

MOZART, MERTON, & KARL BARTH

A Sermon delivered at
King's Chapel, Boston, Massachusetts
July 1991

by **Carl Scovel**

Karl Barth had a dream. In his dream the old Swiss theologian imagined that he had been asked to examine Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart on his beliefs. Karl Barth had been waiting a long time to do this, in fact, ever since he had read that Mozart once said "Protestantism is all in the head" and, again, "A Protestant will never be able to understand the meaning of 'Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi' (O Lamb of God, who takest away the sins of the world)." Those cracks about Protestants rankled with Barth and he was delighted to have the chance to interrogate their spokesman. In his dream Barth pressed question after question upon Mozart. But Mozart, like Christ before Pilate, never answered one of Barth's questions. And Barth woke up distressed.

Now why should Karl Barth, for forty years Professor of Dogmatic Theology at the University of Basel, and probably the greatest Protestant theologian of the twentieth century, care about the opinions of a long-dead composer, even if he was Mozart? To understand his dream and his anxiety you must first understand Barth's purpose in his work. He was for decades the one theologian to be reckoned with on either side of the Atlantic. From 1930 on he was the intellectual leader of those German Christians who opposed Hitler. Deported to Switzerland in 1936 he continued to write tracts and pamphlets against Hitler and joined the Swiss army as a private once the war began.

"No" was young Barth's favorite word. Whenever he heard someone make divine claims for what seemed to him but earthly power, Barth said "No." Against Nazis, liberals, fundamentalists and any other apologist for transient causes, he said, "God alone is God." Barth spoke for God's forgotten majesty and mystery and power. "If I have a system," he said, "it is limited to a recognition of what Kierkegaard called the 'infinite distinction between' time and eternity." He knew what Isaiah meant when he said, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are my ways your ways; for as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways."

If Barth was critical of others, he was much more critical of himself. He constantly revised his thinking and, although early in his life he affirmed God's majesty, he later affirmed what he

□ **Carl Scovel** is minister of King's Chapel in Boston, Massachusetts, a post he has held for twenty-four years. He is married and has three grown children. He grew up in China (where, he adds, he went to boarding school for two-and-a-half years with Dom Augustine Roberts, O.C.S.O., abbot of St. Joseph's Abbey at Spencer, Massachusetts). Dr. Scovel writes: "I like to hike and bake bread and go on retreats."

called God's humanity. He was wary of disciples and once said, "Thank God, I am not a Barthian." His output was prodigious. His *Church Dogmatics* alone comprises eight thousand pages, or twelve volumes, weighing at least a good fifteen pounds. When someone asked him when he was going to write the thirteenth volume on the end of all things, Barth answered, "God will write that one."

He wrote, in fact, over two hundred books and was a bit embarrassed about it. He said, "The angels laugh at old Karl. They laugh at him because he tries to grasp the truth about God in a book. They laugh because volume follows volume. and each is thicker than its predecessor. As they laugh they say to one another, 'Look, here he comes with his little pushcart full of volumes'." And here's the point. Karl Barth who took theology more seriously than anyone else in his time, Karl Barth who pressed the questions which most of his contemporaries did not know enough to ask, Karl Barth whose life was theology, felt something was missing in his life.

Every morning after breakfast and the newspaper, and before he went into his study to meet students or write lectures, Karl Barth went into his living room, sat down and listened for one hour to recordings of Mozart's music. He explained why in a speech which he made at the Mozart festival in Basel. Addressing the composer, he said:

What I owe you is this: whenever I listen to your music I feel led to the threshold of a world which is good and well-ordered in sunshine and thunderstorm, by day and by night. If a man really digests your musical dialectics he can be young and become old, he can work and relax, he can be gay and depressed, in short he can love . . . There is music which can help one to this end and there is music which cannot. Your music helps.

At another time Barth said that if he ever got to heaven he would ask first about Mozart and only later about Augustine, Calvin, and Schleiermacher. On another occasion he said that when the angels play before God they play only the music of Johann Sebastian Bach, but when they play *en famille* they play Mozart.

Barth's discipleship to Mozart began when he was a child. "One day my father was playing something from Mozart . . . He began a couple of bars from *The Magic Flute* ("Tamino, what happiness"). They went right through me and into me, I don't know how, and I thought 'That's it!'" Mozart became an essential part of his life. He sang arias with friends and played a subdued viola in string quartets. He kept Mozart's picture next to Calvin's in his study and in conversation quoted liberally from the libretto of Mozart's operas. At the Basel bicentenary celebration of Mozart's birth it was Barth who gave the primary address, and once instead of lecturing on the grace of God to his theology class, he had a flute trio play Mozart's music.

