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## Protestant Service marking the 500th anniversary of the Reformation (NDR TV)

Sunday 29 Oktober 2017

Christianskirche Hamburg-Ottensen

Bishop Kirsten Fehrs

Good morning to all of you here and to those watching on television –

Music is life. If that remained to be proved - it has been now, with all these very different sounds and songs in our ears, but also with our impressions watching the musicians and their enjoyment in bringing the music to life in such a beautiful, moving way – no, there is no doubt about it: music is life.

That is why it is so important to give music to children as well. To instill a fundamental pulse in their hearts from their mother's womb – a rhythm that teaches them to breathe in and out and not to forget the pause! In my family we used to sing a lot; my mother loved folksongs. And this was vital when she drove us four children to my grandparents – so that no one got car-sick she got us to sing the all the pieces in a popular song-book used for youth groups. For example, “Morning on the dewy hill”, or “The monkeys race through the woods”. Singing was a great help....

And when we were staying with grandma, it was part of the going-to-bed ceremony to sing Brahms' Lullaby –

**Antonia Brinkers and piano:** *Guten Abend, gut Nacht* (Good evening, good night)

The line *mit Näglein besteckt* talks of being adorned with small nails, which intrigued me, as a child – they are, of course, aromatic cloves.

*Schließ unter die Decke* (slip under the cover) – I can still feel the heavy featherbeds and smell the freshly mangled bed-linen.

*Morgen früh, wenn Gott will, wirst du wieder geweckt* (Tomorrow morning, if God will, you will be awakened again). Above me hung a painting with a guardian angel – in splendid pink – helping a child over the bridge.

I think that was when I started to have faith. To become religiously musical, as the German saying goes. Beyond profound theological debates and also rather irreverently, God was for me something like a very special member of the family. Someone who loves me and is there – without really being present. Which led to my thinking for a while that my busy father was God. Especially on the rare evenings when *he* sang with us – not very well, but with great feeling. “Sleep, little Princess, go to sleep.” I can still hear him. And I remember my happiness was complete. Enfolded in a greater order that eclipsed any child-like sense of chaos.

Music can reach a deeper layer of our humanity, a dimension of the soul that we do not have in hand or under control. A dimension beyond the text and our intellect, that brings the all-too-often distant God close to my life. And that is why music can really console us. And relieve us. From inconvenient thoughts. Deep despair. Anxieties. Just as the music of a harp helped King Saul to put up with himself a bit better.

Music was for me a key to being near to God. To understand something of God’s way of guiding and blessing us. God is the creator of life, who breathes life into us – so that we breathe God’s Spirit, every child and every older person, and make the world a better place according to the divine will. And so that we sing of the hope that is in us. Notwithstanding...

Notwithstanding the madness abounding in the world. And despite the chaos facing John the Seer in the Book of Revelation. We heard his words a moment ago [Rev 15]. John is struggling with fear, because he sees how the world is threatened by apocalyptic situations. Reports about the Roman Empire in his time, about 100 years A.D., sound to us like a recent news broadcast: they tell of religions and cultures being suppressed in the Middle East, of all places; arbitrary taxation and unjust trading practices; wars and despotic rulers. Sing, says John in response to this hardship, sing the song of the victor. And they stood *“beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands. And they sang the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb: Great and amazing are your deeds, Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, King of the nations!”* (Rev 15:2-3)

An atmosphere of gloom and doom gives rise to resistance and longing, says John. And so, in the midst of disaster, he recalls the song of Moses, taken along through the sea and across the wilderness. *Go down Moses, way down in Israel’s land...*

**Igor Zeller, youth choir and double bass:** *When Israel was in Egypt’s land*

Go! Go through the glassy, transparent sea, that people once imagined to be like a crystal bowl, encompassing the earth. John sees through the crystal sea to the open heavens, and he watches God with this miracle, sees how the sea divides and how those persecuted and oppressed cross the border to the land of freedom.

And I hear John saying to me: Sing, like Moses did! Even if you, like him, are in a dilemma and constantly lose your way. Even if you fail and are tired of all the responsibility. Sing. Not: “The world is tough, the problems are insurmountable, the lack of recognition is frustrating.” But, notwithstanding: “Wonderful are your works, O God. I tell and sing of you and of the hope that you give me.” Sing, because only if we keep the vision alive does it have a chance of becoming reality.

Hence the plea: *Go down, Moses*. What strength lies in this Gospel song! God spell: in the midst of suffering that people put up with or fight, God speaks of Resurrection. Hallelujah! This sung faith is fervent, living, ringing gospel among the Afro-American slaves in the United States of America. Let my people go – over 50 years ago a man in sang “Let my people go” in St. Mary’s Church in East Berlin – close to the Berlin Wall, that was made of anything but glass. Let my people go, this man sang. It was someone much more famous in the United States than Martin Luther, namely Martin Luther King. His song of hope, his dream of a just world is unforgotten and moving to this day. “I have a dream,” he said, that one day my children will be judged not by the color of their skin, but by the quality of their character. And they also sang: “We shall overcome. Black and white together.” We will overcome fear, as well. Injustice. Walls. That may also happen in today’s America, that is so divided and in turmoil.

**Antonia Brinkers and piano:** *Verleih uns Frieden gnädiglich* (Give us peace, merciful God)

And now our old Martin Luther. With his pleading, imploring, singing. Music was life, for him, too. That may be – above all it gave him the strength to resist. The story goes that this sometimes very gloomy, rough-mannered man with his powerful words was another person in music. A gentle person, absorbed in himself and his God, with a music in which his torment ceased and whose gracious God’s presence began. Music stood at the cradle of the Reformation. Finally people could sing the way they liked. Not in Latin but in German. The language of the heart, not of the mind. After all, faith means knowing with the heart.

Music reaches the depths of our being; it is life – even in the face of death. Because it believes in a heaven, that some time, when countless tears have been shed and the raging pain has ebbed, may be bright again. And a tent for all our questioning and moments of desolation. This is hard to believe in the midst of a personal disaster, I quite understand. When we become seriously ill, when our marriage goes on the rocks, when we lose our job or – and I believe that is one of the most terrible things – when we lose a child. Eric Clapton, a gifted blues guitarist, describes that in one of the most touching songs that I know. In 1991 his four-year-old son suffered a fatal accident, falling from the 53<sup>rd</sup> story of a New York sky-scraper. In “Tears to heaven” Clapton gives voice to his grieving in music that is heart-rending, 25 years later. It ends with the words: *Time can bring you down, time can bend your knees. Time can break your heart and have you begging please. Beyond the door there’s peace I’m sure and I know there’ll be no more tears in heaven.*

**Igor Zeller, youth choir and piano:** *Tears in heaven*

*...there’ll be no more tears in heaven.* That is how the Revelation of St John ends as well. And he sees God sitting with us in our huts and in our tower blocks, wiping away all tears. And says: death will be no more, nor suffering nor crying nor pain. Instead, there will be a new heaven and a new earth.

This vision of the future is important for our church and for our world. For me it means: Write new songs. Dare to compose the music of the future. Be the sound of music that moves hearts. Knock down walls. Sing lullabies. Be loud, be soft. Raise your voices, be the “notwithstanding” in this world. Your songs shall cry to heaven and move hearts. You are the sound of the earth.

And the peace of God that passes all understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.