A Song goes around the World

80 Years – Dietrich Bonhoeffer: "By gentle Powers wonderfully sheltered"

A Journey of Discovery with probably the most popular Hymn of our Time

In a letter dated December 19, 1944, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote seven verses to his fiancée and family from the Gestapo's basement prison, which can rightly be described as his last great sermon. According to Wikipedia, the verses have since been set to music over 70 times, and the last verse – in its use as a refrain – established the popularity of the hymn and its diverse use on all kinds of occasions, its rise to the number one requested song among German church hymns, so that we can only speak of a phenomenon here.

The waltz-like rhythm of the most popular melody carried the message of confidence and God's faithfulness to the ends of the earth in countless interpretations and language versions. Many well-known Bonhoeffer experts have commented on these seven verses over the decades: they have expressed their assumptions, written comments, developed a very personal viewpoint on the structure and content, on its circulation as a song, on its message for today.

Why?

So why this compilation now – especially from someone who doesn't have a “big” name? Well, I've come to the conclusion that God himself wants to speak to us personally through these verses, to lead us into a deep fellowship with him. It is my desire to pass on the blessing that I have experienced on my personal journey with this hymn – its message and its melodies – to others and encourage them to start such a journey themselves.

I am grateful for the many different publications on this song, which have been a guide for me with extensive information and tips for my research. However, I owe the most valuable inspiration to the exchange with other "travellers", especially Kurt Grahl. His melody can be found in the Catholic hymnal "Gotteslob".

Not least from this exchange, my melody project grew – the urgent need to place alongside the often only well-known popular melody the many others that "transport" the deep message of the text more seriously, and also the need to carry the complete lyrics out into the world.

The result of my journey can now be experienced by an interactive directory and can be discovered on two playlists on my YouTube channel. The offer now goes far beyond the presentation of the individual melodies and also includes special interpretations, compositions, interviews and video contributions on Dietrich

Bonhoeffer and his thoughts. This collection does not claim to be complete. It is only intended to be an impetus for your own research and discoveries.

Basics

The message of hopeful confidence in dark times and the promise of God's faithfulness, which will carry us through all the highs and lows of life, is what has made the song so popular, but its messages cannot be reduced to a chorus. It is about a journey with various important stops, all of which "breathe" the presence of God. The name Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his fate make these messages credible and thus meet our need for orientation, support and security in the storms of this time.

Before I go into the details, the many puzzle pieces that can be formed into a picture, I want to note for myself that the resulting picture will always remain incomplete and subjective. That is what makes the journey so exciting and, as you recognize it, it becomes more and more detached from the actual textual basis and melody. God himself wants to meet us in and behind the statements of the text, the stations of the path, that probably only someone like Dietrich Bonhoeffer had the strength to walk. In him we meet Christ himself, just as he wants to take shape in us if we trust in him completely. This journey thus points far out into eternity and at the same time back to the source of life.

What gave the Impetus

My personal journey with the hymn began in mid-January 2024 with a copyright complaint from Siegfried Fietz's “Abakus” music publisher. I had published his melody in my own simple piano arrangement for the New Year as a personal greeting on my YouTube channel, with the offer of passing on the sheet music for free. There was also a presentation to sing along to, with appropriately selected photos of my own accompanying the statements in the text. I hadn't thought anything of it, because there were already countless interpretations on YouTube. However, the videos in question were rightly requested to be removed.

It begins to resonate within me

In the days after the turn of the year, we often sang this hymn – usually at the end of the day. A upper voice began to sound within me that was clearly different from the one I knew at the time. When my videos were deleted because of the music publisher's complaint, I put this new “voice” into notes, breaking the waltz-like rhythm of the melody in several places to adapt it to important accents in the text. This gave my melody its own character that stood out from the popular version.

The first real “Encounter” with the Text

I had known this song for decades and had never thought about it before! Even when it came to Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his courageous path, I only knew the "outline".

Now I took a closer look for the first time and was able to adapt the new melody accordingly.

When the music publisher rejected this melody too as being too close to the "original" and threatened legal consequences if it would be published, I was close to giving up. My reference to the many differences was of no use – one could not risk setting a precedent. Was I on the wrong path with my ideas? Should I continue to leave Dietrich Bonhoeffer's text entirely to the melody of Siegfried Fietz, whose music publisher defended it so vehemently as if it were his intellectual property?

A Song of my own and a last Attempt

I was encouraged by my own lyrics to my new melody, written down in 15 minutes, especially in this time of doubt. This song about the confidence and faithfulness of God even in the darkest of times is a "general version" of the prison perspective, which also applies to the many persecuted Christians of our time.

I also wanted – as a last attempt – to free my melody from the 6/8 time, which was the only way it was still so closely linked to the popular version. I had no idea how difficult that would be. The text is so strongly stuck in people's minds with this rhythm, which has been confirmed time and again in surveys of friends and acquaintances.

The Research begins

During my research on the Internet, I came across a study by Dr. Wilhelm Schepping, then a musicologist at the University of Cologne, who had closely studied the hymn and its diverse use at all kinds of family celebrations (baptisms, confirmations, weddings and even funerals). The appropriate verses are chosen depending on the occasion, and the seventh verse is always included as the chorus. Even back then, in 2009, he spoke of a phenomenon – of a song that is alive in its many interpretations – and he extensively examined and evaluated the presence of the song on YouTube in the melody by Siegfried Fietz. I owe this paper my first overview of the stages of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's life. Dr. Schepping's findings also made me curious.

Searching for other Melodies

It was around this time that I began to search for other musical settings on YouTube. I did remember an official melody in the Protestant hymnal (Otto Abel), but it was quite unknown to me and others. Now I heard the melody from the Catholic hymnal "Gotteslob" (Kurt Grahl) for the first time and felt familiar with it! The conflict I found myself in took on a completely new direction.

I had already asked several authorities about the recognition of my melody. Now I came into contact with Kurt Grahl, whom I simply wrote to ask for his assessment of the situation. His first criticism was the misuse of the seventh verse as a chorus and the rhythm of Siegfried Fietz's setting, which is not appropriate for the seriousness of the text. I had not yet thought about many things – it took some time (and emails) to

understand all of this and to take it into account as far as possible in my own melody. I will go into these issues in more detail later.

I just want to say here that the valuable exchange with Kurt Grahl has fundamentally changed my view of the hymn, the depth of its lyrics and the circumstances of its creation. I am so grateful for that and it became my aim to offer the "church" melodies as serious alternatives to the popular version by Siegfried Fietz on YouTube, a path that was increasingly confirmed to be sensible in the lively exchange with Kurt Grahl.

Background Information

I owe my first assessment of the structure of the verses and their content to Jürgen Henkys' detailed commentary on the hymn. In her detailed analysis with many examples of interpretation, Ms. Esther Handschin (Methodist Church of Austria) also reports on the history of the first (incomplete) translation of the text into English and provides valuable information on other melodies that were created specifically for this hymn or are linked to it in the English-speaking world.

An article by Stefan Wieczorek, editor of a German-language magazine in Spain (Costa News), "provided" valuable background information about Dietrich Bonhoeffer's time in Barcelona, as well as the Catalans' relationship to his hymn. He mentioned a translation of the text into Spanish, which prompted further research.

The Melody Project is born

Kurt Grahl allowed me to publish a simple piano arrangement of his melody, which I had made for YouTube for this purpose. I also received permission from the “Merseburger” publishing house, which owns the rights to Otto Abel's tune, to reproduce it as part of this project. The first complete language versions were added: Spanish and Catalan - later presentations with a translation of the complete text into Chinese, which I found on the Internet. It was exciting to follow the hymn to the ends of the earth: South America, China, USA, India, Korea...

The spectrum is also complemented by my own melodies. The focus, however, remains on the textual statements in their various, faceted accents, reflected in melodies by various composers that have been created specifically for this hymn over the years or have been assigned to it from the musical treasure of the centuries.

Many performers around the world had been enthusiastic about passing on this hymn as a message of hope and confidence, especially during the Covid period – but almost always with an incomplete English text and the popular melody. The Melody Project should also be an enrichment for them, because the courage to confess and the message of confidence are so important, especially in countries where Christians are oppressed. The alternative melodies had to be accompanied by a complete translation that would make the content of the text shine. That was the next challenge...

Over time, I have been able to collect interesting videos, interviews and factual information that enrich the Melody Project and provide additional inspiration to dive deeper into the world of thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I do not want to repeat or comment the experts here: I have provided links to the publications that could not be presented as videos on YouTube in the PDF directory.

Interesting Side Paths

The comment from the song review mentioned above had made me suspicious: the first (incomplete) translation into English by F. Pratt Green was assigned an existing melody for the hymn book of the Methodist Church in England (more on this later). So the hymn is still represented in the English-speaking world today with a wide variety of melodies – another exciting side path for the Melody Project, because these "classic" melodies are a good addition to the spectrum and are appropriate as serious alternatives to accompany the text. I was particularly interested in looking at the other songs "linked" to these melodies. They also found their place here, because they also reflect content that played a major role in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's life. I have reproduced those lyrics in the appendix.

And now?

I have collected and sorted as best I could. I have passed on the information that I have received and that has become important to me. I notice again and again how the text works within me, how Dietrich Bonhoeffer's testimony is alive and gains color in mutual exchange. I therefore want to leave the assessment of the various melodies and thoughts to the individual. It's not about me or – generally speaking – about human beliefs, but rather about the fact that God "knocks on everyone's door". And that can be very different.

In any case, I hope with all my heart that “By gentle Powers” not only creates a relaxed atmosphere as a "feel-good song" for all occasions, but also changes us deep inside and reaches the ends of the earth in all its fullness as a valuable testimony of unswerving faith. We owe this to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's legacy and only in this way can it unfold its full power – especially in our time.

I am also grateful for the many personal contacts that have arisen over the months and hope that I can pass on the blessings I have received to others in this way.

Confession

Finally, I want to reproduce here the accompanying text to the impressive organ improvisation by Kurt Grahl (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ofsrc1CIAQ), which aims to show the meaning of the hymn for each individual:

“Through the depths of suffering, Dietrich Bonhoeffer experienced: “God is faithful!” His powerful confession in the final verse of his poem “By gentle Powers” grew within the inhumane treatment of the Nazi dictatorship, but for us must be proved in the

demands of everyday life. This melody takes our hearts with it – into the trials of everyday life, into the storms of life, until we ourselves find peace in God's presence.

Only then, if we do not shy away from this journey into the depths, only then will the melody of hope and confidence be able to develop the power in our lives that only a personal faith relationship with our heavenly Father and our Savior Jesus Christ, tested and strengthened in suffering, can provide. Dietrich Bonhoeffer followed this path to his final goal – there is no shortcut.

“Wonderfully sheltered by good powers” – this is not an experience, to make in waltz time. The peace of God, which far exceeds all human comprehension and which wants to carry us through all the depths of life, cannot be reduced to a “wellness experience” as needed.

Jesus gave his life for our salvation, Dietrich Bonhoeffer died for this confession. God's grace comes at a price, but it is worth it.

God bless you on your journey to life!”

About the Matter

Poem or Song?

