



The Peasants' War by Constantine Émile Meunier.

THOMAS MÜNTZER

and the Radical Reformation 1489-1525

Priest, preacher, mystic, and a leader in the Peasants' War, Thomas Müntzer (1489-1525) is perhaps the single most controversial figure in the entire Reformation. He died young, having been captured, tortured and executed after the bloody battle of Frankenhausen in 1525; thousands of artisans, peasants and miners were mown down by the princely army.

Young Thomas studied in various universities in Germany, was ordained priest, associated himself with the reformation movement, moved around to some 50 different towns in the exciting but stressful early years of the Reformation, and wrote a rather beautiful Eucharistic liturgy

for his parishioners in the little town of Allstedt. Finally, he was swept into the uprising of peasants and artisans in 1524-5. This Peasants' War was the greatest social upheaval in Europe before the French Revolution.

For a long time, communist East Germany hailed Müntzer as a heroic battler for the rights of the common people, a sort of founding father of their state communism. Meanwhile most Lutherans, following Martin Luther himself, were appalled, regarding him as a wild dreamer, a blood-thirsty radical who had brought the Gospel into utter disrepute by politicising it.

In June of this year a scholarly edition of his writings was finally

launched in Leipzig, following two other weighty volumes devoted to his letters and the background of his life. It has taken us nearly 500 years to approach his life and his thought in this measured and fair way. My privilege has been to translate his fascinating letters and writings into English, with the help of two marvellous colleagues, Tom Scott and Siegfried Bräuer. His German is notoriously difficult, and it took me some 10 years, on and off, to complete the task.

Why spend so much time and effort on this one individual? Well, as we have seen before, the Reformation was not a one-man band. Erasmus, Contarini, the woman reformer Argula, all had their special insights, as well as the more

famous Martin Luther. So it's important, simply in order to illustrate this variety, to give a hearing to this controversial Christian, even if Luther saw him as Satanic! But there's more to it than that. He really gets under my skin. I love his language. I admire his courage. Perhaps we could best describe him as spelling out some of the *revolutionary* implications of the Christian Gospel.

He had a passion for ordinary people, the "clumsy, gnarled people", mostly illiterate, who were his parishioners. So he tried to talk their language, wrote hymns and prayers for them. He thought too many academics lived in ivory towers: "We talk big about the truth, write great tomes littered with blots, but spend our days in empty quarrels and in worrying about material things." Ouch!

He thought, too, that those in power were ruthless tyrants and enlisted religion to convince ordinary folk to obey them. "Our lords are violent, they flay and fleece the poor farm-worker, tradesman and everyone alive, but as soon as any of the latter commits some petty theft, our lords act the hangman. If saying that makes me an inciter to insurrection that's just too bad." Society simply had to change, he believed. "The old remedies won't fit any more." He saw the discontent of the peasants as part of a great cosmic, apocalyptic struggle between good and evil.

At heart, though, he was a pastor. Yes, like the early Christians he seems to have believed that property should be held in common. But first must come the change in heart. We cannot set out to change the world until we ourselves are changed.

So he taught his people a popular mysticism based on his reading of the medieval mystics, especially Tauler and Suso. Each of us must allow the Holy Spirit to purge us in the depths, in the abyss of our heart. He used homely images like the fish diving down into the dark depths of the pool and then rising up again. This led him to an exciting new way of viewing Scripture. We can't just appropriate the words of the patriarchs, the prophets, the apostles. We can't parrot them like some magic formula. "Scripture must come to pass in every person." What I think he meant by that is



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that we all have to find our own way of experiencing what Abraham, or Jeremiah or Paul experienced of the trials and exaltations of the Spirit before we throw their words around. Muntzer was an interpreter of dreams. He talked the language of visions. We are all called, he argued, to share in the suffering of Christ. Too much easy preaching of mere words, of grace, of the "sweet Christ" and we will "eat ourselves sick of honey."

Today, as we struggle to do justice to Scripture, I find this approach very timely. Likewise, as we seek to understand how poverty is linked to a

disordered understanding of creation, Muntzer's warnings hit home.

There is a puritan dimension to Muntzer's thought which many of us will find alien. And his dualistic division of the world into the godly and the wicked, his legitimization of violence to overthrow unjust structures, needs a long, hard, critical look. We can't swallow him whole! Indeed none of these Reformation figures should be put on a pedestal. Provided we listen carefully to their concerns, we can be discriminating in what we accept and what we reject.

I know of countless Catholic scholars working on Luther, but not a single one studying Muntzer. Let's hope that changes. He is a rough diamond all right. But let me close with a verse from one of his Eucharistic hymns, for in the end of the day it is the trail of language, stretching from then to now, their time to ours, which is the greatest gift left by our forebears in the faith:

*Take then the body of the Lord
And as the Spirit strikes a chord
Within our hearts true God we know,
And godly love begins to glow.
On his vine,
His Spirit mine
His body given as the sign. ■*



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