

# ‘Zeig uns durch deine Passion’: The Christology of Bach’s St John Passion

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## Introduction

On a wet, early spring afternoon, on Good Friday 1724, the congregants of Leipzig’s Nikolaikirche witnessed the first performance of Bach’s *St John Passion*.<sup>1</sup> For at least a generation, Good Friday in Leipzig’s principal Lutheran churches—St Thomas’, St Nikolai and the ‘New’ Church—had concluded with the singing of Johann Walter’s chanted Passion.<sup>2</sup> As part of the final liturgical observance of the day, the story of the death of Jesus would be sung, combining words and music in order to reflect on the significance of that day.

Bach took the proclamation of the cross to a new level – theologically and musically. Rather than use a poetic retelling of the Passion story as his textual basis, Bach made use of a single gospel account, matched with contemporary poems and traditional chorales to retell the trial and death of Jesus. By providing regular opportunities for theological reflection, he purposefully created a “sermon in sound” and so, in his music making, he closely mirrors Lutheran Baroque homiletic principles.

An orthodox Lutheran believer throughout his life, Bach’s Passion serves as a vehicle to invite his listeners to make their own his belief that it was “through Christ’s agony and death” that “all the world’s

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<sup>1</sup> Andreas Elias Büchner, Johann Kanold, *Vollständiges und accurates Universal-Register, Aller wichtigen und merckwürdigen Materien* (Erfurt: Jungnicol, 1736), 680.

<sup>2</sup> As popularised in Gottfried Vopelius, ed., *Neu Leipziger Gesangbuch/ Von den schönsten und besten Liedern verfasst/ In welchem Nicht allein des sel. Herrn D. Lutheri und andere mit Gottes Wort/ und unveränderter Augsburgischer Confession überein stimmende... und gebräuchliche Gesänge/ Lateinische Hymni und Psalmen/ Mit 4. 5. bis 6. Stimmen/ deren Melodeyen Theils aus Johann Herman Scheins Cantional, und andern guten Autoribus zusammen getagen/ theils aber selbsten componiret... / Mit Fleiß verfertigt und herausgegeben von Gottfried Vopelio* (Leipzig: Christoph Klinger, 1682).

redemption” had come.<sup>3</sup> Bach’s intent is to take his listeners on a musical journey to the cross and beyond. As they journey, he provides regular pointers to enable the hearers to see beyond the Man of Sorrows and recognise in the broken, human Jesus, the self-emptying, saving Christ. The principal aim, then, of Bach’s musical sermon was to instil in his listeners a sense of gratitude for the saving death of Christ, and to kindle in their hearts a response of loving affection.

Using the theological writings of the German reformer Martin Luther as a theological foundation, Bach encourages his listeners to make their own the response to Christ’s death Luther himself had set out in 1522: “When I recognise the death of Christ for me I must love him in return, for one must respond in love to such a man”.<sup>4</sup> At the end of his Passion, Bach’s listeners are left not with a sense of loss and grief but with a sense of acceptance and fulfilment: the empty cross is a sign of salvation, the tomb is the temporary resting place of the Son of God. In the same way, those who followed Christ in discipleship would rest until they, too, shared his resurrection.<sup>5</sup>

At the heart of the Passion story stands the insight that a gracious God showed his mercy by “emptying himself, taking on the form of a servant, being born in human likeness”, and as true human and true God to humble himself further “by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil 2:6–8). For the reformer Martin Luther, the appropriate response to the kenotic event of the cross was the believers’ confession of, and love for, Christ. It is in their loving confession that they partake of *theopoiesis*: “Ascend beyond the Son to the Father and I see that Christ is God and that he has plunged himself into my death, my sin, my misery and in

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<sup>3</sup> Johann Sebastian Bach, *Johannespassion BWV 245*, no. 32: “Mein teurer Heiland, lass dich fragen”, cited in Andreas Loewe, *Johann Sebastian Bach’s St John Passion (BWV 245): A Theological Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 129: “Kann ich durch deine Pein und Sterben/ das Himmelreich ererben?/ Ist aller Welt Erlösung da?” (Can I through your agony and death/ The kingdom of heaven inherit?/ Is all the world’s redemption there?).

