

Bach Cantata 147

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Preacher: Canon David Short

[0 : 00] You probably know that since Bach was a teenager, there has been a steady stream of experts trying to remake him in their own image.

I discovered this week a quote from a critic of Bach's during his lifetime, a man who is unfortunately named Johann Adolf Scheiber.

And he writes about Bach, this is while Bach is still alive, that Bach would be the admiration of the whole world if he had more amenity.

If he did not take away from the natural element in his pieces by giving them a turgid and confused style. And if he did not darken their beauty by an excess of art.

He goes on, all voices must work with each other and be of equal difficulty. And none of them can be recognised as the principal voice. Turgidity has led Bach from the natural to the artificial.

[1 : 06] One admires the onerous labour, the uncommon effort, which however are vainly employed since they conflict with nature. And the question we are all tempted to ask is, does anyone still use Scheiber's music?

Has anyone heard of Scheiber? Now, of course the most important thing for understanding Bach is that the most important thing for Bach was not music.

It was his faith in Jesus Christ. What motivated him was his Christian faith. His education took two tracks, theology and music. And all his life he was a deeply devoted student of the Bible.

We still have his Bible, some of which he translates from the original. And he marks notes in the margins. And in a passage which describes the worship in the Old Testament, he has this in the margin.

In devotional music, God, with his grace, is always present. I wonder if you could just turn me down a little bit, please, Ted. Some of you would wish...

[2 : 15] Yeah, thank you. Now, no, no. I won't say that. Bach, of course, remained a very good Lutheran all his life.

And Luther, the great theologian master, said this, The whole purpose of harmony is the glory of God. All other use is the idle juggling of Satan.

Which is not necessarily a view we endorse here, but that's what Luther said. Perhaps more generous was Leonard Bernstein, who said, For Bach, all music is religious. Writing is an act of worship.

Every note is dedicated to God and to nothing else. And you know that at the end of the written texts of the cantatas, he would write SDG, Soli Deo Gloria, To God alone be glory.

All of Bach's texts were centred on the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and the joy that he brings to us. In fact, at the ripe old age of 23, Bach stated his purpose in music as this, I should have always liked to work toward the goal, namely, a well-regulated music to the glory of God.

[3 : 29] And by regulated, he doesn't mean having music at regular intervals in the service. It's not like, nor is it music that will be a way in which I can express my personal piety.

What he means is music structured to be in tune with the deep truths of the Christian faith. Above all, Bach desired that his music be pleasing to God.

And of the 200 cantatas that we have around today, they have the similar shape, where they begin in the first chorus by stating the problem, and then a recitative and an aria brings out the implications of the problem for us.

A resolution comes with the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ, and then they usually conclude with a corral of joy, which draws the threads together and draws our faith toward the person of Jesus Christ.

But as Bach came toward the season of Advent, when Christians remember the coming of Jesus Christ into the world as a baby, Bach had a problem. And the problem was not the darkness of the season, or the darkness in human experience, it was the very opposite.

[4 : 41] How can we possibly begin to express the wonder of God's love? That the Son of God should leave heaven and enter our world to be crucified for our salvation.

On the first Sunday that this cantata was performed, the Bible readings told of the announcement of the birth of Jesus Christ, from Mary, Jesus' mother, to John the Baptist's mother.

And that is why the first chorus announces the problem. If you just have a look at the yellow sheet for a moment, here is the problem. Heart and mouth and thought and action must bear witness to salvation.

Free of fear and vanity, Christ is Lord and Deity. Part of the difficulty for everyone who begins to follow Jesus Christ is this.

The centre of gravity changes for us. The big issues no longer have to do with me. They no longer evolve around me. Somehow we have to deal with the great difficulty and privilege of being caught up in what God is doing in Jesus Christ.

[5 : 53] And the question is, how do we express the magnificence of the Son of God in his loveliness and his holiness and his mercy and kindness and compassion and grace and beauty?

I mean, how do we speak about a miracle that is greater than creation itself when the Creator enters their creation to be born for us? It is clearly beyond the totality of all the very best of our human expression, but still heart and mouth and thought and action must at the very least seek to bear witness to salvation.

And that is why the cantata finishes with this chorale, Jesus Joy of Man's Desiring, perhaps the best known. Bach is seeking to articulate that joy that comes from beyond the world, the joy that is God's, which he shares with us in the person of Jesus Christ, the joy that we as a church have probably done a very good job of hiding.

And Bach took this text, which actually he didn't write, because it expressed this joy. And he didn't want to create in us just an emotional response.

