Glorification through Abasement

John, Luther, and Bach on the passion of Christ

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1. Any performance of music that has been written nearly 300 years ago, or any attempt at understanding it, involves a complex process of transcultural interpretation. This raises questions of an essentially musical character ranging from the technique of performing to the interpretation of the written music, to the very idea of what music is or would have been for the composer and his original audience. Yet it involves also questions arising from the wider cultural context within which music was originally written and performed. The latter would include religion, and in the case of Bach's St John Passion this context is arguably of particular importance as this music is evidently drawing heavily on rather specific theological ideas, which would have been familiar to Bach's Leipzig audience, but are essentially unknown to all but a few specialists today.

Yet it is not only an unfamiliar world of ideas we encounter in such a piece of music; its very setting within a liturgical context, as part of vespers on Good Friday, must have influenced both its original composition and its reception by the Lutheran church-goers of Bach's own time. For us, music has become irrevocably an end in itself; it is no longer thought to serve primarily extraneous purposes be they political, civic or religious. This is why we go to the concert hall to hear a performance of sacred music, and even those who attend one of Bach's passions during Holy Week out of a genuinely religious motivation or concern accept implicitly the autonomy of the aesthetic. We ought to be aware, however, that for the longest time and most certainly for the early 18th century this would have been different.

Nevertheless I will, in the following, confine myself to some theological ideas that may be standing behind Bach's great composition. What are they and what purpose do they serve? Let me begin with the seemingly obvious. The cross, on which Jesus of Nazareth was executed, has become the most pervasive symbol of Christianity. Yet this fact must not blind us to the truly

counterintuitive and surprising nature of this development. Whatever the wisdom and humanity of Jesus of Nazareth may have been, however memorable the impression was that he made on those he encountered, his untimely execution by the Romans could not but appear as the ultimate failure of his mission. No one present would have seen this as his most glorious hour; on the contrary, it was the moment of his deepest humiliation, of a hope being disappointed, of a great man dying a dishonourable death.

The next thing we hear about is that great turning point, reported as his resurrection, and the history of Christianity gets underway on the basis of precisely this belief. Jesus' story then does not end in humiliation and despair, but in triumphant victory. Yet this, if nothing else, should have led to an eclipse of interest in the darkest moment of his career. And indeed there are indications, in the New Testament, that certain members of the Christian community would rather be silent about the cross. Paul, who rebukes them sharply, is nevertheless himself convinced that speaking about it theologically is fraught with difficulty and even paradox. The word of the cross must appear as 'a scandal' or as 'foolishness' to those who look at the Christian faith from the outside (1 Cor 1,18.22); elsewhere the apostle acknowledges that the Old Testament word 'cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree' applies to the crucified (Gal 3,13) – and yet, in spite of all that he affirms constantly that it is precisely the death of Jesus on the cross that has unique significance for the believer. This seems to be the general view of all New Testament authors. In the canonical gospels the passion narrative is absolutely central; Mark, the earliest of them, has sometimes been called 'a passion narrative with an introduction' as the account of Jesus' suffering and dying takes up nearly half of the entire gospel, but even in those gospels that have more extended renderings of his life and his sayings the passion clearly is the climax of the narrative.

This then raises some wide-ranging questions: what is the significance of this death? In what way is it connected with the mission of Jesus? What does it tell us about the man himself, about his relationship to the Godhead and, finally, about God? Answers to all these questions begin to emerge in the New Testament already, but their constant reformulation throughout the history of

Christianity is in many ways formative for the development of Christian theology.

2. Let us look at some of the New Testament answers first. For obvious reasons the gospel of John is of particular interest, but we must not ignore that for Bach and his contemporaries the Bible still speaks with one voice; there is, as yet, no awareness of historical and theological distinctions between the individual authors and traditions represented in the biblical writings. This is why Bach makes no apology for including passages from the gospel of Matthew in his St John Passion; essentially for him they are telling the same story albeit in different ways. Having said this, however, it seems also evident that Bach did have an excellent sense for the very specific character of the account given by the fourth evangelist which for him chimed well with his own Lutheran background of which I shall speak in a moment.