Seven numbered verses on increasingly scarce paper as a Christmas greeting for his fiancée and family – what might have been going through Dietrich Bonhoeffer's mind when he wrote these lines? In an interview, it was suggested that because of censorship he had to avoid anything that would arouse suspicion that it could be more than a simple greeting.

Is the text therefore still regarded as a private greeting in the shape of a poem, even though it is so much more? The question of a melody remains unanswered to this day. These considerations lead us to the fact that it begins to resonate within us, that what God wants to tell us through these verses becomes a melody within us, which points us back to the source that we have in common with Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Isn't the fact that the message is so widely spread already a sign of its inherent power? As exciting as the attempt to answer this question is, it is not of decisive importance.

Since Dietrich Bonhoeffer himself did not leave us a melody for his poem, the question of an appropriate setting to music is a topic of discussion, starting with the question of whether these verses, described as a private Christmas greeting, can even be used as a song in public. The pros and cons are documented in detail in various publications. I personally think that there were melodies that could have accompanied Dietrich Bonhoeffer when he wrote them down, since he also got to know church hymns other than German ones during his stays abroad. In any case, the order of the verses was so important to him that he reserved a wide margin for the numbers.

The topic is exciting; looking at the individual melodies not only leads to a deeper understanding of the text but – as already mentioned – also to interesting side paths to hymns with valuable content that fit well into Dietrich Bonhoeffer's world of thought and enrich the topic with valuable ideas. I will go into this in more detail later.

High Demands

According to Wikipedia, there are now over 70 musical versions of the well-known text. And new ones are being added all the time. This is proof of how deeply the song touches the soul – inseparably linked, of course, to the fate of the author and the story of its transmission as a Christmas greeting in the winter of 1944. The text is definitely not "light fare". It is about individual stations on a path that must be endured, as Kurt Grahl once put it. Translating this path into music in a way that is credible and personal is a great challenge for anyone who dares to set it to music.

The melody with its individual “mood arcs” must correspond to the structure of the verses so that the content of the text can be conveyed credibly. While the popular version can use different melodies for the six “present time verses” and the “finale” (as the refrain), a serious musical setting must manage without such recurring “peak spiritual experiences”; it must do justice to the content of all verses. This is not easy, but it is all the more remarkable when it succeeds.

The greatest difficulty is probably to set the emphasis in such a way that it fits the sentence structure of as many stanzas as possible. This is because the emphasis is distributed differently in the individual verses. Incorrect emphasis can easily distort the meaning. There are also major thematic differences that cannot easily be conveyed by a single melody. Compromises are required that can credibly depict both the way of dealing with suffering and the hopeful confidence. Actually, each stanza should have its "own face" ...

Music – Language without Words

A melody must be the direct translation of the text into sounds so that the song forms a real unity – it must translate the message that is to be conveyed into another dimension. While the thought takes shape in the word in order to reach this level again on the "listening" side, it wants to speak directly to the soul through the melody.

That is why it is so important that both "channels" convey the same message and form a unity. This requires a deep understanding of the content, because only when the text comes to life beyond the written word can a melody form in the soul – impulses that really inspire me, but cannot be further elaborated on here.

This excludes inappropriate musical settings as well as “mathematically artistic” variants or melodies that develop such a strong life of their own that the text is no longer recognizable.

Isn't it true that a melody initially reflects the text as it sounds in the soul of the composer? And that's a good thing. Because personal feelings are reflected in the variety of musical settings and styles and encourage dialogue. Some things that sound unusual at first need words to explain.

An additional challenge, however, is to set the spoken word to music in such a simple and credible way that Dietrich Bonhoeffer himself can speak with his message and not primarily create a song with an appropriate melody. The melody of speech with its very own accents is a good starting point. I was recently made aware of this again.

I think both have their place: a melody that "translates" the content of what is being said directly for the soul and one in which the author of the text himself can be heard – which perhaps even helps to sense the prison atmosphere.

By the way: Dr. Wolfgang Huber's biography "On the Way to Freedom" illuminates in detail and impressively Dietrich Bonhoeffer's intense relationship with music. It would have been easy for him to pass on the melody that resonated within him to a text conceived as a song. This would have eliminated a lot of speculation but would also have prevented the variety of emphasis through different interpretations of the text , which makes the hymn alive for us beyond its historical context. In this way it resonates within us in different ways and becomes a personal message through which God himself speaks.

A closer Look to Musical Settings

A melody that wants to make the lyrics of a song shine must place the accents correctly. With regard to this text, I cannot repeat it often enough: Important statements must not be lost in an "upbeat", but must set the right accents as a "drum beat" at the beginning of the bar. Incorrect accents lead you astray and can easily distort the meaning of the lyrics. This topic moves me again and again, as I know from my own experience how big a difference these "little things" make.

The same goes for the rhythm. A "swinging" rhythm for a serious text is not appropriate, even if it boosts popularity in the long term. But yes: if it opens the first door to the central message of "I am with you" as a promise of God's faithfulness into the hearts of those who are not otherwise so close to the faith, that is a certain justification, but it calls for a "big brother" who complements the appearance for the benefit of all.

This also applies to the use of the seventh verse as a chorus. The repeated message of God's faithfulness easily "degrades" the contemporary verses of the harsh everyday prison life to marginal phenomena – the individual stations of the martyrdom are easily pushed into the background by the repeated "Easter message". However, this is probably the reason for the popularity of the hymn with its selection of verses appropriate to the occasion: the promise of God's faithfulness is always there. If you look more closely, you will discover trust in God as the supporting "melody" in the other verses too. Perhaps many people today need this repetition of

the final statement because otherwise they do not recognize what is obvious to others. What would Dietrich Bonhoeffer himself have said about this?

If the core of his sermon on Sunday were to be “whistled in the streets” during the week, he would certainly welcome that, but would then immediately stress that this is only one side of the coin. Only if we keep the memory of the suffering we have experienced within us can we truly appreciate redemption in the long term. The fourth verse expresses this connection in similar words (grateful memory – devotion). Pure speculation? Instead of enjoying a “miracle cure” with limited effect, we should ultimately be fundamentally healed for time and eternity.

Special Interpretations

Many interpretations of the song on YouTube are based on the melody by Siegfried Fietz. Wedding and funeral singers are lining up to use the song for their advertising purposes. During the Covid years, there were particularly many creative ideas for passing on this message of hope and confidence. Who didn't need it back then?

Well-known artists from the Christian music scene also tried their hand at unusual - arrangements. A group called “Glashaus” received praise for their performance of the Fietz melody – this ornate, distorted interpretation is not my taste: *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5kUnxUhgL_A*

Sarah Kaiser sang the song a cappella as a personally accentuated Fietz interpretation in a prison cell similar to the one in which Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote the poem. The video recordings are thought-provoking – the vocal presentation is a matter of taste: *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PEdGWu8BAUA*

Sefora Nelson included the song in her Christmas show with a soulful, "dreamy" melody of her own. She writes: "I gave these well-known verses a new melody when I became newly aware of the deep words while walking alone through the fog." The melody is nice, except that it doesn't fit the lyrics. The video is in stark contrast to Sarah Kaiser's interpretation...

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XOZVHkwqqXc

Special Interpretations from all over the World

The countless interpretations of Siegfried Fietz's melody from all over the world show how deeply the text speaks to people and finds a very personal expression. I have included a few special ones in my playlists.

The music group of a Christian youth movement in India presents the song very simply and convincingly:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K9gwyTGscr0

Classical performance from Korea, sung in German:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7auRNqXGUuq

Touching Chinese choir recording with impressive nature shots:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sQ0gFr-zDIo

A credible interpretation by a band from Peru (in English), which also incorporates the historical context – here the second verse is turned into a chorus and is accompanied by historical images in the finale:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nVH9feUT89g

In a special interpretation by a Chinese choir, the basic melody is suppplemented and interwoven with other well-known melodies and adapted to the text of the individual verses. Siegfried Fietz's melody only forms the framework, but the predominantly dance-like mood seems a little strange to us. Nevertheless, the accompanying Chinese text really appealed to me because it shows how much people there identified with the text:

"This poem was adapted by Teacher Shi Qixuan, a member of the Sound of Comfort group. It retains the original melody of the first and second verses and adds harmonic changes. The third and fourth verses were recreated by Teacher Shi based on the text. The lyrics are "If you give us a heavy cup of bitterness...", the theme melody is changed to a minor key using the original motif. The sound of the minor key makes the emotional development of the song more delicate, allowing more a deeper understanding of "the bitter cup in the heart" and the willingness to accept it, the feeling of being surrounded by the power of good around me, interspersed with a simple, clear and familiar song "God is so good." When we realize that God's power of goodness constantly surrounds us in good times or bad, we can even sincerely say: God is so wonderful. The fifth and sixth stanzas return to the original melody, but with richer harmonic changes. Finally, the melodies "God is so wonderful" and "All the power of goodness" alternate, which are deeply touching. Moved by this, the heart bursts with praise and gratitude."

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ssr5Flk56-Y

A choir from Taiwan presents its own melody on YouTube in the style of old gospel songs, the combination with the lyrics seem quite strange to us. Other cultures have a different understanding of music that we must respect. In any case, the popular melody was not copied here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AVhtAUdDadI

The American church musician Benjamin Brody also presents his own melody in his video on YouTube:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O1VrG9y52Gs

In my opinion, it is a beautiful "romantic" melody, the kind that would be more suitable for a love song. This is just one example of the wide range of melodies that exist.

New Approaches to musical Settings of the Message

The effort to preserve the historical context of the poem's creation has led for many years to the recommendation that the seven verses should not be sung as a hymn at all. Since the publication of Siegfried Fietz's "casual" version and its triumphant run through the world, other aspects should also be considered: Can one reject lively melodies for this text – if the emphasis is placed correctly – from the outset if they credibly sing of God's faithfulness and the joy of a life with Jesus? Couldn't the preservation of his legacy also include testifying to one's confidence in God as joyfully as Dietrich Bonhoeffer himself might do if everything had turned out for the better back then?

An example of this is Hartmut Nitsch's setting from 2022. The accents are correctly placed in this melody and the accompanying text to the video on YouTube explains the background in detail. Here it is no longer Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the prison cell, but the text freed from it that speaks for itself. That is why it can tolerate this joy. It would certainly have been better to find your own words for a song about God's faithfulness – but if you want to pick up the listener from something familiar and take them into a new interpretation, there is probably no other way:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K5XTd387aNU

Reconciling Thoughts

Have I made myself clear enough? Preserving the text in all its depth should not exclude genuine efforts to separate the core messages for our time from the historical context and to "translate" them into the present day with a fresh melody so that they can be experienced in a new way. But as already emphasized: such song versions absolutely need a "big brother" who explains the background...

I really have to overcome myself to allow such thoughts to occur. But I notice that my "journey" with its valuable impulses and encounters leads me back to its starting point in a somewhat reconciled way.

In this sense, the Melody Project can and should also be an incentive for others to dive deeper into the world of thoughts of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, with great benefit for their own path with God.

The individual Melodies

The wide range of alternative melodies is an enrichment for anyone who wants to go on a journey of discovery through the different accents of the text and is open to new impulses. The fact is that the spoken word together with an accompanying melody conveys a much stronger message to our soul than would be possible with letters

alone. The different melodies always bring out different facets of the text. That is what makes the "journey" so exciting.

