

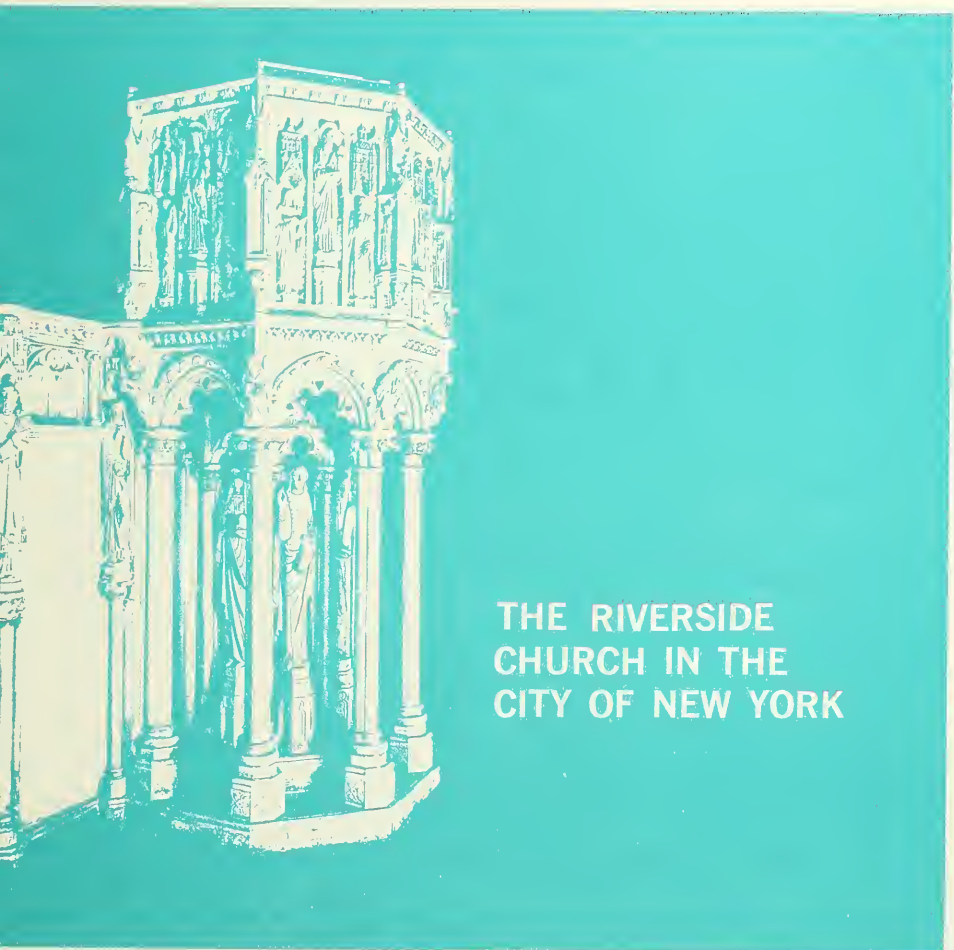
SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE



THE FIFTH EVANGELIST - J. S. BACH

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Ordinarily one would not make a musician the subject of a sermon. But Johann Sebastian Bach was no ordinary musician, and this is no ordinary occasion.

I should like to thank publicly Fred Swann and those who have labored with him to make this Bach Festival a reality. We are lastingly in their debt.

It is not within my competence to comment on Bach's musical techniques. Suffice it to say that the forms and devices he employed he ennobled and developed to the full. I want rather to focus on Bach the man, whose genius was so mightily used of God.

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The basic history is not complicated. Johann Sebastian Bach was born in 1685 in Thuringia, a State in central Germany that only 200 years earlier had given the world Martin Luther. He was born of a family that was steeped in music for seven generations. At the age of nine he was orphaned and spent his early teen years with an older brother.

At the age of nineteen he became organist for a church in Arnstadt. He stayed there for about two years before moving on to a similar post in Mühlhausen. One year later he accepted the post of organist in the Ducal Chapel at Weimar. This was Bach's first major position and he held it for nine years.

