

B I M A I L

BIBLE FOR THE DARING

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Cheer up, rejoice!

When desperation turns into unbelievable joy, one can sense the glory. What kind of comfort do I desire?

This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it.

John 11,4

„Cheer up, rejoice and praise the day!“ The Christmas Oratorium written by Bach for the new year of 1734/1735 begins with this chorale. In the previous year he and his wife Anna Magdalena lost seven of their children. Christiana Sophia and Christian had lived three years, Christiana Dorothea one year, Ernst one day, Christiana Benedicta three days. “Praise what the highest has done” – says the chorale. In April of the previous year Regina died at four and a half, in November the newly born Johann. Did the siblings cry with their parents? “Give up apprehension, ban lament, sing full of cheer and gaiety!” Who knows the lullabies which were sung to the dessert flowers? “Serve the highest with glorious choirs; let us honour the name of the Lord!” How could Johann Sebastian, whose music reveals that he was among the most emotional men of his century, put his feather to paper once again in order to note down the drums and trumpets in high dancing lines? Not even his genius and the perfection of decades of practise could enable the tonal craftsman to do it.

This beating joy, the joy which precedes all celebration and dignity, arises from an experience which seems impossible in desperation, which however can only arise from a broken heart, from the experience of comfort. Bach's joy is no easy, flying, entertaining thing; no, it's heavy, beating, carried on powerful wings, a crying joy. Without Bach's bitter grief over his children, perhaps the world would never have heard the Christmas Oratorium. Perhaps without this pain the inner rejoicing over every new born child which promises life would never have been heard. The paradoxical experience of comfort, that in the moment of despair can only sound like derision and even when comfort begins to arise remains incomprehensible, simply overwhelms; this speaks to Jesus when – the terminal illness of his beloved already hurting him even in his innermost parts – he already senses divine glory. Precisely this paradoxical experience runs through the history of mysticism, everything should serve the greater glory of God. Everything, that means even all desperation. This idea has its deepest roots in the Biblical concept of the all encompassing divine glory. The call of the prophet Isaiah begins with his vision of God sitting on a throne over which the six winged seraphim floats and sings: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Almighty! The whole world is full of his glory!” (Is 6,3) Who still hears the unheard in this confession sung at every mass?

Even if not everything will be good in the new year 2010: Which lost treasure do I desire to hold in my arms again – like Bach his seven children? Do I dare to keep hoping that one day everything will become glorious?