First of all, we will look at the important German "Church" Melodies with which the poem "Von guten Mächten" was incorporated into the song treasury of the centuries. There are also a few musical settings that were created in different environments. I myself have tried this several times, as others around the world do again and again.

Here I just want to give a brief overview of my incomplete "collection" and allow myself to make a few comments. More information can be found in the texts accompanying the videos on YouTube.

Otto Abel – 1959

This first melody was created to set the 7th verse, which was often spoken as a closing prayer in the "Young Congregation" in East Berlin. The remaining six verses of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's poem only became known later. This helped me to understand the melody. Compared to others, the melody may seem a little strange at first, but later it reveals a simple beauty.

It is an inseparable part of the history of the hymn – as a song of consolation and hope in the GDR – and has its traditional place in the hymnal of the Protestant Church. In 2009, Prof. Dr. Wilhelm Schepping from the University of Cologne wrote the following about the history of this melody in his very interesting (but already incomplete at the time) work "Von guten Mächten - Vertonungen des Dietrich Bonhoeffer-Textes: ihre Bedeutung, Funktion und Reproduktion im christliche Singen unserer Zeit" (Elaboration on the Hymn, its Distribution and Interpretations):

"This poem, which is so significant because of its fateful context, was not set to music until relatively late, and significantly, it was first set in East Berlin – under the dictatorial GDR regime: in 1959, the first version of the melody was created there at the suggestion of the then Protestant cantor and singing director Theophil Rothenberg, after he had experienced that the Protestant youth, who were watched with suspicion by the state and hindered in their activities, liked to recite the seventh verse, which was the only one known at the time, as an evening closing prayer ."

Kurt Grahl – 1976

This beautiful melody is included in the Catholic hymnal "Gotteslob" (No. 430), but is also not unknown outside the Catholic Church. It has become our favorite melody. This expresses the quiet joy that allows God's children to rejoice inwardly, even in difficult situations, giving them peace and security. This melody carries both presence and hopeful confidence within itself, and places the emphasis so well that it does justice to all verses.

The most important thing: the often mentioned “drum beat” at the beginning of the third line, which also indicates the change of perspective in the text. It is also the climax of the melody.

He himself writes about his melody and its creation:

"The melody for the most famous text by the theologian and man of resistance , the Protestant pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, was written in 1976. It was written for a meditation of texts and new compositions. This meditation was under the motto "IN A DIFFERENT LIGHT". This line again comes from a "poem" by the pastor and poet Lothar Zenetti. The third verse reads: "People who live from hope see everything in a different light..."

One of the most impressive, but at the same time most "intimate" texts of hope is that of the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, written, probably not by chance, "at the turn of the year" , full of tenderness for the person most close to him, Maria von Wedemeyer, his fiancée... He writes this greeting in these days when "the sun and the year are turning", when we gratefully leave the old behind us and hopefully await the new. And it is the devotion of a Dietrich Bonhoeffer that, a few years later, led the UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld to say: "Thank you for what has passed, yes to what is to come!"

Back then, in 1976, the last verse, the apocalypse, the lookout for the "new heaven and the new earth", marked the end of a "long (meditation) journey". It was a "refrain" whose verses were also "broken" by a sung text by Lothar Zenetti, entitled "Request while Dying":

"Do not let us fall like the leaves in autumn, don't let us sink into nothingness, into oblivion. Do not let us perish, for you are the Lord... But if you will, then let us fall like the rain on the land. Then let us fall into your hand, for you are the Lord."

The seven verses of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's text are shaped by these thoughts, because "on the path to freedom, death is the greatest celebration." The path that he takes with us, verse by verse, as if it were ever new stages of life, as "stages of knowledge", begins with the source from which our life comes and flows into the sea that will one day receive us again. ... And HE will be EVERYTHING in EVERYTHING.

The song spans an octave. The melody moves within this octave. The octave stands – also in earlier "works" of music history – for the protective hand, for the omnipotence and greatness of God. We are wrapped up in this "outline", we are protected, we can live, move and be ourselves.

Our life begins through "good powers" and after a "long" journey (and this is not a question of lifespan) described in the verses, it returns – transformed – to these "good powers". And we are always safe. Expressing this in the melody was an obligation and a concern and a high goal at the same time."

Kurt Grahl's melody can be found in various versions on my YouTube channel, supplemented by other compositions by him that were written about Dietrich Bonhoeffer over the years – I am grateful for this enrichment.

His organ improvisation on this melody always touches me, because it expresses everything that makes up the "right" life: the security in God, the storms of life that test faith, and the peace that finds space in the soul when, after all these struggles, it comes to rest trustingly in God's hands.

Joseph Gelineau – 1972

This setting was created for the first English translation in 1972. Customer was Erik Routley, who wanted to include this hymn in his ecumenical songbook "Cantate Domino". The accompanying voice somehow reminds me of Gershwin. It is not surprising that this melody did not prevail...

However, it should not be missing here, as it is directly related to the abridged first English translation.

Gottfried Brezger – 2013

Gottfried Brezger is a retired Protestant pastor with experience in church music and has been leading the support group of the “Bonhoeffer House memorial and meeting place” in Berlin since 1998.

His musical setting is important to me because an "insider" has captured his impulses and placed them alongside the existing melodies. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's thoughts touch the soul in very different ways and often bring out very different facets of the text.

He himself explained:

> “A poem of consolation for his closest relatives from the hell of the Gestapo cell – this understanding is the basis of my musical setting. …
>
> In the new setting, I looked for a simple and easy-to-sing melody that follows the emphasis in the text from the first verse. In the tone of a song of consolation, the first line is reminiscent of the sequence of notes from "If you will only let God guide you" and with the turn to the dominant in the last line, the confident hope is sung in all verses. …"

Russell Schulz-Widmar – 2015 (from a Requiem)

I found this beautiful melody on YouTube. It was written by an American composer with German roots. In a very interesting interview he says:

> "...One of my best and most beautiful pieces is a Requiem for choir, organ and 6 instruments, which is now being published. It is 40 minutes long and I wrote it in memory of my father. For it I used the poem “Von guten Mächten” by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. ..."

Herbert G. Hobbs – 2021

I discovered this enrichment for my melody project quite late by accident. It was "hidden" because the translation used for this melody is called "As Powers of Good" and there is only one interpretation on YouTube that presents this combination.

Adriaan C. Schuurman – 1973

A valuable "discovery" for me was the Dutch version of the hymn, which has been in the hymnal since 1973 with a fairly well translated complete text. The melody takes a little getting used to, as it begins with five long notes. This is intended to correspond to the character of the text. The climax of the melody is deliberately the beginning of the fourth line.

Erik Sommer – 1994

This melody is included in the supplementary editions of the hymn books of two countries. The Danish version has a fairly well translated text with all the verses, while the Swedish version has a different order and the third verse is missing.

Erkki Melartin – 1923

With this melody, which actually belonged to a Christmas carol, the hymn has become very popular in Finland. For the 1986 hymnal, the text, which was translated quite freely for a collection of poems and shortened to five verses, was adapted again.

Anders Kronlund – 1983

This melody is contained in the Swedish language hymnal of the Church of Finland, but with a rather loosely transferred text shortened to five verses.

Other musical Settings

Other musical settings are only represented in the melody project with their interpretations on YouTube, partly for legal reasons. It quickly becomes clear that my overview is incomplete and limited. But that also makes it interesting for your own research... Often the song is part of a larger musical work, for example included in an oratorio. It's worth taking a look at the whole thing.

Siegfried Fietz – 1972

In this popular setting, the seventh verse was transfered into a chorus, and it is thanks to this and the swinging rhythm of the 6/8 time that the song has become the most popular hymn of our time – the omission of inappropriate verses makes it universally applicable.

These manipulations and the waltz-like rhythm do not fit with the structure and serious background of the poem, and experts rightly criticize this. But I have also known only this version for several decades and know people who are still not interested in anything else.

In an interview (Andreas Malessa) it was mentioned that the musical “Jesus Christ, Superstar” had just been released at this time, whose Last Supper song has a striking similarity in melody…

Manfred Schlenker – 1989 (Song Motet)

A classic interpretation in which each verse has its own "face" – an attempt to artistically portray the prison situation? I at least recognize in it the inner conflict that Dietrich Bonhoeffer also describes impressively in his poem "Who am I?"

Gerhard Schnitter – 1999

A typical lively melody in the style of the time, but I can't make out any of the text. It emphasizes the end of each line with verve. That's my feeling, but ultimately everyone has to judge for themselves. The seventh verse is inserted at the beginning and after every second stanza.

Matthias Nagel – 2002 (from his Bonhoeffer Oratorio)

The melody is probably only intended as part of the oratorio and not as a standalone piece. It comes across as a simple classical melody, without any distinct "mood arcs". There is hardly any difference between lines 1+2 and lines 3+4. Variety is created by the different singing voices depending on the stanza.

Robert Buckley Farlee – 2006

Written by a Lutheran church musician in the United States, this melody is available on YouTube both as a solemn version and in a chilling modern version that completely ignores the lyrics:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nZx04qVUiaw

The "modernized" version is given here only as a negative extreme ...

Lucio Mosè Benaglia – 2014

Playful classical melody, well presented, but I can't see any connection to the text. Just my impression? Feelings can be so different...

Hartmut Nitsch – 2022

In this “cheerful” version, selected verses are taken out of their historical context and credibly “transported” into our time. Is that acceptable? I now think that there is also another level of seeing the text and passing it on when – as here – the historical

background is described in the accompanying text and the listener is invited to a journey through life with God.

Own Melodies – 2024

1st Since my first melody was created with Siegfried Fietz's melody in mind, it also has an extra melody for the seventh verse. It was only after switching to 4/4 time that it was no longer considered too similar. The original version is still preserved as a variant in my song "Deine Liebe sprengt die stärksten Kerkermauern" (Your love breaks down the strongest prison walls). In the sing-along presentation, the seventh verse is only inserted after every second stanza.

1a "Melody Project D Major": During our short vacation in the Algarve in March 2024, I had the idea of combining this melody with those of Otto Abel and Kurt Grahl in order to make the song's statements more varied and more apt. This turned the song into a kind of dialogue… We often sang it together like that, also to get to know the "church" melodies a little better.

2nd Shortly before Easter, a melody came to life that contains elements of the chorale "Praise the Lord, all who honor him" – as a reference to the hymns of Paul Gerhardt and his thoughts that accompanied Dietrich Bonhoeffer during his time in captivity. This then developed into a version of the hymn in which each verse has its own character in adaptation to the text.

3. Recently, I was interested in creating a quiet musical setting that is based on the melody of the spoken word, as Gottfried Brezger did in his own way.

While it was first important to me to get my own interpretations accepted, I now see these alternatives simply as a supplement to what already exists, as a subjective expression of my feelings that can serve to enrichment, because the text sounds different in each one.

Assigned Melodies

In the English-speaking world, it is common practice to assign an existing melody to a text. This began in England with the melody "Intercessor" by Charles Hubert Hastings Parry. Other melodies create a connection to the Geneva Psalms and other historical models.

Unlike with the classic hymns in Germany, the meter used here is quite common. It is also interesting to take a look at the texts to which these melodies were originally written. Is it just a coincidence that there is often also a connection to the content of these hymns?

