

## *Ein' feste Burg.* Introduction for the Cherwell Singers Concert 19 November 2017, University Church, Oxford

---

The German Reformation is a singing movement. All of the pieces you heard in the first part of this concert have grown out of what can be called the defining feature of German Protestantism: the combination of printing, translating and singing. The date for the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary we are commemorating is based on this print (show), Luther's 95 Theses, but this reached just an academic audience since it was published in Latin. The movement went viral when the theology behind the theses was translated into German – and into music. This print (show), an inconspicuous pocket book, is the first Protestant hymnal, a pirated edition cobbled together from broadsheets. The first programmatic hymn in it is *Nun freut euch, liebe Christengmein* in which Luther asks for everybody to shout out their joy of redemption – and he uses a popular dance tune to set the words in the right mode: “Dear Christians, one and all, rejoice, With

exultation springing, And with united heart and voice And holy rapture singing”. And the congregations took to it: if in the 1520s a priest was trying to preach Catholic doctrine, people followed the injunction of the hymn, jumped up and started to sing.

The success of this dissemination method was seized by the printers and princes alike; a year after this handbook, the Wittenberg musician Johann Walther published four-part settings of all the hymns (show); in 1541, this impressive folio volume (show; the facsimile is actually downsized) was printed in huge numbers since it was ordered to be kept in every parish and every school, primary or secondary. Through hymns, children learned to read and sing. By that time, Luther had written another programmatic hymn which presents Reformation theology *in nuce*, ‘Ein feste Burg’. He based it on Psalm 46 – after the Gospels and the letters of Paul for him the most important book of the Bible, precisely because it brought theology emotionally alive through song.

Just as an aside: We will hear the influence of Luther's Psalm translation in the second part of the programme since Miles Coverdale used for his translation of the



Psalms Luther's translation as a guideline and correction for the Vulgate – and Coverdale's translation survived in the form of the Book of Common Prayers. When we hear 'Teach me, O Lord, the way of thy statutes' we hear echoes of Luther's 'Zeige mir, Herr, den Weg deiner Rechte' (Ps 119:33).

Back to Psalm 46 'God is our refuge and strength', the source of Luther's 'Ein feste Burg'. It is one of the processional psalms, sung by a collective we as they walk towards the city of God. There follows a description of the city of God with its holy place of the Tabernacle, culminating in a strong chorus, repeated at the end: The Lord of Hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our refuge. In re-forming the Psalm into a hymn for the 16th century, Luther starts fairly closely to the text. 'Refuge' for him takes the concrete form of a 'Burg'; he had felt the protective power of castles on the Wartburg and was experiencing it again on the Veste Coburg while waiting for the outcome of the Imperial Diet of Augsburg in 1530.

But the hymn is not about physical safety; the real enemy aren't the heathens of the psalm or the Catholics on the other side of the Augsburg debating table but 'the enemy of old', i.e. the devil. From here, Luther takes off

to a radical reading of the psalm as talking about spiritual struggle. That leads him to identify in verse 2 the God Zebaoth acting on behalf on those trusting in him as Christ (sing): *fragst du, wer er ist – er heißet Jesus Christ*. He reads the text as speaking of the same salvation history he had read in the letter to the Romans: salvation by grace alone, not through armed struggle. Physical fighting is pointless; as the last verse says, this is not about goods, honour, even one's own family – but the promised kingdom of God which will remain. And the only weapon which will work in that case is 'das Wort' i.e. the word of God, sola scriptura.

This message has not always been understood; in the centuries of singing the hymn, all too often the spiritual struggle was dragged back to mean whatever military or political operation was current. Part of this was due to the changes to the music. Luther's version of the tune is a dance of defiance, strong cross-rhythms hurling the word at the devil (sing): "Das Wort sie sollen lassen stahn." In the course of the following centuries congregational singing slowed down, the tune was evened out as the hymn was used in big gatherings to invoke God not for help in gaining the heavenly kingdom but for the success of a collective we in defending a worldly version of the Empire.



Both readings of the hymn clashed in the ‘Kirchenkampf’, the struggle of two factions of the Protestants during National Socialism. While the German Christians, loyal to Hitler, would start their meetings with (sing) ‘Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott’, the Confessing Church, defiant of Hitler, would close their meetings with the last verse, stating that the devils of this world will need to let Scripture alone, sung in Luther’s original rhythm. This also brings out the dramatic turning point in every verse: the repeated first couple of lines drive along the narrative with the defiant dance rhythm, only to slow down abruptly in line 5. This is where in verse 2 Christ was introduced as saviour; this is where in verse 4 the price of resistance is spelled out in heavy mono-syllables: “nehmen sie den Leib, Gut, Ehr, Kind und Weib”. It will cost life, goods, honour – and family.

This is a message which is also connected inextricably with the hymn. On 10 December 1944, the German author and Protestant hymn writer Jochen Klepper, committed suicide together with his Jewish wife and daughter. His last diary entry runs: “I cannot sing with Luther ‘Nehmen sie den Leib’ – my life, yes, but not my family.” and he continues: “We die, o God, in your presence trusting in your mercy.” It is the last line “ours is the lasting kingdom”, in which the defiant cross-

rhythm returns and into Klepper could join with Luther – and with the Psalmist.

It is particularly fitting to remember this here in the University Church which is intimately linked with the Confessing Church. It was started in 1939 by the Rev. Hans Herbert Kramm, who came to England as liaison officer from the Confessing Church and wrote a thesis on Martin Luther at Mansfield College. Last Sunday, the German Lutheran congregation sung the hymn here in this church in German in its original rhythm, sang it from a hymnbook which was completely overhauled after World War II: out went the 19<sup>th</sup> century with his militaristic and sickly sweet texts and evened-out tunes, reinstated were the original tunes and the new comers included eight hymns by Jochen Klepper which spelt out in the language of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the message that Luther had tried to spread in his hymns in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

So listen out for the message of both the text and the tune in the hymn!