In 1717 he became Kapellmeister at Köthen where he prepared orchestral and chamber music for the young Prince Leopold. His first wife died in 1720. In 1721 he married again. In May of 1723 he took his last post as Cantor at St. Thomas-Schule in Leipzig where he served for fifteen years.

Bach died in 1750 and was buried in the churchyard of St. John in Leipzig. No identification was placed upon his grave. It wasn't until 1894 that his grave was discovered, and his body buried, this time, within the church.

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As one reads the literature on Bach there are three main impressions that tower over all the rest. First, Johann Sebastian Bach was a church musician. Not only in the sense that for the most part he earned his livelihood in the employ of the church. But primarily in the sense that the work he produced was designed to enhance the worship of Almighty God. He lived but to worship God and write music. At the age of twenty-three he could state his life purpose: A regulated church music in honor of God.

In this connection it is critically important to remember that Bach was a Lutheran. It was providential that this was so because Luther alone of the reformers had a warm place in his heart for music. This is what prompted Albert Schweitzer to ask what Bach would have done had he been born in Zurich or in Geneva?

Luther was one who could not tolerate the banishment of choir and art-song from the church. It was this loveable reformer who noted one time that the devil did not deserve all the good tunes. On another occasion he said: "I am not of the opinion that on account of the Gospel all the arts should be crushed out of existence, as some over-religious people pretend, but I would willingly see all the arts, especially music, in the service of Him who has given and created them." 2

The worship for which Bach wrote adhered very closely to the Church Year. This was the only year that mattered. There was no civil year intruding. There was no ecclesiastical promotional year intruding. The only year the church knew was the year that began with Advent and moved on through Epiphany, and Lent, and Easter, and Pentecost, and the Trinity season. The Scriptures for each Sunday were very pointedly prescribed, and it was Bach's

desire to write music that would help those Scriptures come alive for those who worshipped.

Worship for Bach was a collective response made by the people of God to God's redeeming action in Jesus Christ. Music was not an end in itself but existed to assist men in making their response to God. Bach was something of an exegete and theologian in his own right. He had to be, for in order to write cantatas that were based on Scripture he had to sense what those Scriptures meant.

There were times when Bach felt that his understanding of what the Scriptures meant, and what music would be appropriate, exceeded that of the preacher. At one point during his stay in Leipzig the town fathers found it necessary to reprimand Bach through a Deacon of the Nicolai Church who was ordered "to inform the Cantor that when the ministers who are preaching cause it to be announced that particular hymns are to be sung before or after the sermon, he shall be governed accordingly and have the same sung!" 3 He was first and foremost a church musician.

The second major impression that one gains is that of a man who was capable of a prodigious output. In a day when we prattle on and on about being overworked, and anxiously anticipate a shorter work-week, Bach's achievements stand out as monumentally incredible. Over the course of his lifetime he composed no less than three hundred cantatas and probably more. During his Leipzig years alone he composed one hundred Cantatas, the Magnificat, a Sanctus, unnumbered Chorales and Motets, the Passion According to St. Matthew, the Christmas Oratorio, and the B minor Mass!

His life had a remarkable focus. It was not the scattered and extended life that we rather envision for ourselves. He never travelled any further north than Lübeck or Hamburg; never any further south than Carlsbad; never any further west than Cassel; never any further east than Dresden. Yet, ponder the impact of that life.

His productivity was achieved against considerable adversity. His first wife died while he was on a trip with the young Prince. Upon his return he learned that she had died and was already buried. His first marriage produced seven children, only three of whom survived. His second marriage produced thirteen children, but he lost four of the six sons born to that union. One of his children was mentally deficient. He was grossly under-appreciated throughout his vocational life. He got the job in Leipzig because, as one of the Council members said: "Since the best man cannot be obtained we will have to resort to a mediocre one." 4

He continuously encountered resistance from small minds that could not embrace the lift that he was giving to church music. In his very first church in Arnstadt the authorities complained: "Bach had made many peculiar variations in the chorale; he smuggled many foreign tones into the melodies, and thus greatly confused the congregation." 5

Yet through it all -- personal losses within the family, and professional frustrations, Bach maintained a loyalty to perfection that never quit. Perhaps it is true when all is said and done that we do our best work under the pressure of time and heavy circumstance.