The following melodies are listed here as examples because they have been directly assigned to the text in the hymnals of various countries or there are corresponding interpretations on YouTube that present these melodies – unfortunately often with incomplete text.

The melody from "Finlandia" by Sibelius is particularly interesting, as this melody is also linked to other hymns that fit very well with Dietrich Bonhoeffer's world of thought (ecumenism, personal discipleship and devotion) and were also written and sung in his time.

Did this melody accompany him when he wrote his poem? An excursion to these hymns takes you deeper and enriches the picture in any case. For this reason, German translations have also been created for some of them, which now also complement the offering on YouTube. The English lyrics are reproduced in the appendix.

“Donne Secours” (Geneva Psalms XII), Louis Bourgeois – 1551

“Lord, help us,” is how the text to this melody begins. Psalm 12 describes how to deal with the reign of terror and is titled “Lamentation over the power of evil” in the Luther translation. It is also worth taking a look at Psalm 10 – an astonishingly accurate description of the time.

“O Quanta Qualia”, Paris Antiphoner – 1681

This melody was originally used to set a poem by Peter Abelard from the 12th century, which describes in Latin the longing for the heavenly Jerusalem.

Peter Abelard's life story is also interesting.

“Finlandia”, Jean Sibelius – 1899

This hymn from the symphonic poem Finlandia is interesting for several reasons: Finlandia describes the Finnish people's longing for liberation from Russian occupation. With the Finnish text, this melody is considered a secret national anthem.

The melody is closely linked to the hymn "Be still, my soul," which describes security in God – despite all the adversities of life – with a view to eternity. The original German text by Catharina von Schlegel from the 17th century became known in the English version, which was not written until 100 years later, through its connection with this melody.

The Finlandia hymn is also part of the hymn "This is my Song," which expresses the longing for peace among the nations, knowing that only God can give it. The hymn was published in 1934, the same year that the ecumenical youth conference was held on the Danish island of Fanø under the leadership of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I think the hymn was sung there too.

The fourth text to this melody is "Stjernesangen" (Star Song) by the Norwegian Salvation Army general Henry A. Tandberg, who received permission to use the melody from Sibelius himself. It is about the heavenly reward for a life of following Jesus.

"Intercessor", Charles Hubert Hastings Parry – 1904

This melody, which was chosen for the first English translation, was created for the hymn "O Word of Pity," which vividly describes Jesus Christ and his suffering and calls us to follow him. (Advocate) It therefore fits the text quite well in terms of content.

"Highwood", Richard Runciman Terry – 1912

I included this hopeful melody – originally written for a wedding song – in the project because it was listed in an Australian hymnal. It becomes clear here that beautiful melodies in the right meter do not necessarily meet the requirements of the text. I found a larger selection of more suitable melodies in the American song database "Cyber Hymnal" (highly recommended) and presented them in a separate video.

The Text – Structure

Song or Poem?

Seven numbered rhyming verses at the end of the Christmas letter of December 19, 1944. Were they intended as a song? In any case, the numbering and thus the order of the verses was so important to Dietrich Bonhoeffer that he dedicated a wide margin to the numbers – only as the space on the sheet became tight did it become narrower and then had to be omitted entirely: stations on a journey that begins with protection from good powers on the outside and finally arrives at being safe, resting in these good powers. Thus the six stages with their different aspects lead to the seventh verse, which points to the future for all of us and concludes this last great sermon with a faithful "finale".

Dietrich Bonhoeffer consciously accepted that the verse form and rhyme set limits on the choice of expression. Or was it also a gift for him to simply write down what would one day go around the world as a message of hope and confidence?

Text Structure

It is important to recognize that the first and second, as well as the third and fourth lines of each stanza form a unit – often closely linked to each other through the sentence structure. The first half describes a situation from the past, present or future; with the beginning of the third line, the perspective changes and a decision is

made that sees the future in the light of God and takes His possibilities into account. The first word of the third line indicates the direction.

After recognizing these regularities in the structure – the "eye-opener" for me was Kurt Grahl's setting – the "drum beat" at the beginning of the third line and the confident change of perspective became the most important criteria for me when assessing a melody. Depending on the emphasis on the first word, different accents arise in the following text. Incorrect emphasis distorts and misrepresents the meaning.

Almost all melodies contain this "division" to a greater or lesser extent. However, where this structure is not reflected in the melody and the right accents are not set, the all-important change of perspective cannot be brought to the fore and is sometimes not even recognized. This will be explained in more detail later when we discuss the verses...

Two verses can also be seen as a thematic unit and are also connected to each other through the wording. 1 - 2: situations of the past**,** present and future (experience); 3 - 4: struggle in Gethsemane, longing for freedom, undivided devotion (being); 5 - 6: living in God's light in this world, looking up into the eternal world and its sounds (expectation). The seventh verse tells of arriving in God's rest and opens up a view of heaven for all of us with its faithful promise of security and the presence of God beyond this life.

Journey with important Stops

The seven verses are a path with individual “stations”, which are intended and should be respected in this order. They are stops with different aspects and all of them are important in order to really reach the destination of the journey. Anyone who makes a subjective selection here or destroys this connection by omitting individual verses turns a confession in difficult times into a "mood song" about God's faithfulness. The fact that Bible verses are widely treated in this way cannot be an excuse. In any case, a personal selection should always be accompanied by a view of the whole.

The first manipulation of the text occurred during the translation into English, as an ecumenical songbook specified the order 7 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 6. "New Year" (1) and "Christmas" (5) were deleted and the "finale" was moved to the beginning. But the omitted verses contain so much more! The fatal thing is that this trimmed translation is still in use in the English-speaking world today. More on that later. Enough has already been said about the misuse of the seventh verse as a refrain when discussing musical settings. I therefore don't need to repeat it here.

The hymn in printed form should therefore in any case preserve all the steps of the “journey” in their order, while the transmission in acoustic form may leave room for interpretation, which should, however, be clearly justified in the event of changed order or selection of verses and supplemented by a view of the whole.

The Text – Contents

Text Comprehension and Definition

The big issue that needs to be clarified before examining the text in detail is the question of the “good powers” that protect the statements in the text like a surrounding bracket. The discussion about this also shows how alive this text is even today, 80 years later.

It is not only in his Christmas letter that Dietrich Bonhoeffer affirms how real his family and memories of times gone by are to him, so that he does not feel lonely. The care of his loved ones gives him strength. Then again he refers to the protection of angels and recalls a children's song, most recently set to music by Engelbert Humperdinck: *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IRLerxIXwPo* Can there be a better description of childlike trust?

Ultimately, what is meant is certainly the work of God, which we encounter in our lives in many different forms, just as we are called to be ambassadors of Jesus in this world – which does not exclude the supernatural intervention of God in our circumstances.

God alone is good: how he meets us and brings peace to our souls, even in the face of evil, is something we can confidently leave to him. That is calm in the storm and light in the darkest night. Where the evil powers still loudly raise their voices, the good powers already proclaim freedom and victory through their presence – not necessarily for this life, but certainly for eternity.

However, the term "good powers" is also often used by esoterics who want to separate it from the biblical image of God and the statements of Jesus. Sects use this expression to pass on their message under the name Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

The very framework of these good powers makes it clear that this is a path with individual stops that Dietrich Bonhoeffer consciously walks with us. The protective wall as the surrounding bulwark against evil becomes, over the course of the journey, the place of refuge for the soul, with perspectives that also want to help others on their journey through time.

But it is not the case that Dietrich Bonhoeffer only understood this when he wrote down the verses – he wants to take us along on his journey, beyond his family, so that we can reach our destination with him and not perish in the darkness along the way. That is why this sermon is written with its impressive stations.

Firm trust in God is the central point in every verse, and the proclamation of God's unconditional faithfulness in the seventh verse is "only" the finale. For those who cannot recognize this, however, the continuous, supporting "melody" could be made clearer by inserting the seventh verse as a chorus. This aspect would partially excuse its misuse.

Already in the sixth verse, external silence prepares us for silence in God, in the "peace that surpasses all human understanding," so that the "ears of the heart" are ready to hear the hymns of praise from the eternal world. Is it a coincidence that I am now thinking of Stephen, who saw heaven open when he was stoned?

So it cannot be a frightening silence, which is spoken of in the sixth verse: Where God's peace spreads, it broadens our horizons and we immerse ourselves in another dimension of existence. And that is also what this hymn wants to give us: preserving the past, but already sensing the future in the now.

Evening and morning – a pair of terms from the story of creation: That includes the night and with it all human experience with its highs and lows. This opens the door to a better world and helps us to rejoice in the new day even in the darkness. This light drives away the shadows of the past, the darkness of the present and allows us to look brightly into the future.

No, it is not just a song with a catchy chorus to a lively melody! The testimony of Dietrich Bonhoeffer is an impressive sermon about the power of a living relationship with our Creator, who in Jesus went all the way to the cross for us. How could consistent discipleship be described more impressively?

My journey with this hymn is far from over. The many letters that Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote from prison provide exciting insights into his thinking, and the biographies have different focuses. I am excited about the additional pieces of the puzzle and the picture that can emerge ever more clearly.

Impulses instead of Commentary

Much has already been said about the content of the poem and the meaning of the individual stanzas. Jürgen Henkys' detailed commentary on the hymn was a first guide for me. There are song descriptions with valuable ideas, theological studies and biographies that address this topic.

Everyone can go on a research, as I did. It is important that the text comes alive in us and unfolds its power where, deep within us, the questions about God, our relationship with him – his work in the world and in our personal lives – are seeking answers.

Following in the footsteps of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, we discover a treasure trove of personal insights that go far beyond the intellectual understanding of the phrases. This is how the word wants to work in us and meet us personally.

At least that's what happened to my wife and me when we were looking for the right terms for a new translation into English. So I would like to add my (incomplete) comments on the text content here , deliberately placing them in this context and having them understood as a personal impulse.

Translations into English

The history of translations began with the intention of making the text for a songbook a little more “handy”. This has had consequences that continue to this day. A good insight into this is provided by the detailed description of the hymn by Esther Handschin (Methodist Church of Austria), so I would like to quote the relevant section here:

"Fred Pratt Green (1903-2000), Methodist pastor and superintendent in England, translated Bonhoeffer's text into English in 1972. He was commissioned to do this by Erik Routley (1917-1982), who wanted this hymn with five verses to be included in the ecumenical songbook “Cantate Domino” (1974). There it was published with a melody by Joseph Gelineau (1920-2008), which he had composed especially for it. This melody has remained largely unknown. Gelineau became known primarily for his new forms of psalmody, such as Psalm 23 in English.

Fred Pratt Green also had the traditional text version and not the original for his translation. For the songbook “Cantate Domino”, the verses were selected in the order 7.2.3.4.6. In order to make the transition from verse 7 to verse 2 easier, a small change in the spelling was made: instead of “das alte ” – where the “old” referred to the year that was coming to an end – they wrote “das Alte” starting with a capitol letter. The old year thus became the old enemy, the devil, and Green translated it as follows: “Yet is this heart by its old foe tormented, still evil days bring burdens hard to bear …” Despite advice and the translator’s request to only use a corrected version, the problematic first version continued to spread."