<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther, D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe [hereafter WA], ed. Joachim Karl Friedrich Knaake et al. (Weimar, 1883–1985), *Sermon von der Tröstung des heiligen Geistes in der Verfolgung 1522*, 10 III: 154, 18–19: “So ich das erkenne, so müß ich in widerumb liebhaben, Dann ainem solchen man müß ich hold sein”.

<sup>5</sup> Loewe, *St John Passion*, 96.

this way gives me his grace”.<sup>6</sup> The libretto Bach sets to music is a deliberate reflection on this kenotic arc: at the very beginning of the Passion stands the conviction that this work will demonstrate, *zeig uns*, that God in Christ was glorified in deepest lowliness, *in der größten Niedrigkeit*.<sup>7</sup>

### **Luther’s Theology: Expressing the Reformation Message through Music**

Both the form and the theological basis for Bach’s musical Passion sermon are founded on the theology of Martin Luther. The German reformer held that music was “next to theology”.<sup>8</sup> While he was by no means the first to discover the power of music to stimulate the imagination, he certainly was one of the first church leaders to harness music as a means to tell the Gospel story (and, as his movement gained momentum across Germany, the story of the reformation) through songs, hymns, and devotional plays.<sup>9</sup> A musician himself, Luther understood the power of the sung word: it was a means “to speak and preach of the promise and grace of God so that others might come to hear of it and partake of it... and to incite people to do good, and teach them”.<sup>10</sup>

The first century of Luther’s reformation led to a multi-genre artistic explosion that principally centred on Luther’s great theological breakthroughs: his insight that justification was by grace alone, and his theology of the cross which flowed from it. Luther had first postulated his theology of salvation in his 1517 *Ninety-Five Theses against Indulgences*.<sup>11</sup> By 1519 Luther resoundingly affirmed that:

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<sup>6</sup> Luther, *Sermon von der Tröstung des heiligen Geistes in der Verfolgung 1522*, WA 10 III: 154, 19–155, 1: “Steyge ich weyter am sun auffyhn zum vater und sehe das Christus got sey und hab sich in meinen tod, in mein sünde, in mein ellende gesteckt, und gibt mir auch sein hulde”.

<sup>7</sup> Bach, *BWV 245*, no. 1: “Herr, unser Herrscher”, cited in Loewe, *St John Passion*, 141.

<sup>8</sup> Luther, *Tischreden* [hereafter WA Tr] 6: 348, 22–4, no. 7034: “Ich gebe nach der Theologie der Musica den nächsten Locum und höchste Ehre”.

<sup>9</sup> For Lutheran popular drama and educational plays, see: Andreas Loewe, “Proclaiming the Passion: Popular Drama and the Passion Tradition in Luther’s Germany”, *Reformation and Renaissance Review* 12.2/3 (2010), 235–82.

<sup>10</sup> Luther, *Von den letzten Worten Davids 1543*, WA 54: 33, 18–22: “Redet und prediget von solcher verheissung und gnade Gottes, das ander Leute auch dazu komen, und der teilhaftig werden... auch die menschen nützlich zu reitzen und zu leren”.

<sup>11</sup> Luther, *Disputatio pro declaratione virtutis indulgentiarum 1517*, WA 1: 238, 18.

“CRUX sola est nostra Theologia”.<sup>12</sup> From then on, his understanding of the centrality of the cross for justification would pervade his entire theology, in particular his Christology. For Luther, “God can be found in no other way than the Passion and the cross”.<sup>13</sup>

It is through Christ’s death and resurrection that both the hypostatic union and the distinction of Christ’s two natures are best shown forth: Christ’s divine nature is hidden in the human; the cross hides the resurrection; weakness hides the power of God. While these hidden realities will not be completely revealed until the Second Coming, their effects are already being made present. Calvary was the final expression of the kenotic journey of the eternal God to take away human sin: in Jesus’ human powerlessness, God’s true power is shown forth; overcoming the world and the power of evil. As Luther explained: “On the cross Christ was powerless, yet there he performed his mightiest work: conquering sin, death, world, hell, devil and all evil”.<sup>14</sup>

