

Up from the Earth

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[0 : 0 0] Just bow our heads and pray. Almighty God, who through Thine only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, has overcome death, opened unto us the gate of everlasting life, we humbly beseech Thee that as by Thy special grace Thou dost put into our minds good desires, so by Thy continual help we may bring the same to good effect through Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, world without end.

Amen. Well now as the orchestra disappears, we just want to say thank you to them so much and the choir for helping us celebrate this day of death and resurrection, the cross and the empty tomb, the deepest and highest of all possible things that have ever happened in history, the most wonderful and glorious and terrible and full of hope and full of life.

And the death and the resurrection of Jesus present us with both grief and glory, with confrontation and comfort.

They sting and they save. And you can see this throughout the cantata. Did you notice every piece in the cantata finishes with the same word, hallelujah.

So if you look at the first duet on page one, halfway through we read, I'll sing it for you but, therefore came grim death so soon and took possession of all men and held us in its realm of terror.

[1 : 5 4] Hallelujah. It's one of Bach's earliest cantatas. He was fed up with life in Arnstadt.

Arnstadt had far too many members of the Bach family and so he applied for a job over in Mühlhausen and you may be interested to know that the authorities who had employed him in Arnstadt were not happy with his attempts to write cantatas to be sung in church.

And I quote from the consistory just before he left in 1707, they said that Bach's music was making, quote, strange variations in the chorale, mixing many outlandish tones in it so that the congregation has become confused thereby.

And you're a confused congregation to like it. They say in the future he must not shift too swiftly. And you may be interested to know that's the last we ever hear of the consistory in Arnstadt.

But Bach wrote this cantata likely for his job interview at Mühlhausen and got the job. Didn't stay there long. It was in Mühlhausen where he wrote his famous description of his purpose of all his work to advance music in the divine service toward its very end and purpose, a regulated church music to the glory of God.

[3 : 1 9] And he writes in Mühlhausen, I have not been allowed to do my work without vexation and opposition. And then tells them that he got a better offer and moves on.

However, more of that next cantata. What we need to know about Bach is that he never considered himself as an artist but as an artisan. His music is not the expression of his feelings but is the expression of spiritual truth.

That the purpose of his music was not to evoke an emotional response in us but to provoke the response of faith. He wrote that he didn't see himself as mirroring what was happening in lives and in creation but the structure of his music is so composed to reflect the structure of the spiritual truth it contains and so to bring glory to God and comfort to our hearts.

And this never reaches a higher level than when he dwells on his favourite theme, the death and resurrection of Jesus. So in the second aria he says, this is the sacred paschal lamb that God did swear to give us who high upon the cross was hung and sacrificed to save us.

And these words wonderfully echo the Bible reading that we had a few moments ago from John chapter 12. They are the last public words spoken by Jesus in the Gospel of John.

[4 : 56] He's entered into Jerusalem with the fabulous applause of the crowds. Non-Jewish folk come to seek him out and it's a signal for him that the climax of his life has come and that he's going to lay down his life in death.

And this is more shocking in John's Gospel than it is in the other Gospels. If you haven't read John's Gospel, I encourage you to do it. If you don't have a Bible, take one of the Bibles in the pews.

You may bring it back if you wish, but read through John's Gospel. From the very first words it's clear that Jesus Christ is the eternal Word of God made flesh.

In fact, it says in the early words, nothing was created without him being involved in it. That he lived with God forever in heaven before he became flesh and man.

And that explains why through John's Gospel, Jesus preaches, unlike any other religious figure, he says, I have come from above, you are from earth. I have come from heaven, you are from earth.

[6 : 03] I have come from the Father, you are from earth. And the point of his miracles, you see, are not to, they're not just sideshow tricks, they are demonstrating where he has come from.

So in chapter 9, John comes across a man who is born blind, born blind, there's no sight, absolutely nothing. He heals him and he says, I am the light of the world.

And then just before these words, Jesus comes into Bethany, to a tomb of a man who has died, who has been dead for four days. And as he goes to the tomb, Jesus says, I am the resurrection and the life.

All who believe in me, though they die, yet shall they live and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. And then he goes to the tomb and he calls Lazarus out and death releases its captive.

You see, the point is, Jesus is the resurrection and the life. And the great mystery in John's gospel is that how can it possibly, how can it possibly happen that this one, the Son of God, should die?

[7 : 15] How can the one who comes from above, who has the life of heaven, how can he surrender himself to death? It's absolutely impossible. Death has no power over him.

Death could not steal his life away. If we have any doubts, there's Lazarus standing by there as a kind of disturbing exhibit A for the truth of his claim.

Death cannot touch him unless Jesus volunteers to lay down his life. But to lay down his life, I want you to see, is just appallingly wrong. He is the resurrection and the life, the source of life.

And for him to contemplate death is more than any other human death and more than any other human life. You see, to lay down his life is to lay down eternal life, the life of heaven.

It's like, he's the light of the world for him to die is to extinguish the light of the world. And that is why Jesus explains his death with this central picture in the reading, which means two things for us.

[8 : 22] He says, I am lifted up. That's what my death is about. And secondly, he says, and you are lifted up in my death. And I want to look at those two things very briefly with you.

He says, I am lifted up. And I, he says, when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself. Do you not think that's a very strange way to think about dying?

When we die, we go down, don't we? We go down to the ground. And Jesus is speaking about much more than being hoisted up onto a wooden cross. He has come down from heaven.

At any moment in his life, he could have returned back to the glory of the Father without passing through death. But he chooses deliberately to go through this agonizing, excruciating death to take that path as the return route to the glory of the Father.