This translation was later adapted by Keith Clements. In addition to a few expressions that were intended to make the text more understandable, the "without trembling" in the third verse was changed to "though with trembling". Dietrich Bonhoeffer's great devotion was probably considered too unrealistic...

Another translation was done by Ulrich Schaffer. It was written for the musical setting by Siegfried Fietz, the year given for it is 1990. The fifth and sixth verses are missing here. It too has become widely known through its melody and probably served as a template for other incomplete language versions.

Abbreviated Translations = incomplete Message

From the very beginning, the abridged translations into English meant that Dietrich Bonhoeffer's message was only partially and partly distorted when it was sent out into the world. There were also several private translations, but they were not particularly convincing. Some terms had not been adequately examined, giving rise to misunderstandings and sometimes even distorting the facts. But a message can only unfold its full power if it is passed on in all its fullness!

After a long search for a really suitable translation was unsuccessful, we set about the task of taking the templates we knew into account word for word in order to create something new. Adopting an existing translation would not have been advisable for legal reasons alone...

An own Attempt

When we attempted this task at the beginning of February 2024, we tested the result by singing along to our favorite melody, Kurt Grahl's tune. At the time, conformity to the meter 11.10.11.10 was not my top priority, so some of our lines have one more syllable. The meaning of the terms (as we understand them) was more important to us than the rhyme, a harmonious speech melody more important than the perfect number of syllables.

Did we choose the right words? Did we understand the German text correctly – did we interpret what was said correctly? Did we live up to the great responsibility of ensuring that such a text shines in translation and can unfold its power? We did not take the choice of terms lightly, but we documented them in a way that is understandable for ourselves and others.

Basics: Translation / Transfer

When translating or transferring the text into another language, special care is required. The result must be more than a copy of the written words in a singable language; it must capture the thoughts that formed the words, the beauty of the images, the power of their essence.

While the German text is fixed, a translation can look deeper, has to search for the right terms by grasping the thoughts in order to bring to life the images that want to be expressed in the nuances of a language. Here, the deeper meaning counts more than mathematical accuracy. To understand this better, it helps to look at the structure of the individual verses:

All seven verses contain a description of the circumstances in the first two lines (I have already mentioned this), objectively describing a situation from the past, present or future – the second half consists of a proclamation of living faith: a request or decision and its consequences. This requires – and a comparison of the melodies has clearly shown this – a "drum beat" at the beginning of the third line, because this is where the perspective for what is to come is decided. The translation or transfer must take this structure into account – this is the only way the message can not only be heard but also understood.

A transmission focuses more on the meaning of terms, paying more attention to the context of words and their meaning. Since the German text was cast in a meter by Dietrich Bonhoeffer himself, and the number of syllables and the rhyme set limits to his choice of words, the meaning behind it should guide us in creating this image in other languages. His images behind what is said, which sometimes help the soul to understand, can then shine even more brightly, and his sermon can reach hearts even more directly. Because the focus is on the proclamation of the gospel – so the choice of words is both an opportunity and a responsibility.

Requirements for Content and Source

What has been said about "picking out" verses that are sung together with the 7th verse, misused as a refrain, at all kinds of family celebrations must apply even more to the reproduction of the text in other languages, because the German original is usually unknown then. Therefore, the translation must be complete and come from a trustworthy source.

There are incomplete foreign language texts that seem to have been put together arbitrarily or whose statements have been distorted or added with the "best of intentions". The term "good powers", for example, is also used to pass on esoteric ideas. Sects enrich the verses with their vocabulary and thus misuse Dietrich Bonhoeffer's ideas for their worldview (example: Christian Science).

Path and Destination: The Message for the World

Translations for completely different cultures, on the other hand, may require different "images" to make the context understandable. The difference is not always clear. I read an article about the translation work of a team of pastors in China who considered the original so important that language experts worked with great dedication to create a new translation directly from German in order to reach from Hong Kong or Taiwan the communist-dominated population of China. The gospel in songs is probably the best way to overcome the barriers that prevent access to the spoken word.

Especially in countries where Christians suffer persecution (the “Open Doors” aid organization is a good source of information), Dietrich Bonhoeffer's fate is a similar daily reality and his message is therefore so important. We must think of these brothers and sisters and not withhold from them anything that Dietrich Bonhoeffer left us in his poem.

The fact that New Year’s and Christmas verses are simply “deleted” just because the time-bound occasion seems inappropriate should make us think, because these verses are so much more than just a greeting for the New Year! Both are messages that are also relevant for us today.

The first verse is not just about the longing for a common path despite physical separation – the first two lines describe the exact opposite of everyday prison life: God's experienced response to external circumstances.

The light in the fifth verse is not just candlelight at Christmas – it is God’s light that breaks into the deepest night of human suffering and thus penetrates and transforms even the darkness.

The "Gethsemane verse" with its important statements is often left out because it often does not fit the occasion for which the hymn is being sung. However, even in the German text it seems incomprehensible in some places due to the wrong emphasis: If God allows suffering in our lives, then he also gives us the strength to get

through these times. This requires a deep, trusting relationship with our Creator, a willingness to really accept everything from his hand.

Comparing leads to Depth

Comparing existing translations and carefully selecting terms also have a completely different effect. Both inevitably lead to a deeper understanding of contexts, opening the eyes to alternative perspectives and nuances, just as the accentuations in the various melodies do in their own way. For legal reasons, only the Internet links to existing publications of these texts are given below:

I only recently discovered the official translation of the poem from the English complete works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. It is a good benchmark for comparison and for checking your own choice of words. It is also perfectly written in verse meter and is therefore good for singing. It is quoted here:
https://mypastoralponderings.com/2020/12/30/by-powers-of-good-so-wondrously-protected/

In two other versions the lines even rhyme:

https://bonhoefferblog.wordpress.com/2008/04/04/more-on-dietrich-bonhoeffers-poetry/

https://hymnary.org/text/as_powers_of_good_so_wonderfully

Everyone has to decide for themselves whether and how this has affected the message of the text. Was more attention paid to the external form than to the content? The selection of terms is sometimes a difficult matter. They not only have to be appropriate but also understandable.

This brings us to the topic of communication, which sees the choice of words as a bridge to the other person. What is the use of the perfect choice of words on the sender's side if the recipient cannot understand the meaning? To conclude, I would like to say once again that I am happy about the additional impulses that arise from comparing different terms. That is what makes the topic so exciting and also the exchange about the German text "multi-voiced" and lively.

The good Powers: The Title Theme

I only found some of the lyrics or interpretations of the hymn with English lyrics by chance. This is because it is called differently depending on the translation: “By gracious Powers”, “By gentle Powers”, “As Powers of Good”. Other translations even use the term “forces”.

The nuances are immediately apparent when comparing the different translations of "powers" – anyone who makes a well-considered decision here will also sense the correct terms in the rest of the text. "Forces" or "powers" – what is the difference between power and strength? It is not the effects of force that are at issue here, but rather authorities, which are not shown in the exercise of power through the use of violence, but in the protective preservation through their absolute authority.

Powers that surround us – not like a group of strong friends, but like a protective wall against evil itself. "Force", on the other hand, is a power whose strength only unfolds in the use of violence. In the text, however, it is those who represent God's power and whose tangible presence already conveys security. The "good" refers to the one whom Jesus describes as "the only good". Security in God is thus the source and goal.

Enough to simply translate the German "gut" as "good" to describe their nature? The terms "gracious" and "gentle" from the well-known translations are more helpful here. What is the difference? For me, "gracious" describes a characteristic that can only be attributed to God, whereas "gentle" in combination with "power" embodies the power of authority, which is particularly evident in gentleness.

This is Jesus bending down to wash his friends' feet. This is the lion and the lamb (as an outline of Jesus' personality), an apparent contradiction that is also expressed in the life and demeanor of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He lived it, this transformed life, took up the cross for Jesus' sake. The harmony with the "good powers" that carried him through the described stations of his suffering gave him the necessary strength to do so.

In addition to the "good powers," it is the perceived real presence of his fiancée and his family, their support of his fate in prayer, what gives him strength in his situation and should not be underestimated – especially since he himself refers to this in detail in his letter. God encounters us in many different ways.

So we finally decided on the term “gentle powers” and mentioned the grace that stretches like an umbrella over everything in the second line.

With the official translation we get problems with the “sentence melody”. In order to integrate the "Powers of Good" of the direct translation into a melody, "Powers" has to be shortened to a single syllable. That is why this formulation is out of the question for me for this most important term in the text.

On the Choice of Terms

Just as in the German language we have to carefully select the term that best describes the nuances, we have to be sure that we hit the right "frequency" on the "receiver side" so that the message is received undistorted. This requires a feeling for language that must first recognize the thoughts behind the written word and then the effect of the choice of words on the recipient.

What use is mathematical precision in transmission if the content is not understood because the choice of words does not correspond to common usage? A feeling for language is needed that makes one sensitive to the different nuances.

I think everyone sees the text in a very personal way, comes from a different direction and has a different perspective that guides their choice of words. Therefore, the only thing that can be a touchstone is the message that comes across when reading, singing and listening.

The word is only the shell of the thought that needs to be passed on: the Word of Life that took shape in the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. So the struggle to find the right words remains merely an attempt in which we are dependent on help and knowledge.

An exchange is helpful and valuable: the discussion of the terms that can be found in other translations, the enrichment provided by digital translation aids and, last but not least, the exchange between people who are close to one another. Most importantly, however, is the spiritual harmony with the person who put the thoughts into words and the one who guided his hand in doing so.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's roots in the images of biblical thought are also significant. Despite the opportunity to express this more clearly in the choice of terms in English, the personal signature of the original must not be lost. Achieving this is a high goal, a standard that no translation can meet 100 percent. Ultimately, God as the source and goal must open our ears; we can only make our small contribution to this...

As I have already mentioned, we only got to know the official translation when we had already finished our version. This translation is the high standard for assessing our attempt to give the text an authentic face. If we had known it beforehand, we would not have dared to do this work.

In retrospect, however, I am grateful for it, because we became aware of many of the subtleties in the text when we were looking for the right terms. Here are a few comments that were important to me:

"Glimpses" in the Text

1

Von guten Mächten treu und still umgeben,
behütet und getröstet wunderbar, –

By gentle Powers faithfully surrounded
protected wondrously, consoled by grace, –

The "good powers": I have already reported in detail on the choice of this term from the first and seventh verses, which encloses the individual stages of the journey like a bracket (this comparison can be found in several publications). The first two lines describe the experience of these good powers as protection from the outside, which gives the soul peace; in the seventh verse they are the place of refuge par excellence.

The German word "wunderbar" takes on a new dimension on the way to the seventh verse: at the beginning it describes the ongoing work of these powers, at the end their nature. So different terms are needed to reflect these nuances. Here it is "wondrously" in the first verse and "wonderfully" in the seventh verse.

The German "still", normally translated as "quiet", would lead us astray here. Instead, the wording "by grace" allows us to refer to God, whose authority stands behind the good powers. This is the grace that provides peace and security even in the strongest storm.