The gospel of John differs from the three other gospels contained in the New Testament essentially in the way in which it raises, and answers, the question of who Jesus is. The story of his life, death and resurrection is told, more or less, in line with the other gospels (though there are some substantial deviations), but the fourth gospel makes it clear that behind this narrative there lurks another, more important issue, the identity of Jesus himself. And it is this issue that needs elucidation in the first place. This is why the Johannine Jesus, as modern scholarship likes to call him, gives long speeches about himself, about his mission, about his relation to God and to his followers. And if it is true, as is often observed, that the gospel of John presents Jesus more divine than the other three, more detached from earthly and human constraints, it is equally true that its theological reflection about the person of Jesus is driven by a specific awareness that his exalted nature appeared in an unspectacularly human guise during his lifetime. The motto of the entire gospel is contained in John 1, 14: 'The word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth'. This is intentionally paradoxical: the 'Word', the eternal Son of God, became a human being and, as such, lived amongst other human beings, and in this state of abasement his glory was seen by those who knew him. To be sure, this might be read as implying that Jesus' earthly life was,

after all, so special that no one could have been in doubt about his real identity, but I take it that Bach's Lutheran reading is that the glory of the only-begotten Son becomes apparent *specifically* in his incarnate state. In this sense, the opening Chorus of the St John Passion has the significant line, 'show us through your passion that you, the true Son of God, at all times, even in your extreme abasement, are glorified'.

This then assigns to the reader the task of understanding how it is that the lowliness of Jesus becomes transparent for his special dignity. And if this is difficult enough for his earthly life in general, it clearly is, for all the reasons given earlier, specifically problematic for his passion. The question the Johannine passion narrative seeks to address, therefore, is how this particularly unpleasant and cruel end of Jesus' life can be seen as revealing his true being. In other words, throughout the account given of Jesus' apprehension, trial and execution, the issue of his identity is paramount. It is therefore not by chance that the soldiers who are sent to capture him and say so, are told by Jesus 'I am he' (John 18,4-5). Jesus' answer is more than simply telling them that he's the man they are looking for; he gives them a glimpse of who he truly is. In the Old Testament, God introduces himself to Moses by saying 'I am who I am' (Ex 3,14), and the Greek of Jesus' reply to the soldiers is clearly reminiscent of that. This then explains why the soldiers are so shocked that they retreat and fall to the ground (John 18,6). At the moment of Jesus' greatest humiliation and apparent weakness, the gospel thus hints, his divine status is by no means absent.

This theme is then continued in the deeply ironic account of Jesus' trial before Pilate. While Pilate's questions to Jesus are meant to indicate that he understands nothing of what is really going on – he and Jesus are clearly talking at cross-purposes – the upshot of his interrogation is still that the Roman procurator himself, unwittingly, witnesses to Christ's true nature: 'Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king"' (John 18,37) So, two stories take place at the same time: the Roman authority believes, mistakenly, that Jesus might be a political figure claiming to be the king of the Jews, a mistake Jesus makes no effort to correct in his trial because for him – according to the logic of the fourth gospel – his accusation and execution have an entirely different significance which his

accusers cannot possibly grasp; and insofar as this is so, their plot against him is really fulfilling his, rather than their end; their power over him is, really, his power over them; his humiliation and abasement, his suffering and dying is, really, the climax of his mission. In a sense we can speak of two trials the defendant of one being the judge of the other and *vice versa*.