Why? Because he is the Lamb of God who has come to take away the sin of the world. That's right. He takes our sin, he takes our darkness and chooses to die by embracing all that in our place.

[9 : 38] That's why the passage started by Jesus saying, now is my heart troubled. I'm in agony, he said, as he contemplates what he has to do.

The word literally means agitated, alarmed. There's a violence, there's a savagery in this which he knows is going to utterly undo him. My heart is troubled.

Whenever we have a funeral service here at St. John's, we read these words a few paragraphs later. Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.

And the reason why our hearts need not be troubled is because Christ has allowed his heart to be troubled even to death. And it's not the physical suffering of his death that troubles him.

It's not his just giving away his life, but it's him taking our place. Did you hear the words he says immediately after? He says, now is the judgment of this world.

[10 : 40] Now shall the ruler of the world be cast out and I, when I am lifted up, will draw all people to myself. It's a very strange thing. As Jesus is lifted up on the cross, the judgment of God is somehow brought into history and Jesus is lifted up as the one guilty sinner and is judged for all of us.

All our lies and all our greed and all our arrogance, all our guilt is laid on him and he is judged in our place. You see. That is why he is lifted up.

Jesus sees it as his great enthronement. It's not a well-cushioned throne of comfort, is it? It's not built for luxury.

He has to be nailed to it to stay up there. But what happens on the cross, as Bach says here, is a warfare. It's a conflict of cosmic proportions which has significance for you and me today.

Jesus does as he faces my guilt, my death, my separation, my sin, my love, and all these things that have power over us. He takes them to himself.

[12 : 01] He takes evil and Satan. He takes that ancient serpent and plunges the fangs into his own heart and drains the snake of its poison. He gives over to these things his own life so that they no longer have any claim on me or you.

It's why he speaks about his death as the hour of glory. It's not just a, it's not, you know, a happy, trivial glory. It's on the cross he shows us what he's made of.

He shows us what is in his heart. He shows us that in the deepest and the darkest moment he chooses what's best for us and not what is best for himself. He makes himself weak and he makes himself vulnerable to deal with those things to which we are vulnerable and in front of which we are weak and this is his glory.

This is him being lifted up and that's what we celebrate today when we celebrate the resurrection because the resurrection isn't just a, you know, a happy ending on a nasty series of events.

The resurrection is God the Father saying that is what was needed. There is salvation. He is my King. He is the one whom I love. In fact, God the Father speaks audibly from heaven and says to Jesus, Yes, I have glorified my name and I'm going to glorify it again in your death.

[13 : 23] I glorified it when you came from heaven and took on flesh. I glorified it when you raised Lazarus from the dead. But now as you go to the cross to be lifted up from the earth, I will open the door of heaven to everyone who has faith in you.

And this is the meaning of Jesus' death. He's lifted up. Very briefly, Jesus' death also means that you and I are lifted up.

And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, says Jesus, I will draw all people to myself. As he is lifted up, we are lifted up and drawn.

It's a great word. None of us come naturally to Jesus. This word drawn means kicking and screaming. It's used of hauling in a load of fish, which is not terribly flattering, but is very loving.

And what Jesus draws, he doesn't draw us to the cross, he draws us to himself. He's no longer on the cross. He has risen again. And he does it because, you see, he was crowned with thorns so that you and I might wear the crown of glory.

[14 : 37] He was cast out so that we might be welcomed in. He was mocked, he chose to be mocked and abused so that we could be honoured and blessed.

He took our sins and gave us his righteousness. He was lifted up in death so that we might be lifted up in life, eternal life, the life of heaven. And that is why Bach writes in the second duet at the top of the second page.

It was like a dance. Did you notice how the music changed tempo? We don't dance here, but if you're allowed to, we would have. Let us keep this holy feast with all delight and pleasure, which God the Lord makes manifest.

He is our light and treasure, who through his great light of grace has lightened our most sacred place. The night of sin now has vanished. Hallelujah.

The last words Jesus says, while you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become children of light. I am the light of the world, he says.

[15 : 50] The problem with light is that when it comes, it puts us in the place of choice. We welcome the light, we walk in the light, we turn our back on the light and walk away into the darkness, pretending to know we are going, turning our backs on the one thing that we have been looking for.

That's why we're gathered here this morning. It's to turn our faces toward this blazing glory, the shining light of Jesus on his cross and in his resurrection, to see that glory which consumes our darkness.

And Jesus says, while you have the light, believe in it. Because if you do not use the light, you will lose the light. Jesus says, if you don't act on what you now know of me, even what you know of me will be taken.

He's calling us to decide, to make a decision. He's calling us to welcome the light, lest we lose it. And you may have Christian friends who are lit up by Christ, and you may have a growing sense that you are being drawn to him, even kicking and screaming.

And Jesus says, believe in the light, and you might become a child of the light. And there is no reason why you shouldn't.

[17 : 09] There's no reason why you mustn't trust him. And I encourage you again to take the blue form and have a careful look at it and examine Jesus Christ and join us. Jesus said, and I, no one else can do it, and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself.

He draws all of us through his death and resurrection, all of us without distinction. His death, his resurrection, are bigger than anything that you and I can imagine.

They are bigger than any darkness, they are bigger than my guilt, they are bigger than my sin, they are bigger than my death, and they give to us a hope of future and a hope of glory with much that's left over.

It is the place where we are lifted up to heaven. So I finish with this, believe in the light, that you might become children of the light. Amen.