In these first two lines, Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes the exact opposite of the bitter prison reality that surrounds him – for him, the invisible reality of God is the stronger source of strength from which he lives. In his letters, he repeatedly expresses concern for the well-being of his loved ones, apologizes for causing them grief, and feels closely connected to them despite being separated. He lives from this strength and wishes the same for them.

so will ich diese Tage mit euch leben
und mit euch gehen in ein neues Jahr;

that's how I long to live these days together,
close by your side, to start the coming year;

The stressed "so" at the beginning of the third line refers to what was said before (under God's protection). The convenient translation with the English "so" is not only too short but – in combination with incorrect emphasis – creates room for misinterpretation.

The German "will" could mean the stronger "möchte", but here it is about the longing for togetherness despite physical separation. The English "will", on the other hand, would completely "obscure" the situation, because it can also be equated with the German "werde" (future tense).

Living with you: The official translation adds the term "in spirit" here. This excludes the longing for personal togetherness and reduces the wish to experience the days in harmony with one another. This is certainly a comprehensible interpretation that is realistic in relation to the situation. The wording "close by your side" in our version leaves this open – it is also used where it is about supporting one another despite physical separation. What is more in line with the "soul" of what was said? Despite initial reservations, I have left it in our translation.

Of course: The "these days" is due to the reason for the letter, which was written shortly before Christmas and had the specific turn of the year in mind. This is what makes the song so popular as a New Year's greeting (if you delete a few other verses) and has led to a "stripped down" version in songbooks and on recordings that omits important parts of the message because this verse is then omitted.

But: This is about getting through the oppressive reality of the present together in peace and under God's protection. And that is not tied to a change of year. And: The view into the future opens up to a new year at any time. The term "coming year" is not so situation-related and allows the actual idea to be better understood. Birthday wishes are also about a new year...

For this reason and for reasons of singability, I decided against the word "new" here. Overall, however, the focus here is not on the "new year" or "going into a new year", but rather on being with loved ones during these important days of the year. This clarification was worth a few extra syllables to me.

2

noch will das alte unsre Herzen quälen,
  noch drückt uns böser Tage schwere Last,

our hearts are tortured even now by evil days,
  the burdens of the past are hard to bear,

This verse is to be seen in connection with the previous one – that is now common knowledge. The "old" refers to the past year or the past time, with all the painful experiences. But behind it is the eternal adversary of God, who manifests himself here. In this respect, the previous translations are not so wrong...

For me, the word “tortured” makes this being tormented more tangible than any other term, especially since it is similar to the German word “Tortur”. Dietrich Bonhoeffer emphasizes the word "noch" (still) at the beginning of those lines. Inwardly, despite his circumstances (even now), he seems to already feel the freedom that he subsequently asks God for.

Ach Herr, gib unsern aufgeschreckten Seelen
  das Heil, für das Du uns geschaffen hast.

Oh Lord, grant our scared souls the salvation,
  therefore You have created us and saved.

At the beginning of the third line, the perspective changes: the view of the present (horizontal level) leads to a cry to God, who alone can meet this need. The "grant" goes beyond a simple "give": it not only expresses a wish, but also submits to God's authority. Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds God here of the salvation that Jesus has already achieved for us through his death on the cross, for a redeemed life here and even more so in the eternal world. He longs for it to break through and put an end to the dark times.

Is there a word that describes "horrifying" more vividly than the word "scared"? It is the shock at the unfathomable suffering that Hitler and his followers brought upon Germany and the world, at the cruelty with which we encounter evil itself. The word "anxious" would be far too weak for that.

Two terms with different emphases provide additional orientation: "salvation from" and "created for" as the final destination. Even if we, as children of God, are on the side of the victor, we are not protected from the battles that rage in this world. This

makes the cry for a salvation that already brings peace all the more understandable. Other translations lead us down strange paths in these two lines...

3

Und reichst du uns den schweren Kelch, den bitter'n,
des Leids, gefüllt bis an den höchsten Rand,

And if you pass the heavy cup of suffering,
the bitter chalice, filled to the highest brim,

This important verse raises a number of questions. A translation must take this into account, as the meaning of the German text can be distorted by incorrect emphasis in the melody. Here too, the first word of the third line is important and determines the perspective: If it is God who is making us suffer, then we can accept it from his hands, because he goes with us through these dark times and gives us the strength to do so.

No, we don't have to say "thank you" for the misfortune that befalls us or even accept it as a "gift". The word at the beginning of the verse, often translated as "when", means "if" here. The bitter cup is not necessarily intended for our lives, but it can be our destiny so that blessings can unfold.

The "reichen" (pass) in the German text is not a simple "geben" (give) but a personal "übergeben" (hand over). It is the cup of Jesus that he passes on to his followers. Dietrich Bonhoeffer simply wants to affirm here what he has always lived: the willingness to take up the cross of Jesus.

so nehmen wir ihn dankbar ohne Zittern
aus Deiner guten und geliebten Hand.

then we will take it, grateful without trembling
out of your good and so beloved hand.

Those who speak of "thankful" here are referring to Paul's command, which he wrote down in his first letter to the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 5:18): "Be thankful in everything, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you..."

If you are familiar with Paul's life, you sense that this kind of gratitude can only arise from a purified relationship with God, tested by suffering. Even Jesus did not look forward to the bitter cup in Gethsemane. Left alone in the darkness with the burden of our guilt!

Does Dietrich Bonhoeffer want to encourage himself and his loved ones here, or - does he perhaps overestimate himself by even ruling out "trembling"? I think not: He has experienced it often enough, this inner strength that the Holy Spirit gives when it matters.

Here he once again relies on the Giver, his love and his strength. And: Jesus was all alone in prayer at that time, not even his disciples stayed awake with him. But Dietrich Bonhoeffer knows that he is supported by Christ, who went before him through the suffering of the world.

4

Doch willst Du uns noch einmal Freude schenken
an dieser Welt und ihrer Sonne Glanz,

But if You will grant us once more the joy to see
this world, the splendor of its beaming sun,

The willingness to take even the bitterest cup from God's hand also allows for desires in the second section of this topic, which is about the depth of the relationship with God. The connection between verses 3 and 4 is linguistically established by the "yet" (but).

The longing for the world outside the prison walls breaks through, and the "grant" expresses humble submission to God's sovereign will. Here, too, it is clear that Dietrich Bonhoeffer knows that his life is completely in God's hands.

The luminosity of the sun is given two attributes here: the "splendor" in all its fullness (doesn't that sound like the lavish "generous"?) and the rays that reach and transform even the smallest corner.

dann woll'n wir des Vergangenen gedenken,
und dann gehört Dir unser Leben ganz.

then we will surely remember all the past
and our whole lives will be yours alone.

And then shaping the future from memory – the translations put different emphasis on this. It is about undivided devotion, which is only possible when the souls are freed from the "spider web" of terror and have found complete rest in God's presence.

The "if - then" was formulated in a situation in which – from a human perspective – there was no hope left. And yet Dietrich Bonhoeffer believes that his God can do the impossible.

5

Lass warm und hell die Kerzen heute flammen,
die Du in unsre Dunkelheit gebracht,

Let warm and bright the candles' flames light up today,
which You have brought in our gloomy times,

Of course, the reason for the letter is the "introduction" to the topic. Only at Christmas time was Dietrich Bonhoeffer temporarily permitted to make contact with the world outside the prison walls, despite the harsh conditions of imprisonment, and the iron grip of the power apparatus allowed him a brief respite.

To reduce this verse to Christmas is far too simplistic. The bright, warm glow of the candles underlines the power of even the smallest flame to break through the darkness – its appearance changes everything in an instant, regardless of the intensity of the light.

Warm light – fire instead of a "refrigerator atmosphere". In "today" it should also be present in our lives, in every season - and everywhere, not just in prison. And it is God himself who brings the light, the candles are just the "hook" for this image. He not only brings it into the prison cell, but lets it shine there, is himself the light. This is how Dietrich Bonhoeffer experiences God's presence in a dark, cold environment.

The darkness is not a cozy evening in Advent but the darkness over Germany, which first captured and abused souls and then increasingly brought death and destruction to the whole of Europe with its fanatical racial madness. The term "dark" is far too weak for this, Google suggested "gloomy" – and that hits the nail on the head.

führ, wenn es sein kann, wieder uns zusammen!
Wir wissen es, Dein Licht scheint in der Nacht.

lead us back together again if that can be!
We know for sure, Your light shines through the night.

The second half of the verse begins with an expression of longing and then leads to a confession of faith. The helplessness to change the situation through one's own strength does not lead to resignation, but rather to trust in God, for whom everything is possible.

How good that this can be expressed more clearly in English in the spirit of Dietrich Bonhoeffer: “Your light shines in the night” – this is not a sober statement of fact, not a mental knowledge that is formulated here, but the living reality of a spiritual truth: There can be no coexistence of light and darkness – the light drives out the darkness!

The light of God drives away the darkness and becomes, as Psalm 139 poetically puts it, a light that illuminates even the night. All too often we limit the omnipotence of God through our kind of realism. No, this is not about a lonely flame but about a real "breakthrough" !

Did Dietrich Bonhoeffer even have proper light in his prison cell or did he have to live with the little that came through the barred cellar windows during the day and endure the long nights in the dark? A quick question in between...

6

Wenn sich die Stille nun tief um uns breitet,
so lass uns hören jenen vollen Klang

When now the silence spreads around, grant us to hear
and listen to the full embracing sound

What kind of silence is Dietrich Bonhoeffer talking about here? Frightening darkness that grabs at him like an octopus, or the "stillness" of the heart – the peace of God that spreads out and gives rest? I am convinced that the latter is the case. Only in this silence can the soul open itself to the heavenly world – like a window through which the song of praise from heaven reaches the earth, inaudible but unmistakable.

The greatest difficulty was translating this into another language, something that is already difficult to understand in your own language and then "packaged" in a complex sentence. It is only thanks to the persistence of my youngest daughter that we invested a few extra hours to clarify this. I am so glad about this, because these statements prepare the finale of the seventh verse with its promise of rock-solid confidence in God's faithfulness.

der Welt, die unsichtbar sich um uns weitet,
all Deiner Kinder hohen Lobgesang.

of this world, which unseen around is widening
to all your children's highest hymns of praise.

Here I thought to discover a mistake in Kurt Grahl's melody. That gave me the impetus to look more closely at the first word of the third line in all verses: Here the emphasis is on "the" and not on "world", as I was used to. Then I understood: It is not our physical world that is expanding, but the world of God – His kingdom, which Jesus says is in our midst. Another example of how emphasis can guide or mislead us when understanding the message.

Only those who see heaven open, like Stephen did when he was stoned, can walk the path that Dietrich Bonhoeffer is on with full confidence. And he, who has certainly experienced this before, needs this strengthening from the heavenly world right now. But he also wants to express this request here for his family and also for us, because

we too often reach the limits of our strength. May such a view of heaven then open up for us too!

A sound that resonates in the soul that encompasses all emotions – seeing and hearing simultaneously with the inner eyes and ears of the heart – how can one describe that? And not just "hear" = perceiving, but "listening to", lingering in it, that's what it's about. It's difficult to put all of that into words. Every translation remains an attempt in this. What I'm missing most here is the rhyme, which would make the text's message shine even more.

7

Von guten Mächten wunderbar geborgen
erwarten wir getrost, was kommen mag.