The third major impression helps to explain the other two. It is the impression of a man who was possessed of a profound personal faith in God. In Bach's day the Pietists were a threat to the orthodox Lutheran Church. The Pietists in some ways might be likened to the fundamentalists of our time. They had a low view of the church. They were wary of the arts. They put great stress on inner feeling. How one felt the word of God was more important than the objective word itself. But Bach was Lutheran. And Lutherans do not sentimentalize God. Bach always preferred the pure text of Scripture to poetry that men wrote about the Scriptures.

He was convinced of God's love not because of what

he felt in his heart, but because of what God had done in Jesus Christ. He would have subscribed heartily to Luther's answer to the question, "How do you know you are a Christian?" when Luther replied, "Because I've been baptised." -- not because of any inner steadfastness on my part, but because of the steadfastness of God's abiding love. If one of those Pietists had asked Bach where and when he had been saved, he would have answered: "At Golgotha on Good Friday, between twelve and three in the afternoon."

Yet his faith was deeply personal. It is well known that at the top of his scores he wrote the letters "J. J." Jesus Juva, Jesus Help. And at the end of every one of them, Soli Deo Gloria, To God alone be glory.

His favorite portions of the Bible, which he knew well, were the Prophets, the Psalms and the Gospels. Of these the Gospels were most important to him. He wrote more cantatas on verses from the Gospels than from any other portion. Of the Gospels themselves, his mind and heart were drawn continually to the Passion Narratives. The cantatas that he wrote were liturgically placed, mind you, between the reading of the New Testament Lesson and the sermon. This means that they had to be very much on target and as true to the meaning of Scripture as possible. He interpreted the Bible with such remarkable care that many of the passages of Bach's music that befuddle us become clear when we see more clearly the passage that he was setting to music.

William Scheide of Princeton comments on Bach's Cantata 79 where a chorale setting is given of Psalm 84:11: "The Lord God is a sun and shield: the Lord will give grace and glory: no good thing will be withhold from them that walk uprightly." "Bach built his chorus around three main ideas: a powerful jubilant dance melody for two horns, massive chordal passages for the voices, and exultant counterpoint in the strings. All three are expanded indefinitely and interwoven with an effect that belies description. The continuously glittering horn color, the waves of choral sound, and the stupendous joy throughout assume here an almost military aspect. Albert Schweitzer felt this when he de-

clared that 'a positively blinding radiance gleams from this chorus; it is as if we were looking at a victorious battle in the rays of morning.' " 6

He has a cantata, one of very few that he did on any of Paul's words, on II Timothy 2:8: "Remember Jesus Christ raised from the dead." In this cantata one feels the tumult of the world and the disciples caught up in it, alternating with the majestic transcendent benediction of the risen Christ, which at length mingles with and stills the commotion and ultimately prevails.

We can well understand how a friend of Goethe could say to him one time: "If you could hear one of Sebastian Bach's motets you would feel yourself at the center of the world." 7 He opened his spirit to the mystery of truth and entered into that mystery for us all.

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On Easter day of 1948 and again in 1949 CBS television did a special that featured readings from the Gospels and the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. The announcer for those telecasts dared to describe Bach as "The Fifth Evangelist." Such company is not too exalted for Bach. He belongs with Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. An evangelist is not one who tells people that they ought to trust God; but rather one who creates in people the desire to trust. Only heaven knows in how many hearts Bach's music has inspired faith in the living Christ, and kept that faith strong!

CLOSING PRAYER

O Thou who art the source of every good
and perfect gift -- receive our thanks
for this man sent from Thee whose name
was John.

Make us responsive to the impact of his
music on our souls: that we, like him,
might be sustained in life and death by
an unwavering confidence in Thee.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.



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