Lieb' und Leid,*

*Wehr' und steur' allem Fleisch und Blut,  
das wider deinen Willen tut.*

Thy will be done, Lord God,  
on earth as it is in heaven;  
give us patience in time of suffering,  
obedience in love and sorrow;  
halt and restrain all flesh and blood  
that goes against thy will.]

The theme of discipleship turns from Jesus to his followers when John reports that after Jesus was bound and led to Annas, “Simon Peter followed Jesus, and so did another disciple” (18:15). In the brief recitative in which the Evangelist reports this, the music subtly suggests what following Jesus really entails. At the climax of the Evangelist's melody is a configuration of four notes that Bach and other German Baroque composers used to depict the cross (Leaver, *Preacher*, p. 32). Through this musical symbolism Bach reminds the perceptive listener that following Jesus means bearing a cross.

This small but important recitative is followed by an aria that expresses joy in following Jesus.

*Ich folge dir gleichfalls mit freudigen Schritten  
und lasse dich nicht,  
mein Leben, mein Licht.*

[I follow thee likewise with joyful steps,  
and leave thee not,  
my life, my light.]

The music of this aria is lighthearted like nothing else in the *Passion*. It is the first piece in the *Passion* in a major key; it has a nice, lilting  $\frac{3}{8}$  rhythm; its theme is simple, its phrasing balanced, and its harmonies uncomplicated. It is sung by a soprano (a boy in Bach's performances in Leipzig) and the obbligato instrument is a flute. All of this not only makes it lighthearted, but also gives it an air of innocence. Wilfrid Mellers has aptly called it an aria “‘about’ the innocence of acceptance” (p. 104). In it, Bach is depicting the first stage of discipleship—its joy and zeal, but also its naiveté and lack of depth. The new disciple, eager and perhaps even a bit giddy, is not fully aware of what following Jesus is all about. Yet he is completely confident of his ability to follow:

*Befördre den Lauf  
und höre nicht auf,  
selbst an mir zu ziehen, zu schieben, zu bitten.*

[Continue thy way  
and do not stop,  
even to pull, push, or entreat me onward.]

Many commentators on this aria have pointed to the way Bach symbolizes “following”; he writes canons in which one part, the flute or the voice, imitates the other. But there is more to Bach's musical symbol than that. The imitative writing is of the simplest kind and it is always short-lived. Both of these characteristics fittingly portray the immaturity of the new disciple whose understanding is still simple and whose following is often short-lived.

The musical portrayal of the immature disciple is followed by John's account of Peter's denial. One could say that this episode confirms the immaturity and misguided zeal of Peter, but it also is the next step in Peter's discipleship because he recognizes his weakness and guilt and weeps bitter tears. John did not report Peter's tears but Bach needed them for the development of the discipleship theme, so at this point he departed from following John exactly and inserted the verses from Matthew that tell of Peter's weeping.

Following Peter's denial and weeping is the second aria about discipleship. The disciple has reached a new, deeper level of understanding, and the music reflects that in every way. B♭ major becomes F♯ minor; the flute gives way to the full string section; the soprano deepens to tenor; the lilting rhythms, graceful melodies, and uncomplicated harmonies become lashing, jagged, and dissonant. The disciple is in despair and does not know where to turn.

*Ach, mein Sinn,  
wo willst du endlich hin,  
wo soll ich mich erquicken?  
Wo soll ich endlich hin?*

[Ah, my mind,  
where finally willst thou go,  
where shall I revive myself?  
Where shall I finally go?]

The answer to the repeated question "wo [where]?" is not given until the story brings us to Golgotha. After the Evangelist tells us that "they took Jesus . . . to the place of a skull," Bach inserts the third and final discipleship aria. The voice has now matured to bass as the disciple reaches his deepest understanding of what it means to follow Jesus. He now knows the answer to the desperate question, "wo [where]?": he must follow Jesus to Golgotha; he knows now that discipleship entails taking up his cross. He can now answer the question posed by the choir of "anguished souls."

BASS: *Eilt, ihr angefochtenen Seelen,  
geht aus euren Marterhöhlen,  
eilt—*

CHOIR: *Wohin?*

BASS: *—nach Golgotha!*

[BASS: Hurry, anguished souls,  
go forth from your caves of torment,  
hurry—

CHOIR: *Where?*

BASS: *—to Golgotha!]*

Musically there are some obvious reminiscences of the first discipleship aria. There is the same  $\frac{3}{8}$  meter and the same key signature, although now in the deeper, more serious G minor instead of B♭ major. Even the melody is reminiscent of the first aria. In fact its second measure is identical to the first measure of the first aria. The joy of discipleship is not lost because of the cost of discipleship;

it is deepened. And the freedom of the Christian is not lost because he goes to Golgotha; there, as the aria says, his "Wohlfahrte blüht [prosperity blooms]."

Christ won the victory over sin and death and hell. By being bound and put to death, he freed the Christian from the sting of death. The Lion of the Tribe of Judah has conquered; we are free! This is the central message of the *St. John Passion*. But Bach also knew what Dietrich Bonhoeffer knew (they were, after all, both students of Luther)—that grace, although free, is not cheap. Bach, like Bonhoeffer, knew that "cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross . . ." (p. 47).

Bach, as Pelikan's book so amply demonstrates, deserves a place "among the theologians." I began this article by quoting St. Augustine. Let me end it by quoting Bonhoeffer and, by doing so, put Bach squarely among theologians from one end of the church's history to the other. In *The Cost of Discipleship* is a chapter entitled "Discipleship and the Cross." Both Bach and Bonhoeffer knew and preached the relationship between the two.

The yoke and the burden of Christ are his cross. To go one's way under the sign of the cross is not misery and desperation, but peace and refreshment for the soul, it is the highest joy. Then we do not walk under the burden of our self-made laws and burdens, but under the yoke of him who knows us and who walks under the yoke with us. Under his yoke we are certain of his nearness and communion. It is he whom the disciple finds as he lifts up his cross. (P. 103) ■

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