I read this week of a music critic who had a meal at a truck stop. And as he was eating, he could hear the chorale being played and it was sung in the style of a Gregorian chant with a disco backbeat.

[7 : 18] We're going to do that next Sunday, I understand. You see, Jesus is the joy of our desiring for the simple reason that it is desire that rips a hole open in the roof of a house, of our own house of self-sufficiency and shows us our need for God.

And until God himself fulfills our desires, we suck all our friends into the house and they become prisoners there. That is why we have chosen the readings from John's Gospel.

Because this Gospel of John is written to reveal Jesus as the one who fulfills our happiness. It's written to draw our faith toward the person of Jesus Christ.

And it starts in a remarkable way. In the beginning was the Word, speaking of Jesus. And the Word was with God.

And the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him. Without him was not anything made that was made.

[8 : 30] In him was life. And the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. Our words stagger the imagination.

And they tell us of the first creation in the beginning and of a new creation that is about to begin with the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ and will be brought about by this word, this logos.

It is one of the favourite words in the Greek culture, logos. And what this text reveals to us is that the true logos, the true word, is not an impersonal force permeating nature.

It's not part of creation. It's not something we access through philosophical speculation or empirical research. It's not some abstract life principle.

It's not my inner being. It is the person of Jesus Christ. He is the ultimate disclosure of God, the perfect expression of who God is.

[9 : 36] And it simply means to us that Jesus did not begin to exist on that day when the heavens and the earth were created, but that for all eternity, before time itself was created, Jesus was God and was with God enjoying face-to-face friendship and fellowship.

And what that means for us is that reality is profoundly and essentially relational. Our greatest pain and our greatest pleasure come from relationships.

It is in relationships where our desires are fulfilled and frustrated. And John is telling us that behind our world is not some cold moral principle of uniformity or chance or fate, but God the Father and God the Word opening themselves in love to one another and to us.

The very identity of Jesus as the Word of God shows to us the outwardness of the person of God. His desire to communicate himself with us and to draw us into that love and into that communion that he and the Father share to embrace us with the love that they have had since before time began.

This is the point of Christianity. I mean, Christianity is not a system of rules to make us better citizens. It is not a religious hobby for those who are slightly needy.

[11:06] It is God the Maker and Judge drawing us into an eternal friendship with himself. You see, the fact that all things were made through Jesus and by Jesus and for Jesus means that Jesus alone is the joy of all our desiring.

I mean, every single one of us here this morning has been brought into existence by this Word, this Son of God. The true centre of gravity in our lives and in this world is not me and it's not you.

The true centre of our desires is not me and not you. It is the person of Jesus Christ. Our lives and this world depend on Jesus.

They are not eternal in themselves. This world has no true meaning or no true centre in itself and neither do we. You see, the thing that binds us together ultimately is not our DNA, it's not our, even our desires.

It is that our creation and our existence finds meaning in Jesus Christ. We were made through him and by him and for him and we cannot begin to understand ourselves until we come to this.

[12:20] This week, another Canadian has won the Booker Prize. Yan Martel's book, *Life of Pi*, just a wonderful story. It's about a boy travelling from India to the United States in a ship with his family and a zoo and the ship sinks and he is the only human to survive but he finds himself after some adventures on a lifeboat with a very hungry tiger and over the months that he drifts, he has to feed both himself and the tiger and he prays to the Hindu gods and he prays to Muhammad and he prays to the Christian god but no help arrives.

And it's a very wonderful parable for our time. We are cast adrift with great insecurity facing genuine danger and the gods are distant and uninvolved and seemingly irrelevant.

And then we hear these words, And the word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth. We have beheld his glory, glory as of the only son from the father.

This is the great miracle in John's gospel. It's not that he created the world, it's not that he is the source of life and light. It is that he became a human being and lived for us.

Dorothy Sayers says this, From the beginning of time until now, it is the only thing that has ever really happened. Slight overstatement. We may call this doctrine exhilarating or we may call it devastating, we may call it revelation or we may call it rubbish, but if we call it dull, what in heaven's name is worthy to be called exciting?

[14:04] It's utterly mind-boggling that the creator of the world should be born a human baby for us. The eternal son of God stepping into time. And there's nothing else which makes sense of anything that Jesus says or anything that Jesus does.

If you read through the gospels and I urge you to do so, you will find that everything he says and everything he does is irradiated with the presence of God and demonstrates him to be the joy of all our desiring.