By gentle Powers wonderfully sheltered
awaiting fearlessly what there will be.

The finale follows on from the first verse with its first line, which describes the work of the "good powers". Here, however, they are no longer the surrounding protective wall against evil from outside, but the place of refuge, the place of security par excellence. Here, "surrounding" falls short; this is the security of a child in its mother's arms. It doesn't get any closer than that; that naturally includes protection from outside. The English terms should also reflect this important difference.

The "wonderful" here no longer refers to the protection from the outside, but to the place of refuge itself. From this experience grows the confident expectation of the uncertain future. In English, this can also be taken into account by using different terms.

The "consoled by" in verse one has now changed to "being comforted" (getröstet sein), which allows us to look courageously (fearlessly) into the future. The German term (getrost) already show this difference. And here prison no longer plays a role in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's thinking: the "I" becomes a "we". The security in God frees us from the circumstances of the present. This also applies to each of us.

The "expectation" is not a passive "waiting" but a basic attitude that shapes the whole way of thinking. This is not about a resigned "come what may", but about the willingness to accept the future with trust from God's hands, because that is the only thing that is important. In terms of feeling, subtle nuances play a special role here, especially important when this verse is sung as a chorus. Am I thinking too much about it?

Gott ist bei uns am Abend und am Morgen,
und ganz gewiss an jedem neuen Tag.

God , he is near at dusk and in the morning,
and with us certainly on each new day.

With the proclamation of God's faithfulness we have reached the end of the "journey". However, only those who have gone through all the stages and the depths can correctly assess the significance of this confession.

Again, it is the first word of the third line that needs to be emphasized. It is all about "God": We also have to place the emphasis correctly in our lives so that the most important thing is not lost in the "upbeat". If that doesn't happen and something else sets the tone, it changes the melody of our life and the song that comes out of it.

Right at the beginning – my first melody was still in 6/8 time – I tried everything to move “God” to the accented beginning of the measure, but I didn’t succeed. Since then, I’ve been looking more closely at the different weightings that can arise in this way.

After the manuscript was published, the "with us" was corrected to "near us", which is also significant on another level: God cannot always be "with" us on our often stubborn ways, but he is always close to us. This must be considered beyond the mere correction of the word.

The "evening and morning" reminds me of the story of creation. To distort this image in English by using other terms would rob us of this connection. Evening and morning – that includes the whole night of life. It leads into a new day, whether here or in the eternal world. The message of confidence in the present thus expands into a perspective for the future, where the "each new day" speaks more strongly than the general "forever".

Here I am thinking of God's blessing on Noah and his family – his promises, confirmed by the rainbow as a sign of his faithfulness. The text speaks to a wide variety of people in a very personal way, because it is God himself who wants to meet us in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's words.

Translation: Concluding Remark

We have tried to preserve as many linguistic similarities as possible in this valuable testimony and to adopt the sentence structure as much as possible so that the original can "shine through" in the translation. We have also endeavored to express the recognized statements behind the terms as clearly as possible so that they can unfold their "brilliance" even better for everyone to see.

I have now passed on the thoughts that guided us here. They also allowed us to look more deeply into the German text. People who are native English speakers have

access to a much larger vocabulary. But would these expressions also be understood by people with a similar level of language skills to us?

The decision to use rhyme in the poem had already limited the choice of words in German, how would that affect the English version if one wanted to keep this structure? We decided against it. We decided against it. However, the choice of words will always remain a subjective matter. I am glad to have now found a good benchmark for comparison in the official translation from the English edition.

Incomplete Translations in Hymnals

I have already mentioned that the message of the hymn can be "obscured" or even distorted by an inaccurate translation into other languages. Caution is therefore always advised; incomplete texts are out of the question anyway. Unfortunately, even in the serious hymnals of various countries, the hymn is only represented in this way.

Misuse of the Name "Dietrich Bonhoeffer" and his Message

Without connection to the historical context of its creation the power of the testimony gets often lost as well. Sometimes changes to the text are well-intentioned attempts to make Dietrich Bonhoeffer's statements more "handy" or understandable, sometimes they are deliberate manipulation that uses the author's good name for one's own purposes. But this does not only apply to the lyrics.

Substituted Quotes

For example, a quote is being circulated under the name Dietrich Bonhoeffer which is demonstrably not even his – but which is formulated in his "style" and could have come from him in terms of content: "Silence in the face of evil is itself evil: God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act." It became famous after Eric Metaxas used it in his controversial biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

There are two interesting articles (in English) that document the actual origin of the quote – also a reference to how the truth is dealt with in today's world:
https://wthrockmorton.com/2016/08/25/the-popular-bonhoeffer-quote-that-isnt-in-bonhoeffers-works/
https://wthrockmorton.com/2016/11/11/update-on-a-spurious-bonhoeffer-quote-not-to-speak-is-to-speak-not-to-act-is-to-act/

Misuse for political Purposes

This leads me to the instrumentalization of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's message for political purposes, as has begun in the United States. This is mainly about the so-called "Bonhoeffer Moment", a point in time when civil society is called upon to stand up against the state order. I learned about this through a very interesting film by the ORF, which I have made a little easier to find on my YouTube channel: *https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=8MmJii5MPdQ*

I am grateful for publications like these that point out the dangers of abuse and for the experts who work tirelessly to educate people. What was once said in an interview about the hymn also applies here: Dietrich Bonhoeffer cannot defend himself against the way his message is being "marketed" today. We ourselves must therefore be all the more vigilant so that we do not fall for a "misleading package".

The topics of political discussion are often legitimate, but healthy differentiation is lacking ; what prevails is a "crusader mentality" that only knows black and white. But when it really is about God's goals, dialogue is the priority, not a declaration of war by left or right groups. Dietrich Bonhoeffer would definitely have taken a clear stance on the social trends of the present, but not in this way.

The basic problem of the negative developments in our time – and this is where I end this digression – is the turning away from God's standards in small steps. "Where are we letting ourselves drift?" is something I wrote about in detail (on YouTube as a video).

Foreword

Why here at the end? – I am not the main character here, I did not choose all this, I just somehow got involved. I cannot point to any well-known name that alone promises expertise and credibility. The evaluation is entirely the task of the reader, I can only provide the impetus for your own discoveries. Incomplete and subjective – this summary cannot and does not want to be more than that.

Personal

I have enjoyed classical music since I was young, but didn't have a chance to learn to play the piano until I finished school. The ability to express my own feelings in melodies was a gift after many years of struggling with simple piano pieces by various composers. It was only shortly before I retired that I occasionally started playing a few simple songs that God had put on my heart.

At that time, I already had a YouTube channel with videos on how to make Bascetta stars – also in English because of personal relationships in the USA. The songs became a supplement on YouTube, an expression of my desire to confess my faith and raise my voice against the currents in "modern times".

To the Subject

On New Year's Eve 2023, I presented the hymn "Von guten Mächten" on my channel in my own simple piano setting (which I had first made for myself), combined with an additional personal message of confidence in uncertain times. Because I had used the copyrighted melody by Siegfried Fietz, I ran into problems. This is how the exciting "journey" with this hymn began.

My first melody began to ring within me and I looked for other musical versions of this hymn. We got to know the melody by Kurt Grahl (included in the Catholic hymnal “Gotteslob”) and contacted him – his valuable input changed my view of this hymn forever.

The Melody Project arose from the desire to present the serious but lesser-known melodies of this hymn to the public via “sounding sheet music” and presentations with continuous text and to invite people to sing along, so that this precious legacy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer becomes known in all its fullness – and not just in excerpts with the popular waltz-like melody as a “feel-good song for all occasions”.

The collected musical arrangements, my own melodies and a variety of additional ideas can now be found in two playlists on my YouTube channel. I have made the results easily accessible via interactive directories with links to many of the individual videos.

Since we could not find an acceptable full English translation at the time, my wife and I "fought" for a new one. We made a lot of effort to find out the right expressions to make the thoughts clearer while staying close to the original.

After about four months, the melody project was finally completed. My wife's patience and support made it possible to pass on the blessings we have received over the last few months to others.

But that is not the end of the journey: This hymn is a constant invitation – not only to reassure oneself from time to time of the faithfulness of the living God – it is an invitation to immerse oneself completely in the thoughts of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, to question one's own relationship with God and to find approaches to answering the important questions of life.

The compilation presented here reports on the origins of the Melody Project, the structure and content of the text, the principles of setting it to music with many examples, and the selection and interpretation of important terms based on our own experience in translating. It is not intended to replace the many existing specialist publications, but rather to complement them with a very personal perspective.

September 2024

Eckhard Becker

Information Sources / Material Collection

Here are some publications that I came across on my "journey" with the hymn and that were helpful. Most of them are in German. This is not a complete list of all the materials on the subject. The order has nothing to do with a rating. It just happened that way. The most comprehensive collection is available on the Bonhoeffer portal: *https://www.dietrich-bonhoeffer.net*

Best Images of the Christmas Letter of December 19, 1944

https://www.lwl.org/pressemitigungen/mitigung.php?urlID=45633

https://www.praesenz-verlag.com/download/Von%20guten%20Maechten%20Brief.pdf

Wilhelm Schepping: Elaboration on the Hymn, its Distribution and Interpretations

"Von guten Mächten" musical settings of the Dietrich Bonhoeffer text: their meaning, function and reproduction in religious singing of our time: *https://www.hf.uni-koeln.de/data/musikeume/File/Oppositionelles%20Lied/Von%20guten%20Maechten.pdf* This work by a former musicologist from the University of Cologne gave me some important initial inspiration. However, it dates from 2008 and was already incomplete at the time because it was limited to the melodies of Otto Abel and Siegfried Fietz. There really does seem to be some denominational "shy flaps" here...

Hymn Commentary by Jürgen Henkys

https://www.bonhoeffer.ch/downloads/vgm-kommentar-oelk.pdf/view

Here you have to click on VGM comment to download the file …

The commentary is very detailed and offers a lot of background information. It too was written in the "Protestant sphere" – Kurt Grahl's melody is only mentioned in passing in a footnote. In the section "Song or Poem" he tends towards poem simply because there are no German hymns in this meter.

Detailed Hymn Review by Esther Handschin

https://www.emk.at/de/ Glaubensimpulse/2022/von-guten-maechten

Very good presentation with many integrated audio examples and information about the first musical versions and the first translation. However, I sometimes cannot share her assessments...

Archived Website – Communications Department, Reformed Church of the Canton of Zurich

https://bonhoeffer.ch

Large media collection on the occasion of the 100th birthday of Dietrich Bonhoeffer:

"In 2006, the Evangelical Reformed Church of the Canton of Zurich organized information events for the 100th birthday of Dietrich Bonhoeffer: church services, film screenings, concerts, discussions, etc.

Since Bonhoeffer's life and theology are groundbreaking and inspiring far beyond the commemoration year of 2006, we will continue to leave this website with its diverse background information online as an archived website.

We are convinced that the materials collected here are of broad interest and can contribute to a stimulating study of Bonhoeffer's life and work."