The person whom Karl Barth hears in the midst of Mozart's music is what he calls "the divine child." This is strange, of course, because Mozart never had a childhood in any ordinary sense of the word. When he was only three he began of his own accord to learn his sister's lessons on the pianoforte. When he was six he went on his first concert tour with his sister, and when he was seven he began a three-and-a-half year tour, performing in such cities as Munich, Augsburg, Brussels, Paris, Versailles, London, Amsterdam, The Hague, Geneva, Zurich, and Basel. Everywhere he was petted, praised, and adored. The Austrian emperor called him "der kleiner Hexenmeister" (the little magician) and Voltaire exclaimed that he had at last seen a miracle.

During this tour Mozart continued to practice and compose, as well as play, with an intensity which astonished even his severe father. Years later Leopold Mozart wrote to his son:

As a child and boy you were too serious ever to be childish; and when sitting at the harpsichord or doing anything in the way of music, you would not stand a joke from anyone. Indeed, from the precocity of your talent and from the thoughtful expression of your countenance, many people thought you would not live to grow up.

Mozart was stronger than his admirers imagined but his life was hard. His salary was scarcely enough to support him and his family. His wife, Constanza, was often ill. His highest income in a single year was eighty pounds and he often endured insulting treatment from his court employers. He hated to teach but did so for the tuition fees, and he pawned the family silver plate in order to finance his last artistic tour. He died of typhus at the age of thirty-five while trying to finish the *Requiem* and was buried in an unmarked grave. The mourners turned back at the cemetery gate because of a rainstorm.

Yet like his admirer Barth, Mozart left an astonishing legacy to the world: thirteen masses, nineteen operas, thirty-six minuets, forty-one symphonies, seventy-five dances, and ninety-two concertos. He completed a total of 626 works at an age when many composers are just beginning their real work. Small wonder that Tom Lehrer once remarked, "It is sobering to realize that when Mozart was my age he'd been dead for five years." Harry Ellis Dickson of the Boston Symphony says that Mozart is the one composer who makes musicians tremble. And why? "The music of Mozart is exposed, pure, meticulous. No musician can play Mozart without perspiring."

The surprising thing about Mozart is that, although he never had a real childhood and although he had a difficult life as an adult, he was ever debonair. A devotee of billiards, rum punch and dancing, he was always playful, and never more so than when composing. He liked to write music in a roomful of people with someone singing at the piano, children dashing in and out and others bowling on the lawn outside the window. The child who never came to life during childhood was born when he became a man. Only his music grasped him with utter seriousness. As Barth says:

Play too belongs to daily bread. I hear Mozart . . . play as nobody else can play. Yet such playing is so high and serious that it must be mastered, and . . . beautifully playing presumes a childlike knowledge of the center of all things — including the knowledge of their beginning and their end. I hear Mozart make music from this center, from this beginning and from this end.

Barth goes on:

What happens in the center is . . . a splendid annulment of balance, a turn in the strength of which light arises and the shadow winks but does not disappear; happiness outdistances sorrow without extinguishing it, and the 'Yes' rings stronger than the still existing 'No' . . . 'The rays of the sun dispel the night.' That is what you hear at the end of *The Magic Flute*. It is a play in which some Height or Depth is winning or has already won.

But Karl Barth for all of his love of and appreciation for Mozart never quite brought him into his theology. Mozart never answered Barth's questions. He only (*only!*) continued to delight him.

Some ten years after Barth published his speech on Mozart an American monk tucked away in a Trappist abbey in Kentucky read it, and chuckled. Thomas Merton, an English teacher and bright young writer in Manhattan, turned Catholic convert, turned monk, turned novice master, turned sometime hermit but still at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky, Thomas Merton himself the author of some sixty books, and perhaps the most published recluse of the century, read of Barth's daily playing of Mozart and of his dream. He wrote:

Barth is striving to admit that he will be saved more by the Mozart in himself than by his theology. Every day for years Barth played Mozart in the morning . . . unconsciously seeking to awake, perhaps, the hidden Mozart in himself, the central wisdom that comes in tune with divine and cosmic music and is saved by love, yes, even by eros . . .

Mozart who was never allowed to be a child in the literal meaning of the word was always a child, says Merton, "in the higher meaning of the word." And now the monk admonishes the theologian: "Fear not, Karl Barth! Trust in the divine mercy. Your books and mine matter less

than we might think. Though you have grown up to be a theologian, Christ remains a child within you. There is in us a Mozart who will be our salvation.”

These two men, Karl Barth and Thomas Merton, died on the same day, December 10, 1968, just three days after the 173rd anniversary of Mozart’s death. Barth was eighty-two, Merton was fifty-three. I like to think they entered heaven together, laughing, each with his pushcart full of books, knowing that Mozart would greet them, ready to continue the education which he began for them on earth. As we remember these three men and the graceful interplay of their lives, let us pray that our Mozart, the Christ still child within us, may lead us to the serious joy of our life and our eventual fulfillment.