

# Passiontide Organ Meditation

Music and Readings for Passiontide

music by  
Johann Sebastian Bach  
(1685-1750)

Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> March 2021  
4.30 pm

Bach evidently found the season of Passiontide particularly stimulating for his creativity. The agony of the Passion narrative is keenly felt in Bach's music for the season. A setting of the Passion lay at the heart of the composer's grand (though uncompleted) vision of annual cantata-cycles for the church year, while the large-scale St John and St Matthew Passions are heralded as two of the finest jewels of Bach's vast musical output.

Bach's Passiontide choral music is a dramatic backdrop to his Passiontide organ chorale preludes. In a chorale prelude, the composer takes a chorale (a Lutheran hymn melody) and bases a composition on and around it. Since specific hymn texts were sung to specific chorale melodies, the chorale prelude genre often offered a rich web of musical, textual and religious allusions.

In this Meditation, the opening and closing pieces serve as meditative frames. The remaining five pieces are strongly tied to the readings: Psalm 51 is followed by its musical paraphrase, *Erbarb dich*, while the reading of Chapter 23 of the Gospel of Luke is interspersed with pieces whose textual links directly comment on the contents of the chapter.

The organ is played by  
William Fox, Sub-Organist

# ORDER OF SERVICE

## Bidding

Welcome to this Passiontide Organ Meditation from St Paul's Cathedral, which forms part of our offering of prayer and worship in this season of Lent. In this recital, we hear music by the composer Johann Sebastian Bach, framed by the readings from scripture to which they relate. Through this offering of music and scripture, may we seek to enter more deeply into the suffering and death of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Almighty God,  
whose most dear Son went not up to joy  
but first he suffered pain,  
and entered not into glory before he was crucified:  
mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross,  
may find it none other than the way of life and peace;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.

## *Prelude and Fugue in A minor (BWV 543)*

*This work emanates from Bach's time in the Weimar court. The Prelude is one of the composer's darkest openings, with broken chords and scales advancing haltingly, while the Fugue is buoyant and carries rigorous energy through to a virtuosic conclusion.*

## Reading

Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to your steadfast love;  
according to your abundant mercy  
blot out my transgressions.  
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,  
and cleanse me from my sin.

For I know my transgressions,  
and my sin is ever before me.  
Against you, you alone, have I sinned,  
and done what is evil in your sight,  
so that you are justified in your sentence  
and blameless when you pass judgement.  
Indeed, I was born guilty,  
a sinner when my mother conceived me.

You desire truth in the inward being;  
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.  
Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;  
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.  
Let me hear joy and gladness;  
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.  
Hide your face from my sins,  
and blot out all my iniquities.

Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and put a new and right spirit within me.  
Do not cast me away from your presence,  
and do not take your holy spirit from me.  
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
and sustain in me a willing spirit.

Then I will teach transgressors your ways,  
and sinners will return to you.  
Deliver me from bloodshed, O God,  
O God of my salvation,  
and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.

O Lord, open my lips,  
and my mouth will declare your praise.  
For you have no delight in sacrifice;  
if I were to give a burnt-offering, you would not be pleased.  
The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;  
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Do good to Zion in your good pleasure;  
rebuild the walls of Jerusalem,  
then you will delight in right sacrifices,  
in burnt-offerings and whole burnt-offerings;  
then bulls will be offered on your altar.

## *Erbarm dich mein, o Herre Gott (BWV 721)*

*Have mercy on me, O Lord God*

*A piece of profound simplicity, the unadorned chorale melody appears as a solo above a pulsating chordal accompaniment.*

### Reading

Then the assembly rose as a body and brought Jesus before Pilate. They began to accuse him, saying, 'We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king.' Then Pilate asked him, 'Are you the king of the Jews?' He answered, 'You say so.' Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, 'I find no basis for an accusation against this man.' But they were insistent and said, 'He stirs up the people by teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee where he began even to this place.'

When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. And when he learned that he was under Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him off to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time. When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had been wanting to see him for a long time, because he had heard about him and was hoping to see him perform some sign. He questioned him at some length, but Jesus gave him no answer.