In 1522 Luther reflected on this cosmic redemptive work in terms of the *communicatio idiomatum*: “what Christ accomplishes or suffers, God surely has accomplished and suffered, even though the same only was experienced by one nature”.<sup>15</sup> Not only is God manifested in the midst of our human lives through the cross; his self-offering, sacrifice and exaltation, his plunging the depth of our existence and sharing our death saves humankind and exalts human nature into God’s presence: “For ultimately, all that is said about Christ’s humiliation and exaltation shall be accorded to humanity”, Luther affirms.<sup>16</sup>

For the reformer, the suffering and death on the cross of the Man of Sorrows fully reveals the glory of the hidden God. Luther

<sup>12</sup> Luther, *Operationes in Psalmos 1519–21*, WA 5: 176, 32–3: “The cross alone is our theology”.

<sup>13</sup> Luther, *Disputatio Heidelbergae habita 1518*, WA 1: 362, 28–29: “At Deum non inveniri nisi in passionibus et cruce”.

<sup>14</sup> Luther, *Das Magnificat verdeutschet und ausgelegt 1521*, WA 7: 586, 15–17: “Sihe, alzo wart Christus krafftlos am Creutz, und eben da selb thet er die groste macht, ubirwand die sund, tod, welt, helle, teuffel und allis ubel”.

<sup>15</sup> Luther, *Kirchenpostille 1522*, WA 10 I/1: 150, 22–23: “Was Christus thut odder leydet, hatt gewißlich gott than unnd gelieden, wiewol doch nur eyner natur dasselb begegnet ist”.

<sup>16</sup> Luther, *Kirchenpostille 1522*, WA 10 I/1: 150, 8–10: “Und endlich alles, was von Christus nydrung unnd erhohung ist gesagt, soll dem menschen tzugelegt werden”.

summarised this paradox as follows: “A human hides his own things in order to conceal them, God hides his own things in order to reveal them”.<sup>17</sup> In this way, God demonstrates his true glory in the abject humiliation of the cross, and there is proclaimed for all time as Lord of all.

### Lutheran Christology in Bach’s St John Passion

Luther’s christological insights provide the theological framework for Bach’s Passion. He opens his work with an imposing chorale proclaiming Christ’s self-emptying. Bach’s singers call on the God made man: “Show us through your Passion/ that you, the true Son of God,/ for all time,/ even in the deepest lowliness,/ have been made noble”.<sup>18</sup> The very opening words of the Passion, then, act as a theological guide for his listeners as they journey to the cross. They encourage listeners to look beyond the man “who was for us, at night,/ trapped as a thief,/ led before godless people,/ and falsely accused,/ laughed at, ridiculed, spat at”, and instead to behold in this image of broken humanity in a broken world the “heavenly image” of the true Son of God who has conquered this world.<sup>19</sup>

From the outset of the Passion listeners are invited to react to the events that follow by a personal response of faith and love, knowing that by their faithful, devotional participation in the Passion, they may come to perceive what the “theologians of glory” will never comprehend:<sup>20</sup> that divine power is displayed in weakness, and that “God deliberately chooses to be made known in the Passion and cross”.<sup>21</sup> Having taken his listener beyond the cross of Christ to his

<sup>17</sup> Luther, *Sermo Die Sancti Matthiae Anno 1517*, WA 1: 138, 13–15: “Homo abscondit sua ut neget: Deus abscondit sua ut revelet”.

<sup>18</sup> Bach, *BWV 245*, no. 1: “Herr, unser Herrscher”, cited in Loewe, *St John Passion*, 141: “Zeig uns durch deine Passion,/ dass du, der wahre Gottessohn,/ zu aller Zeit,/ auch in der größten Niedrigkeit,/ verherrlicht worden bist”.

<sup>19</sup> Bach, *BWV 245*, no. 15: “Christus, der uns selig macht”, cited in Loewe, *St John Passion*, 184: “der ward für uns in der Nacht, als ein Dieb gefangen,/ geführt für gottlose Leut,/ und fälschlich verklaget,/ verlacht, verhöhnt und verspeit”. Luther, *Ein Sermon von der Bereitung zum Sterben 1519*, WA 2: 691, 19; “Das hymelisch bild”.

