

## Cantata Evensong Lent 1 2019

This Cathedral is very fortunate in that relationships between the clergy and organists are very good. History shows that it has not always been so either here or in Leipzig where J.S. Bach was organist. In 1729 there was an acrimonious altercation between Bach and one of the deacons at the Thomaskirche over who should chose the chorales to be sung at vespers. This was no trivial matter; for Lutherans believed that the word of God was not just said or read; it was also sung in two distinct ways. First, it was sung by the congregation in chorales or hymns which is why we began and will end this service with congregational chorales. But, secondly the word was proclaimed as the choir sang more elaborate music in cantatas. And these cantatas reflected on particular events in the life of Jesus, inviting the congregation to meditate on their significance.

And today the event which we have been given to reflect on is Jesus setting his face towards Jerusalem as he journeys to Golgotha where he was crucified. Golgotha is a word that means “the place of the skull”. It was thought to have been a

small hill shaped like a human skull. There was also a Jewish tradition that Golgotha marked the place where the skull of Adam was buried. But, more importantly Golgotha was Jerusalem's rubbish tip; the midden where all the refuse and dung of the city was thrown. And the Romans quite deliberately crucified Jewish prisoners there because it was a way of humiliating and degrading a people who venerated the clean and the holy. So Jesus at Golgotha took on himself all the corruption and pollution of this life as he was crucified – both physically and spiritually – in order that we might be set free and made new.

One of the more surprising influences on the Lutheranism of Bach's day was the theology of one of the greatest theologians ever to have been Archbishop of Canterbury – a man called Anselm. And Anselm said that what Jesus did *for* us on Golgotha, he must also do *in* us. And that is why we find in the text of this cantata and in our poem the idea that deep within each one of us is a Golgotha – a shadow side that pollutes and corrupts the mind and heart. And we are called to open

ourselves again and again to the grace of Jesus that this inner Golgotha might be healed and made new. This grace of Jesus comes to us through the church's ministry of word and sacrament. And the transforming *word* was also mediated for Lutheran believers through the music of cantatas and chorales.

I think the residents of Leipzig in 1729 would have been appalled by our casual attitude to music – the way musack is used in pubs and restaurants, in shopping malls and supermarkets. For Lutherans listening attentively to word and music is a precious way of accessing this transforming grace of our Lord. What Jesus has done for us on Golgotha to make all things new he can do *in* us through the words and music of chorale and cantata. That is why Martin Luther said this: “Music is a sovereign master of all movements within the heart. Nothing on earth is stronger than music which can make the sad happy, the happy sad and the despairing courageous...I wish with all my heart, that everyone would glorify and praise God for the godly and splendid gift of music.” And today we do indeed praise

God for the godly and splendid gift of music that can help transform us.