3. This is not all the fourth gospel has to say on the passion of Christ, but it may be worthwhile at this point to cast an eye on Martin Luther and on Bach. For it is highly significant that this very idea in the gospel of John received an influential interpretation through the German reformer; in fact it became fundamental for his so-called 'theology of the cross' which, some argue, is at the centre of his entire theology. Luther starts of with the problem of how knowledge of God and a relationship with him are possible given that sin has radically removed human beings from communion with God. The problem is, he argues, that under this condition of estrangement between humanity and God, a 'theology of glory' which starts from an admiration of God's greatness and beauty based on an appreciation of the created world will necessarily go astray because such an approach will inevitably distract from our separation from God; it is, we might say using a modern word, ideological in that it invents an intact world to justify ignoring the bleak reality.
A more realistic perception of God under the condition of sin would see him in his holiness and justice, but for man this is no great help either because such an idea will strike us with fear and terror because of our own unworthiness and our inability to live up to the standard expected of us. So how could human beings ever be led back to God? It is in reply to this conundrum, Luther argues, that God chose the paradoxical way of revealing himself through the cross. Thus we encounter him as the God of love, but this love of his for humanity becomes apparent only where it is coupled, as it were, with an appreciation of the wrong-headedness of our entire situation. This occurs in Jesus' own suffering and dying for us on the cross. So 'preaching Christ crucified' as Paul put it (Gal 3,1), means precisely that God can only be encountered in and through the cross, that is in the most ungodly guise conceivable because the cross, the symbol of Jesus' passion, combines into one the recognition of our sins and thus of our separation from God *and* God's

power and love which overcome even this deep estrangement between ourselves and him.

For Luther, this has a further corollary. Focussing on the cross as the only way human knowledge of God is possible brings the idea of salvation into the very centre of theology. The full answer, then, to the question of what the significance of Jesus' suffering and dying is, must include reference to those for whom he died. If God reveals himself specifically on the cross and there, as the one who is willing to take upon himself suffering and affliction for the sake of humanity, then this precisely is the fundamental thing to know about God. The question posed by the fourth evangelist of who Jesus Christ is receives, then, a further clarification: the miraculous condescension of the Word of God into the lowliness of human nature occurred for the very benefit of human beings because they could not have been reconciled with God in any other way. The strange irony of the two trials, God's veiling himself in the flesh in order to be known – all this happens for the sake of human salvation.

4. Moving from here to Bach will, I think, easily show how essentially Lutheran his reading of John's passion narrative is. There can be no doubt that Bach possessed considerable theological education; as a matter of fact he was examined in theology by a professor of Leipzig University when he was appointed cantor of St Thomas. It is also known that abiding by the standards of Lutheran orthodoxy was expected and also policed by the local authorities of that city. Understandably perhaps given that his music was performed as part of a service, Bach had to hand in his librettos in advance for approval, which was not automatically and not always granted. The theological and ecclesiastical climate at Leipzig also seems to have been rather conservative by comparison with other German cities such as Hamburg. Whether this means that Bach would have liked to set passion oratorios in a more 'progressive', opera-like style we do not know. In spite of that, however, the caveat is needed that Lutheranism in the early 18th century is not, of course, simply identical with the ideas espoused by the reformer himself two hundred years earlier, and Bach's immediate sources will have been, in most cases, writings by 17th century Lutheran divines.

Nevertheless, there can be no doubt, in my view, that Bach's St John Passion owes much to this particular reading of the John's gospel. Let us look at some examples. I already mentioned the first chorus. Its opening line is adapted from Psalm 8. This verse receives regular Christological interpretation in the Lutheran commentaries Bach owned and used. Thus Johann Olearius, commenting on John, frequently refers to Christ's glorification through 'deepest abasement' and cites Psalm 8 in this connection (M. Marissen, *Lutheranism, Anti-Semitism, and Bach's St John Passion*, Oxford 1998, p. 12). And Abraham Calov's Bible commentary, which in its very title carries a reference to Luther, ascribes to the reformer the view that Psalm 8 is 'a prophecy of Christ, his suffering, resurrection and ruling over all creatures …' (quoted in Marissen, loc. cit.). The idea of Christ's glorification through his passion, which for Bach would have been implied in the words of the Psalm, is then made explicit in what follows: 'show us through your passion that you, the true Son of God, at all times, even in the greatest abasement, have been glorified'.