<sup>20</sup> Luther, *Disputatio Heidelbergae habita 1518*, WA 1: 362, 11–14: “Thus it is never enough nor does it profit anyone who regards God in glory and majesty and does not recognise him in the humility and ignominy of the cross. In this way ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise etc.’ [1 Cor 1:19]. As Isaiah says: ‘Truly you are a hidden God’ [Isa 45:15].” (Ita ut nulli iam satis sit ac prosit, qui cognoscit Deum in gloria et maiestate, nisi cognoscat eundem in humilitate et ignominia crucis. Sic perdit sapientiam sapientum &c sicut Isaia dicit: Vere absconditus tu es Deus).

<sup>21</sup> Loewe, *St John Passion*, 95.

three-day sepulchre, Bach invites his hearers to “believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name” (Jn 20:31), following the express intent of the Fourth Evangelist.

Bach’s Passion concludes with a resounding affirmation of the Lordship of Christ, who saves from death and so has brought humanity into the Godhead. In the final bars of the Passion, the crucified, entombed Jesus is revealed to be the conqueror of death and harrower of hell. As the listeners hear the choir sing their confession of the giver of new life, they are encouraged to make their prayer their own and recognise Christ to be both Saviour of the world, and Saviour of their own lives: “Thereupon from death awake me,/ that my eyes may see you in all joy,/ O Son of God,/ my Saviour and my throne of grace,/ Lord Jesus Christ”.<sup>22</sup>

Within this frame of opening chorus and closing chorale, Bach retells the story of the cross to enable the listener to arrive at the same faith-filled response that he places on the lips of his singers: that the hidden God is fully revealed in his saving work on the cross, and his glory is shown forth by the death of his only-begotten incarnate Son. Three musical examples, one chorus and two chorales, seek to illustrate how Bach set this theological framework to music. We have previously referred to two of them: the magisterial opening chorus, *Herr, unser Herrscher* (Lord, our Lord) and the concluding chorale, *Ach Herr, lass dein lieb Engelein* (O Lord, let your lovely little angels).

The third example, found about two-thirds through the work, is the chorale *In meines Herzens Grunde* (In the depths of my heart).<sup>23</sup> It concludes Bach’s re-telling of Jesus’ trial before Pilate, and leads into his retelling of the crucifixion. Each provide a musical reflection on the significance of Christ’s sacrificial act on the cross: the opening chorale considers the kenotic exchange of God’s divine glory for abject human humiliation, the concluding chorale affirms the certainty of life restored through Christ’s death on the cross, while the middle chorale centres on the emotional impact of the Passion on each listener. We will consider these in chronological

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<sup>22</sup> Bach, *BWV 245*, no. 40: “Ach Herr, lass dein lieb Engelein”, cited in Loewe, *St John Passion*, 295: “Alsdenn vom Tod erwecke mich,/ Daß meine Augen sehen dich/ In aller Freud, o Gottes Sohn,/ Mein Heiland und Genadenthron!/ Herr Jesu Christ”.

<sup>23</sup> Bach, *BWV 245*, no. 26: “In meines Herzens Grunde”, cited in Loewe, *St John Passion*, 256.

order, in the same way in which they are experienced in a performance of the work.

### 1. Herr, unser Herrscher (Lord, our Lord):

Bach opens his work with a powerful reflection on the glory of the triune God. Following a portentous instrumental introduction by woodwind and flutes, the choir sings the praises of God, echoing words from Psalm 8: “Lord, our God, how glorious is your name in all the world” (Psa 8:1). *Herr, unser Herrscher, dessen Ruhm in allen Landen herrlich ist* (Lord, our Lord, whose fame in all lands is noble). Three times the choir calls out to God as “Lord”, each call is interspersed by a crotchet’s rest (a rest of a single note), reinforcing the theological understanding of the triune God as three persons, and therefore the Passion as an act of salvation wrought by the Trinity.