The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him. Even Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him; then he put an elegant robe on him, and sent him back to Pilate. That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies.

Luke 23. 1-12

## *Christus, der uns selig macht (BWV 620)*

*Christ, who saves us*

*The first and second verses of this chorale text recount the trial of Jesus. The apparent dissonance, even ugliness, of this setting appear similar to Bach's intentions for the crowd scenes in the St John Passion. Harmonic unease and recurring syncopation (off-beat writing) never allow this prelude to settle – instead, the evils of humanity and shouts from the mob demanding Christ's death dominate.*

## Reading

Pilate then called together the chief priests, the leaders, and the people, and said to them, 'You brought me this man as one who was perverting the people; and here I have examined him in your presence and have not found this man guilty of any of your charges against him. Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us. Indeed, he has done nothing to deserve death. I will therefore have him flogged and release him.'

Then they all shouted out together, 'Away with this fellow! Release Barabbas for us!' (This was a man who had been put in prison for an insurrection that had taken place in the city, and for murder.) Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again; but they kept shouting, 'Crucify, crucify him!' A third time he said to them, 'Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no ground for the sentence of death; I will therefore have him flogged and then release him.' But they kept urgently demanding with loud shouts that he should be crucified; and their voices prevailed. So Pilate gave his verdict that their demand should be granted. He released the man they asked for, the one who had been put in prison for insurrection and murder, and he handed Jesus over as they wished.

Luke 23. 13-25

### *Christus, der uns selig macht (BWV 747)*

*Christ, who saves us*

*In contrast to the violence of the mob in BWV 620, this setting is more delicate and introverted; perhaps we can see humanity shying away from the shame of Christ's death.*

## Reading

As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus. A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. But Jesus turned to them and said, 'Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For the days are surely coming when they will say, "Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed." Then they will begin to say to the mountains, "Fall on us"; and to the hills, "Cover us." For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?'

Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.' And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, 'He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!' The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, 'If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!' There was also an inscription over him, 'This is the King of the Jews.'

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, 'Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!' But the other rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.' Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' He replied, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'

Luke 23. 26-43

## *Da Jesus an dem Kreuze stund (BWV 621)*

*When Jesus stood by the Cross*

*The stanzas of this hymn outline the Seven Last Words from the Cross, two of which have just been read ('Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing' and 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise'), and one of which will be read next ('Father, into your hands I commend my spirit').*

*Bach's intimate prelude captures many facets of the Seven Last Words: Jesus' forgiveness of the crowd for their actions against him in the poignant vulnerability of the writing, and the weakening of the Saviour's body hanging on the cross in the falling bass line.*

## Reading

It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, while the sun's light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.' Having said this, he breathed his last. When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, 'Certainly this man was innocent.' And when all the crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home, beating their breasts.

But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

Luke 23. 44-49

### *Herzlich tut mich verlangen (BWV 727)*

*I do desire dearly*

*The chorale text emphasises the disparity between the soul and the earthly body: while we face trials in this world, we are destined for everlasting peace as a result of Christ's Passion. Bach's stark setting of the famous chorale melody is timeless in its serenity.*

### Reading

Now there was a good and righteous man named Joseph, who, though a member of the council, had not agreed to their plan and action. He came from the Jewish town of Arimathea, and he was waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God. This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then he took it down, wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb where no one had ever been laid. It was the day of Preparation, and the sabbath was beginning. The women who had come with him from Galilee followed, and they saw the tomb and how his body was laid. Then they returned, and prepared spices and ointments.

On the sabbath they rested according to the commandment.

Luke 23. 50-end

### *Passacaglia in C minor (BWV 582)*

*The Meditation closes in the same darkness in which it began. The Passacaglia is an extraordinary display of creativity in which Bach presents a series of twenty variations based entirely on an ominous bass line. Each variation bleeds one into the other to create a work which is both seamless and riveting; Robert Schumann describes variations 'intertwined so ingeniously that one can never cease to be amazed'. The double fugue which follows is an extensive work of intricate counterpoint based on the passacaglia theme.*

*The work unravels over nearly 15 minutes – a knotty, intense and dramatic piece with which to meditate on the Passion of the Saviour of the World.*