Take just one illustration in the reading that was read for us, the second reading, in John chapter 6. Jesus announces to a crowd, I am the bread of life.

Anyone who comes to me shall not hunger and those who believe in me shall never thirst. He says you are a hungry people, profoundly hungry. And he has just performed a miracle where he has taken five loaves and two fish and he gave thanks to God and then he started to break the bread and the loaves and he fed 5,000 men and probably equal number of women and children and then they collected 12 baskets full over and the crowd has completely missed the point.

They love the bread but they don't want the bread maker. They want what Jesus can give but they don't really want Jesus. But every one of Jesus' miracles just like this is not so that he might be some supernatural safe way.

[15 : 35] It's to show that he is the bread of life. This is what Jesus says. The bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world and the crowd says to him, Lord, give us this bread always so we don't have to go to the store.

One of the terrible things about being human is you can see and know the works of God completely miss what God is doing. I mean it is possible to love all sorts of things about the Christian faith. Love the miracles and the noble teaching and the trappings and it will give you some sort of satisfaction. A physical, even an aesthetic satisfaction but it misses the point. The crowd loves the bread but instead of coming to Jesus and seeing in Jesus the word of God, the joy of their desiring, they just want him to produce more bread.

But Jesus wants to keep directing our true hunger not to the things in this world, clothes and possessions and food but to him. Very difficult to do that in Vancouver.

I mean everything, nearly everything that is held up in our culture as desirable and admirable and worthy belongs to this perishing world and none of them can satisfy this true hunger.

[16 : 54] This week I was in a store and I picked up this important magazine called Weekly World News. I was with my wife so I was safe.

You'll be pleased to know that Jesus' sandals have been found. So I bought it. Here they are. And it says here step into the sandals of Jesus and reach out to the Lord with our series of powerful prayers to bring you money, love, health, happiness. Copy or clip these instructions.

Then place the page on the floor, put your bare feet onto the sandal images and recite this prayer. Lord, grant me wealth, success and prosperity.

Now I tried this at the last service and nothing has happened. Although someone did offer to buy the magazine at a reduced price. Listen to what Jesus says.

[18 : 12] Do not labor for the food which perishes but for the food which endures to eternal life which the Son of Man will give you for on him God has set his seal.

He says we've trained ourselves to be so well to do the opposite and he comes along with this metaphor of food to picture everything good that God will give us in Jesus Christ that will satisfy our true heart's longings.

He says you are so addicted to what is superficial and external he says you need to invest your energy and affection and participate in those things which will nourish your soul and give eternal life.

When they said give us this bread always Jesus turns to them and says I am the bread of life. We do not have the power to give ourselves eternal life.

We do not have the power to climb into heaven and bring the life of God down to us. Jesus is the bread of life who has come down from God. And that is why you see religion is a total failure because religion is it's life in the lifeboat floating on the Pacific.

[19 : 28] It's organising life with the tiger. Christianity comes and says Jesus Christ has come down from heaven that eternal life does not arise from you and me and from not within the world.

It cannot be found in this world. It comes from the one who has come down from heaven who says to us I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread he shall live forever and the bread that I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh.

He's speaking about his death. he says the true heavenly food will come to you through my death. I am able to deal with that true hunger that is gnawing away the hunger for life the hunger for God the hunger for truth.

And you may be surprised to know that the main attitude to this miracle and to most of Jesus' miracles the crowd didn't fall down in gratitude joy and worship and sing a cantata.

they were mightily offended. Jesus keeps insisting that he has come from God to bring us to God. He has come from heaven and bears witness to God because he is the son of God.

[20 : 43] He says I have not come to found a religion I have come as the maker of this world to give you what you most need to offer myself as the true bread and in his death he takes our sins to himself and in his resurrection he gives us the life of heaven.

But there were some in the crowd who said to him what shall we do? And Jesus simply says this This is the work of God that you believe in him whom he has sent.

Very simple. This is what God requires of you and me that we believe Jesus is the Christ the son of God that we look to him and see in him the bread of life the word of God the fulfilment of that genuine hunger.

It is by faith that we receive what he has come to bring the bread he provides the salvation he offers. And you see this bread is such a wonderful picture because it needs to be taken into our hearts and lives.

It's not an abstract intellectual thing but it looks to him and embraces him as the word of God and the bread of life and enables us to sing as the choir will in just a moment Happy I who have my saviour from him never will I part he restores my drooping spirit be I sad and sick at heart cares may vex and troubles grieve me yet will Jesus never leave me him I never will forsake even though my heart should break.

[22 : 30] Amen.