God is glorified through all the earth. He is *herrlich*, “noble”, as well as Herr, “Lord”. For Bach, God’s nobility and Lordship is most closely shown forth in the incarnation of Christ, and his kenosis by becoming human and suffering a human death. A number of commentators on Bach’s instrumentation suggest that the restless sequence of cadences in the strings is a reflection in music on the restlessness of the human condition, perhaps echoing the thought of St Augustine that “our hearts are restless, until they find their rest in you”.<sup>24</sup> Romantic readers of the work, including Bach’s first serious biographer Philipp Spitta, heard giant waves in the opening bars that tossed human souls about in a restless ocean of life – reflecting on the *Anfechtungen* of life.<sup>25</sup> Whatever the precise musical intent – whether restlessness or *Anfechtungen* – God enters into the human condition: he is only truly our *Herrscher*, is genuinely made *herrlich* only at the point at which he is made human. As the choir echoes the restless pattern of the strings, it proclaims that God is the triune Lord made noble in humanity. God’s Word becomes flesh, tabernacles among us, and will reveal his glory on the cross, Bach amplifies in music the central themes of the Fourth Gospel.

The opening woodwind lines introduce a recurrent musical device that is central to the music of the Passion. Bach not only writes

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<sup>24</sup> Augustine, *Confessionum, libri tredecim*, ed. P. Knöll (Leipzig: Teubner, 1898) [CSEL 33] 1.1: “inquietum est cor nostrum, donec requiescat in te”.

<sup>25</sup> Philipp Spitta, *Johann Sebastian Bach*, 2 vols (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1873–1880), 2: 365.

music to hear, but “music for the eyes”, *Augenmusik*. Baroque music, like other Baroque art, thrived on such embedded messages. Bach here introduces the “cross motif”, a symbol of the cross, to embed a perpetual focus of the journey of faith into his score.<sup>26</sup> The cross extends across both woodwind lines, is clearly visible in the score and, some commentators suggest, can even be heard because of its jarring dissonance. From the first two bars of the work, therefore, the destination of the musical journey is evident: the climax and turning point of this musical drama is the crucifixion of the Son of God. While the chorus still sings of the glory of God shown forth in the incarnation, the oboes and flutes already give voice to the suffering and sacrifice of God on the cross.

This first movement of the Passion, then, is rich in musical imagery: Bach’s threefold exclamatory proclamation of God as the triune Lord is echoed by four choral fugal entries on *Zeig uns durch deine Passion* (Show us through your Passion), entreating the hidden God to reveal himself to the faithful in his work of salvation. Four matching entries set to music the words, *dass du, der wahre Gottessohn* (that you, the true Son of God). The opening proclamation and fugue highlight the insight that Christ was first glorified in his incarnation, and revealed as the God of glory in his debasement on the cross. The way in which “the true Son of God” has been made noble for all time was “in the deepest lowliness”. The nobility or glory that Christ gains is by taking on him human form and human suffering and so, when the choir sings of the way in which Christ is *verherrlicht* in the Passion, Bach again makes use of the restless semiquaver lines of the strings, in order to emphasise Christ’s complete acceptance of the human condition.

Bach’s opening movement affirms how God’s act of salvation is indeed one of self-revelation. Just as the death of Christ reveals three persons of the Trinity acting in harmony to effect the redemption of humankind – the death of the incarnate Son subsuming all human sin, making satisfaction to the Father, and effecting, at the giving up his own breath, the sending out of the Holy Spirit – so here Bach invokes the three persons of the Trinity to be present in this act of devotion, and so to be made present in the lives of the worshippers.

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<sup>26</sup> For earlier uses of such a motif, in particular in Heinrich Schütz’s *St John Passion*, see Tamsin D. Jones, *Passions in Perspective: An Analytical Discussion of the three Passion Settings of Heinrich Schütz (1585–1672) against their Historical and Stylistic Backgrounds* (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation: Birmingham University, 2000), 212, 234.



## 2. In meines Herzens Grunde:

The use of a well-known funeral chorale, *In meines Herzens Grunde* (In the depth of my heart), aims to anchor the events of Calvary in the lives of the worshipping community. Christ's holy name and his cross are set up as ensigns in the heart of each believer, the chorale proclaims. There they glow as lights of hope in the darkness of human adversity: they literally *funkeln* (sparkle) as bright as rock crystals or diamonds under a bright sun. The invocation of Christ's name and the remembrance of his cross are both a defence against evil, and consolation in *Anfechtung*. Because of their inherent salvific power, *drauf kann ich fröhlich sein* (I can be cheerful).<sup>27</sup>