Reading Booklet: "Four Weeks with Dietrich Bonhoeffer"

New Evangelical Church Community Werningerode – with poems and impulses:

https://www.ev-kirche-wernigerode.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Leseheft_Lektuerekurs_2021.pdf

How to achieve Peace – Article by Detlef Bald

On Dietrich Bonhoeffer's ethics of peace:

https://www.nomos-elibrary.de/10.5771/0175-274X-2016-2-146.pdf?download_full_pdf=1

Evangelical Resistance in National Socialism

https://de.evangelischer-streit.de/html/view.php?type=biographien

Clearly structured and exciting biographies of those active in the resistance. With many photos and original texts.

Dr. Jutta Koslowski – Website with extensive Download Offers

https://www.jutta-koslowski.de/Documents/

Here you can find a lot of information not only about Dietrich Bonhoeffer but also about Judaism. I am grateful for such personal initiatives.

Bonhoeffer Congregation Tübingen

https://www.bonhoeffer-gemeinde.de/christen-und-juden/dietrich-bonhoeffer

This community has its own section on the relationship to Judaism. Interesting download offers

Newspaper Articles and other Media

"By gentle Powers, also for Corona Virus Times"

Stefan Wieczorek: Costa Nachrichten (for the coastal areas of Spain)

https://www.costanachrichten.com/kultur/deutsche-spanien-dietrich-bonhoeffer-barcelona-halt-von-guten-maechten-corona-90002366.html

Informative article about Dietrich Bonhoeffer's time in Barcelona: (in German)

Good Report about Dietrich Bonhoeffer from MDR

https://www.mdr.de/geschichte/ns-zeit/ Resistance/dietrich-bonhoeffer-100.html

"Later he would say that he became a Christian in the United States, before that he had only been a theologian. Bonhoeffer was one of the first to call on the church in Germany to raise its voice for the Jews..."

Article about the Popularity of the Hymn in China

https://jochenteuffel.com/2023/06/25/warum-chinesische-christen-von-guten-machten-auf-englisch-by-gentle-powers-herzergreifd-singen/

A Song for the Year (New Translation of the Text for China)

https://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/blog-entries/a-song-for-the-year/

A very worthwhile article about the meaning of the song in China (English)

Bonhoeffer's last Advent

https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2015/12/bonhoeffers-last-advent

Vivid description of the prison situation in Advent 1944 (English)

Leader – Seducer: Radio Address of February 1, 1933

https://rundfunk.evangelisch.de/kirche-im-radio/morgenandacht/bonhoeffers-radiovortrag-fuehrer-und-verfuehrer-13740

"Maturity and Power - Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Demands on Church and Society today"

Lecture by Dr. Wolfgang Huber: https://www.ekd.de/060307_huber_dessau.htm

"Today Bonhoeffer would be insulted as a Do-Gooder"

Deutschlandfunk: Wolfgang Huber in conversation with Christiane Florin | 15.02.2019

https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/streit-heute-wuerde-bonhoeffer-als-gutmensch-beschreit-100.html

Among other things: Important statements about the song and its musical setting

Hymn of Consolation or Waltz of Resistance? – Von guten Mächten, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Song

HR2 : Andreas Malessa in conversation with Bonhoeffer biographer Prof. Wolfgang Huber, the composers Siegfried Fietz and Albert Frey, and regional church music - director Dr. Christa Kirschbaum.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rxQV-26Qzxk

The best radio report about the hymn that I know. Many experts are heard, interesting background information...

Abuse of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Ethics by the American "Right"

by Thomas Klatt | 27.01.2020

https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/protestantischer-widerskaempfer-dietrich-bonhoeffer-100.html

Deutschlandfunk: About the Stay in Rome

by Tilmann Kleinjung | 07.04.2015

https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/70-todestag-dietrich-bonhoeffer-im-katholischen-rom-100.html

"My husband asked Bonhoeffer: If you had the opportunity to kill Hitler, would you do it? How can a pastor kill someone, no matter how evil he is? Bonhoeffer said: Yes.

If I am on a street full of people and a madman runs people over, what should I do? As a pastor, do I have to bless the dead and help the dying, or do I have to try to jump on the car and stop the madman, even if it costs me or his life?"

Article about Maria von Wedemeyer – CV

https://www.pfarrerverband.de/pfarrerblatt/aktuelle-beitraege?tx_pvpfarrerblatt_pi1%5Baction%5D=show&tx_pvpfarrerblatt_pi1%5Bcontroller%5D=Item&tx_pvpfarrerblatt_pi1%5BitemId%5D=5586&cHash=16aac1fdb2c042c5 898980556b62f540

Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Watchwords

https://www.pfarrerverband.de/pfarrerblatt/archiv?tx_pvpfarrerblatt_pi1%5Baction%5D=show&tx_pvpfarrerblatt_pi1%5Bcontroller%5D=Item&tx_pvpfarrerblatt_pi1%5BitemId%5D=3102&cHash=189f41af2b70c7191211 9e20e6a28059

Videos on YouTube

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL4G_TfKePYgLUkq5_0YjJkDTBCTeFgZNF

Video about Dietrich Bonhoeffer by Students for Students

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-AUJscEfquo&list=PL4G_TfKePYgI6qX5gRIAuH5mINzgMqgBM&index=91

Impressive film by the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Secondary School in Neustadt an der Aisch about life and work – also suitable for adults…

Pitfalls of Memory: Who owns Bonhoeffer?

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8MmJii5MPdQ

Exciting TV program from ORF 2 (2019) on the instrumentalization of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's message in the US election campaign, including an interview with Christiane Tietz and Arnd Henze. I copied the video from the station's website for YouTube for better accessibility.

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Hymns "linked" via Melodies

O Word of Pity (Intercessor) – Melody: Charles H. H. Parry

O word of pity, for our pardon pleading,
Breathed in the hour of loneliness and pain;
O voice, which through the ages interceding,
Calls us to fellowship with God again.

O word of comfort , through the silence stealing,
As the dread act of sacrifice began;
O infinite compassion, still revealing
The infinite forgiveness won for man.

O word of hope to raise us nearer Heaven,
When courage fails us and when faith is dim;
The souls for whom Christ prays to Christ are given,
To find their pardon and their joy in Him.

O Intercessor, who art ever living
To plead for dying souls that they may live,
Teach us to know our sin which needs forgiving,
Teach us to know the love which can forgive.

Lyrics: Ada Rundall Greenaway

Be still, my Soul – Melody: Jean Sibelius (Finlandia)

Be still, my soul: the Lord is on thy side;
bear patiently the cross of grief or pain.
Leave to thy God to order and provide;
in every change He faithful will remain.
Be still, my soul: thy best, thy heav'nly Friend
through thorny ways leads to a joyful end.

Be still, my soul: thy God doth undertake
to guide the future, as He has the past.
Thy hope, thy confidence let nothing shake;
all now mysterious shall be bright at last.
Be still, my soul: the waves and winds still know
His voice who ruled them while He dwelt below.

Be still, my soul: when dearest friends depart,
and all is darkened in the vale of tears,

then shalt thou better know His love, His heart,
who comes to soothe thy sorrow and thy fears.
Be still, my soul: thy Jesus can repay
from His own fullness all He takes away.

Be still, my soul: the hour is hast'ning on
when we shall be forever with the Lord,
when disappointment, grief, and fear are gone,
sorrow forgot, love's purest joys restored.
Be still, my soul: when change and tears are past
all safe and blessed we shall meet at last.

The fifth stanza was probably added in 1859:

Be still, my soul: begin the song of praise
On earth, believing, to Thy Lord on high;
Acknowledge Him in all thy words and ways,
So shall He view thee with a well-pleased eye.
Be still, my soul: the Sun of life divine
Through passing clouds shall but more brightly shine.

English lyrics: Jane Borthwick, 1855
(originally German by Catharina von Schlegel, 1752)

This is my Song – Melody: Jean Sibelius (Finlandia)

This is my song, Oh God of all the nations,
a song of peace for lands afar and mine;
this is my home, the country where my heart is;
Here are my hopes, my dreams, my sacred shrine:
but other hearts in other lands are beating
with hopes and dreams as true and high as mine.

My country's skies are bluer than the ocean,
and sunlight beams on cloverleaf and pine;
but other lands have sunlight too and clover,
and skies are everywhere as blue as mine:
O hear my song, Oh God of all the nations,
a song of peace for their land and for mine.

May truth and freedom come to every nation;
may peace abound where strife has raged so long;
that each may seek to love and build together,
a world united, righting every wrong;
a world united in its love for freedom,
proclaiming peace together in one song.

Text: Lloyd Stone 1934, Georgia Harkness

Stjernesangen – Melody: Jean Sibelius (Finlandia)

Vi synger titt om seirens lønn der hjemme,
om å få stjerner i vår krone der.
Men la oss aldri noensinne glemme,
de stjerner tente vi mens vi var her!

De er den sorg som du til glede vendte,
de er den hjelp som du i nøden gav.
De er de lys som du i mørket tente,
de er de tårer som du tørret av!

De er hver edel kamp du stred og strider,
hver vunnet sjel, hver seier i hans navn.
Hva du for Jesu skyld har lidt og lider,
hvert kjærlig offer og hvert hellig savn!

Men aller herligst glans og lys utsender,
det gode du i stillhet øvet her.
Som ingen annen, men kun Jesus kjenner,
det stråler klarest i din krone der!

Alt finner vi igjen for Herrens trone,
alt som har evig verd, vi finner der.
Men ingen stjerner får vi i vår krone,
som ei vi selv har tent mens vi var her!

Henry Albert Tandberg, 1910
(Salvation Army General from Norway)

We sing about the crowns we get in heaven,
With sparkling stars for every victory.
But don't forget, those stars, they got their splendor,
alighting them while we were living here:

They are the sorrow turned by you to laughing,
they are the help you gave in times of need.
They are the candles you have lit in darkness,
they are the tears of grief you whiped away!

They are the noble battles you have fought for,
each victory, each soul you won for God.
What you have suffered in the name of Jesus,
your longing and your sacrifice of love!

But the most brilliant beams of light emits from
the good, that you have done in silent ways.

What no one else knows it is seen by Jesus,
giving your crown of stars a sparkling shine!

We’ll find it at the throne of God almighty,
all precious deeds kept for eternity.
But only those will last as stars forever,
lighted for Him, while we were living here!

Translation: May 2024

Your Love breaks down the strongest Prison Walls

At the beginning I reported that in the middle of the copyright conflicts I was given my own text for my new melody. I can't describe it any other way, because it was written down within a quarter of an hour.

The text reflects Dietrich Bonhoeffer's personal experiences and brings the topic into the present day, in which many Christians around the world suffer persecution, are imprisoned, tortured and executed because of their faith.

Song of Hope - Melody of Joy

It is a song of hope that guides us,
a light as bright as dark the times -
it is the gentle melody of joy ,
for God's peace endures forever.

Refrain:

Your love breaks down the strongest prison walls,
it sets me free and gives me new courage.
My whole soul rises up to you;
yes, you are there and you make everything good!

Even in the cold, your closeness warms me,
despite all the bars I am truly free.
You live in me, I am safe in you:
You are here too, because you are always faithful!

Refrain:

Oh, if only everyone could understand
how much your consolation nourishes the quiet hope:
the evil of this time will soon fade
in the light of your great glory!

Refrain:

January 23, 2024 (Original Lyrics in German)

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