I already mentioned the immediately subsequent scene of Jesus' betrayal and his being captured. Once again, Bach's Lutheran commentaries are explicit in their theological exegesis of this Johannine passage: Jesus' answer to the soldiers gives a glimpse of his true, divine nature; and because of that they retreat from him and fall down. So again Olearius:

> I am the one. The Son of the Living God … At this omnipotent, powerful Word, suddenly, as by thunder, they would be struck down, so that they fell to the ground. It was a view of Godly majesty and glory. (quoted in Marissen, op. cit., p. 13).

While I must limit myself here to some examples I cannot, of course, pass over the dramatic core of the passion, the interrogation by Pilate with their agitated choruses punctuated by the dialogue between the bemused and uneasy procurator and the quiet, almost detached Jesus. Yet perhaps the term 'dramatic' is here ill chosen. For it has often been observed that Bach does precisely *not* build into this scene a climactic development that might suggest an increasing agitation of the crowd; rather the various choruses can be shown to display a chiastic symmetry (21d, *Kreuzige, kreuzige* equals 23d, *Weg, weg*

mit dem, and 21f, *Wir haben ein Gesetz*, is repeated in 23b, *Lässest du diesen los*: for details compare RA Leaver, 'The mature vocal works and their theological and liturgical context' in: J. Butt [ed.], *The Cambridge Companion*, 102). Now Bach could be forgiven for thinking the chiasmus particularly apposite for a passion oratorio – after all, the Greek X has the form of a cross and is, at the same time, the first letter of the title Christos, the Messiah. Yet, more important than this for my present purpose is the observation that through this choice of structure Bach seems to suggest to his hearers that the narrative development of the scene is rather incidental for what is going on – the confrontation of God and world with its strange inversion of power and impotency; strength and weakness; victory and defeat: Jesus who, to all appearance falls victim to the accusations of the crowd and the supreme power of the Romans is, in reality, in full control of the situation which, unbeknownst to the other parties, occurs ultimately to fulfil a divine purpose. In other words, the entire scene, which is so central to Bach's work, is dominated by the theme of Christ's glory revealed in his abasement and the salvation effected in this way.

It is therefore significant that at the centre of these various choruses there is a chorale that conveys precisely this theological message. It is No. 22 *Durch dein Gefängnis, Gottes Sohn*. Some have even argued that this chorale marks the very centre of the Passion, but this is controversial and not important for my argument here. What is important, however, is to see that this chorale espouses precisely the Johannine/Lutheran interpretation of the passion that we have encountered in the opening chorus and beyond: our freedom could only be achieved through the prison, the captivity of the Son of God. Had he not become a slave, our slavery would have continued eternally. This neatly explains the significance of the strange dialogue between Jesus and Pilate. The real meaning of these exchanges is not this that a Roman procurator exercises the power of his office; it is not understood either, however, by simply reverting this judgment and by considering Pilate's trial as paradigmatic miscarriage of justice. This it may well be, but the reason why it happens the way it happens – according to the evangelist – is because of God's will to save human beings in this particular way. The chorale is thus a theological

commentary on the preceding interaction between the various people and groups of people.

5. While I would thus contend that at the heart of Bach's great work we find one very specific – and at the same time genuinely Johannine – interpretation of the death of Jesus, it would be wrong to ignore that other views exercise a certain role as well. Let me briefly point out two of them. The first one is this that the death of Jesus was a sacrifice. This idea is deeply rooted in the gospel of John where Jesus is introduced, right at the beginning of the gospel, as 'the lamb of God'. This 'lamb' would be the Passover lamb, the yearly ritual sacrifice on the first day of the Passover festival in remembrance of the exodus of the people of Israel from Egypt. This identification of Jesus with the Passover lamb is recurrent in John's passion narrative in an interestingly indirect way. The death of Jesus, namely, is made to coincide with the hour in which the Passover lamb would have been slaughtered in the Temple. In order to achieve this effect John moves Jesus' death one day back: whereas the other three gospels describe the last supper as a Passover meal thus implying that the day *before* the crucifixion is the first day of the festival, the Passover meal in the gospel of John is envisaged for the night of the Friday (cf. John 18,28 = 16a St John Passion: the High Priests don't enter the praefectorium of Pilate 'so as to avoid ritual defilement and to be able to eat the Passover'.) The identification of Jesus with the Passover lamb is made explicit, furthermore, in John 19,36 where Jesus is taken from the cross with unbroken legs (because he is already dead). This is said to fulfil the word of Num 9,12 that none of his bones shall be broken which, in Numbers, refers precisely to the Passover lamb.