Luther had reflected on this "image of grace" or *Gnadenbild* in 1519 in much the same way:

This is grace and mercy: that on the cross Christ has taken away your sin; that he carries your sin for you and crushes it for you. And that those who firmly believe this, and have this image before their inner eyes, do not doubt this. That is what it means to gaze on the image of grace and to set it up within oneself.<sup>28</sup>

Following Luther, for Bach the proper way to respond to the crucifixion is by internalising the events of Calvary, by enshrining the cross as a means of personal salvation. Those who take the events of the cross into their own hearts, Bach expresses in music, will "for all time and at all hours" have confidence and consolation in their own undoubted adversity, because they will know that it was for them that Christ, their Lord, "so charitable... [has] bled to death".<sup>29</sup>

This is the ground of their believing: Bach's play of words on *Grund* in the German libretto enables a reflection on all of the word's literal senses. *Grund* here means both "reason" and "depth" as well as "field". The image of the cross is the ground of all faith and, when set up in the depth of human hearts, functions very much like a standard or ensign set up on a battlefield. The image of the cross

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<sup>27</sup> Bach, *BWV 245*, no. 26: "In meines Herzens Grunde", cited in Loewe, *St John Passion*, 256.

<sup>28</sup> Luther, *Ein Sermon von der Bereitung zum Sterben 1519*, WA 2: 686, 33–35: "Das ist gnade und barmhertzigkeit, das Christus am Creutz deyne sund von dir nymmet, tregt sie für dich und erwurget sie, und dasselb festiglich glauben und vor augen haben, nit drann zweyfellnn, das heyst das gnaden bild ansehen und ynn sich bilden".

<sup>29</sup> Bach, *BWV 245*, no. 26: "In meines Herzens Grunde", cited in Loewe, *St John Passion*, 256: "Du, Herr Christ, so milde/ Dich hast geblut' zu Tod!"

enshrined in the human heart is at once a symbol of public allegiance to Christ and a sign of the cosmic effects of the cross, as it is an intimate, personal image of profoundly cherished reassurance.

Believers may claim the redemptive work of Christ, his power of goodness, when faced with any evil, by taking on them *dein Nam* and so are known as Christ's own forever. They may make present Christ's power over death at the hour of their own deaths by enshrining the image of the cross in their hearts. In this way the instrument of death becomes a symbol of life, as the German theologian Johannes Olearius expressed in his *Biblische Erklärung* (a copy of which Bach owned and bequeathed to his son Friedemann):<sup>30</sup>

This shows/ that the death of our Saviour is the end of all suffering/  
the principal purpose of which is our consolation/ that Christ's death  
may be for us our life/ and that the death that he suffered on our  
behalf/ has in this way become for us merely a slumber.<sup>31</sup>

### 3. Ach Herr, lass dein lieb Engelein:

Bach's Passion concludes with an intimate confession of commitment to Christ. In the final chorale of the Passion, the believer is no longer placed on a battlefield between good and evil, death and life, as in the previous example. In his final chorale Bach confidently affirms the belief, expressed in the opening chorale, that the triune God has fully made himself known by letting the incarnate Son be killed on a cross so that his glory may be established for all times.

All is now completed: Christ has died and has conquered death. In giving up his spirit on the cross, he sent out the Spirit that will renew the world. Even the grave is now hallowed. The three-day sepulchre "makes Heaven open/ and Hell shut to me".<sup>32</sup> For those

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<sup>30</sup> See *Specificatio der Verlassenschaft des am 28. July 1750 verstorbenen Herrn Johann Sebastian Bachs*, in Werner Neumann and Hans Joachim Schulze, eds., *Bach-Dokumente*, 3 vols (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1963–1972), 2, no. 627. For the Lutheran theological works owned by Bach, see Robin A. Leaver, "Bach und die Lutherschriften seiner Bibliothek", in *Bach-Jahrbuch* 61 (1975), 124–132.

<sup>31</sup> Johannes Olearius, *Haupt Schlüssel der Gantzen Heiligen Schrift... Fünfter und letzter Teil/ Darinnen das gantze/ Neue/ Testament* (Leipzig: Chr. Tarnoven, 1681), 783: "Weiset/ daß der Todt unsers Heylandes sey das Ende alles Leidens/ dess Haupt-Zweck ist unser Trost/ daß der Todt Christi sey unser Leben/ und was Er als einen Todt für uns erduldet hat/ dasselbe ist uns nunmehr ein Schloff worden".