This notion is developed in later theology into the theory that Christ's death 'atones' or propitiates for the sins of human beings which is only possible because he himself was without sin. He is therefore the 'perfect sacrifice' who alone is able to offer 'satisfaction' for the punishment owed by humanity to God. Now, whether the Jewish Passover lamb is a sacrifice in the sense of this theory of satisfaction is open to some serious doubt and thus also the respective interpretation of the gospel of John. Nevertheless Bach and his contemporaries would have taken the allusions to Christ as Passover lamb in

this sense; in fact the theory of satisfaction was easily the dominant understanding of the atonement in 17th and early 18th century Lutheranism. It is thus not surprising that Bach's Passion is using this kind of idea occasionally. Rather, I think, it merits noting how limited use of this influential view is in the St John Passion.

Secondly, there is the view that Jesus' death has an exemplary role; it extols the believer to follow him, to take on the cross for himself and to suffer as he had suffered. This more subjective view was clearly on the rise in Bach's own time; it dominates Pietist and more generally, Baroque religion. This is in contrast to the rather critical view Luther and traditional Lutheranism used to have of such a theory. Not that they objected to ethical consequences of the Christian faith, but these had to be *consequences*. Luther was worried that a rash identification of the Christian's suffering with the passion of Christ would occlude the vital difference between the work of Christ and our own work. Therefore, the believer reflecting on the passion ought not primarily to think of the parallels between his or her own experience and the fate of the saviour, but of the paradox that he suffers for their sake; think of the ending of the first chorale (O grosse Lieb): 'I lived with the world in joy and pleasure, while you have to suffer.'

Given that ideas about this kind of identification with the suffering Christ were so popular at Bach's time, it is, I think, again rather significant how limited their influence is in the St John Passion. This may be due partly to the overall small number of contemporary texts Bach is using in this oratorio; where this is different, as in the St Matthew Passion, the presence of Baroque-style imitation piety is at once much stronger. Still, even where they occur they are often given rather substantial twists. Just consider the aria *Ich folge dir gleichfalls*. The idea that the faithful believer 'follows' Jesus into his suffering is, of course, characteristic for 18th century religiosity. Yet the hearer of Bach's Passion cannot fail to suspect a certain irony in the placing of this aria: it is inserted after Simon Peter's decision to 'follow Jesus' when he was taken prisoner. Those who know their Bible will, even at this point, be aware that this 'following' is going to stumble effectively very soon thereafter: it merely sets the scene for Peter's shameful betrayal of Jesus.

Yet this is not all; the text of the aria itself is only half-heartedly espousing the ideal of imitation as a source of piety. For it continues to ask for Jesus' assistance in the disciple's way: 'do not cease to pull me and push me, to beg me yourself'. The reflection thus turns away from the merits of a religious life and towards the need to rely on the saviour.

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Let me briefly summarise. The death of Jesus has, over the centuries, been explained theologically in various ways, and traces of more than one such theory can be found in Bach's St John Passion. Yet there is a dominant theme, which is in line with an important strand in the gospel of John, backed up specifically by a characteristically Lutheran reading of the Bible. This is the idea that God is revealed, paradoxically, in and through his abasement in the Incarnation and, specifically, the passion of Jesus Christ. It is this glorification through condescension that, according to Lutheran theology, provides the one way for the salvation of sinful humanity. Reflecting on the passion, the believer is then led to the insight that the issue of Jesus' true identity as the Son of God even and especially in his suffering is identical with that of his function as our saviour. Understanding who he is in his passion will make us understand simultaneously what he does for us, and what this means for the believer today. This, I think, is the theological message at the centre of Bach's great work of music.