<sup>32</sup> Bach, *BWV 245*, no. 39: "Ruht wohl", cited in Loewe, *St John Passion*, 292: "Macht mir den Himmel auf/ und schließt die Hölle zu".

who are willing to make Bach's beliefs their own, there is no more fear of death, for Christ sanctifies our own deaths. As Luther had expressed:

Christ's sepulchre is... our treasure, by which we are sanctified through and through from our sins. It is the treasure by which we have received everything: forgiveness of sins, death and all misfortune.<sup>33</sup>

At the end of the Passion, as at its beginning, stands a prayer. Where the first movement of the Passion entreated the blessed Trinity to reveal itself as the God who is glorified through *kenosis*, this prayer addresses the conqueror of the grave. Echoing the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke's Gospel (Lk 16:19–31), the chorale asks that at the end of the singer's life, Christ would send his holy angels to carry the departed soul into Abraham's bosom. Comforted by the certainty that through "his death and grave [Christ] has killed and buried my sin, and that of all who believe in him", death and judgement have lost its thrall.<sup>34</sup>

So diminished are the powers of death and evil that life's end is gentle falling asleep as in one's own bedchamber, while Christ's judgement is filled with grace, *gar sanft ohn alle Qual und Pein* (gently, without any torment or agony at all), for those who believe this good news.<sup>35</sup> At the end stands not perpetual death but a glorious resurrection for all who call on Christ as their Saviour: *mein Heiland und Genadenthron* (my Saviour and throne of mercy). Those who call on Christ regard him not as the Man of Sorrows, but behold him as the Son of God, who has come to bring joy and delight, and who delights in receiving the praises of his people, which is why Bach's prayer and his Passion appropriately conclude with words of praise: *Ich will dich preisen ewiglich* (I want to praise you forever).<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Luther, *Wochenpredigten über Johannes 1528–29*, WA 28: 420, 23–27: "Christus Grab ist... unser Schatz... dadurch wir durch and durch geheiligt sein von unsern Sünden, und in welchem Schatz wir alles haben. Nemlich Erlösung von Sünd, Tod und allem Unglück".

<sup>34</sup> Idem, WA 28: 420, 28–29: "Das durch sein Tod und Grab meine und aller die an In gleuben, Sünde getödtet und begraben würden".

<sup>35</sup> Loewe, *St John Passion*, 298.

<sup>36</sup> Loewe, *St John Passion*, 134.

## Conclusion

Bach's St John Passion is so effective as a work of Christian devotion, because it elicits a response to the message of the cross. We have seen that Bach is an expert translator of Luther's doctrine into music: his work skilfully augments the Johannine Passion narrative, and the wider incarnational concerns of the Fourth Evangelist by weaving into his musical construct echoes of Luther's own thought: through Scripture and poetry as in our first musical example and, as in the second and third, through the living tradition of Lutheran worship.

The Christology of Bach's *St John Passion* is therefore Luther's Christology, retold through Scripture, devotional poetry and the purpose-written hymns and anthems that reflect on the theology of Luther's reformation; a combination that surely would have delighted the reformer, had he been able to witness it. Bach sets to music the conviction that a distant, hidden God may be revealed to the believer to be a gracious, personal Saviour. That those who accept this message will find consolation, hope and confidence for their own lives through the cross. As in a Lutheran sermon, Bach invites his listeners to put their trust in this triune God. They are invited to recognise the glory that flows from the cross, the joy that can be found in the conquered grave, and the life that can be enjoyed in discipleship of this Saviour both here and hereafter.

As the Passion concluded, the congregants of St Nikolai went on their way home into the dusk of a wet spring evening. Signs of new life abounded around them. Bach left them with the invitation to come and share his belief that the cross was a new beginning, not the end. For the composer his passion to communicate in music the good news of the cross would lead him to write at least one, if not two, further Passions; the great Passion, performed the following year, giving voice to the story of the self-emptying Son of God through St Matthew's eyes.