

Against the Tumultuous Peasants

Widder die stürmenden bawren

April 1525

In my previous book on this matter ¹, I did not presume to judge the peasants, since they had offered to be corrected and instructed. And as Christ commands, we should not judge, Matthew 7. But scarcely had I turned round than they set off on the roads and, forgetting all their promises, took violent action, robbing and raging and behaving like mad dogs. And now we can all see what they had concealed from us and that everything which they proposed in their ‘Twelve Articles’ ² was a pure lie made up in the name of the Gospel. In short, they were carrying out the Devil’s work, most especially the work of the arch-devil who ruled in Mühlhausen ³ and stirred up nothing except robbery, murder and bloodshed, just as Christ spoke of him in John 8, saying that he was a murderer right from the beginning. Now that these peasants and miserable people are letting themselves be led astray and are acting contrary to what they promised, then I too must write differently about them and begin by showing them their sins, just as God commanded Isaiah and Ezekiel, so that they might thereby recognise themselves. And then I must advise the worldly rulers how they should behave in this situation.

The peasants have loaded themselves with the burden of three kinds of terrible sin against both God and men, and have thereby merited death in both body and soul several times over. Firstly, they swore to be true and loyal to their rulers, to be submissive and obedient to them, just as God commanded when he said: “Give unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s”; and in Romans 13: “Let every person be subject to the rulers” etc. But because they are now deliberately and violently abandoning obedience and are setting themselves up against their lords, they have forfeited both body and soul. They are like those disloyal, perjured, lying, disobedient rascals and evil-doers which St Paul judged in Romans 13: “Whosoever strives against the authorities will bring a judgement upon themselves. “ This saying will smite the peasants in the end, sooner or later, for God wants us to be loyal and to do our duty.

¹ This is Luther’s pamphlet ‘Admonition to Peace Concerning the Twelve Articles of the Peasants’ (*Ermahnung zum Frieden*) published in April 1525. This earlier text divided the blame for the rebellion equally between nobility and peasantry.

² Luther refers to the ‘Twelve Articles’ drawn up by the peasantry of Swabia in south-west Germany in March 1525. Specifically he refers to the ‘Conclusion’ to the Articles, in which the authors ask to be informed of any article which goes against God or neighbourly love.

³ i.e. Thomas Müntzer

Secondly, in raising a rebellion, in robbing and violently plundering monasteries and castles which are not theirs, by this alone they deserve a double death in body and soul, just like highway-robbers and murderers. In addition, anyone who is proved to be a rebel will become an outlaw before God and the Emperor, and whoever is the first to put that man to death will act correctly and justly. For any man can be both judge and executioner of anyone who rebels openly, just as when a fire starts, the first man to put it out will be the best man for the job; for rebellion is not just murder, it is rather like a great fire that sets light to a whole country and devastates it. So rebellion fills a country with murder and bloodshed and makes widows and orphans and destroys everything: it is the very worst disaster. And so everyone who can should strike in there, killing and stabbing, secretly or openly, remembering that there can be nothing more poisonous, more harmful, more devilish than a rebellious man. You must kill just as you would kill a mad dog – if you do not strike first, then he will strike you down and the whole country with you.

Thirdly, they try to disguise such a terrible, horrible sin with the Gospel, by calling themselves ‘Christian Brethren’, by taking oaths and swearing loyalty and forcing people to go along with them in these abominations, so that they become the very greatest blasphemers and slanderers of his holy name, and thereby they honour and serve the Devil in the name of the Gospel: in doing so, they deserve a tenfold death in body and soul, for I have never yet heard of a more despicable sin. And I also think that the Devil feels that the Last Day is coming soon, and he undertakes such an unprecedented game, as though saying: “This is the end, so let the very worst things come to pass, and let us stir up the broth and knock the foundations down.” May God guard us against him ! Just look what a mighty prince the Devil is, how he holds the whole world in his hands and can throw everything into turmoil, now that he can catch so many thousands of peasants, and deceive them, blind them, make them obdurate and stir them into rebellion and do with them whatever he wants in his most raging fury.

It does not help the peasants at all when they claim, following Genesis 1 and 2, that all things are created free and in common, and that we are all baptised the equally. Moses does not have a voice in the New Testament. On the contrary, our master Christ stands there and compels us to obey the Emperor and the laws of this world, in both our body and our possessions; he says: “Give unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s” And Paul, in Romans 12, also says to all baptised Christians: “Let every person be subject to the rulers.” And Peter says: “Be subject to every ordinance of men.” It is our duty to live

according to this teaching of Christ, as our father in heaven commanded when he said: “This is my dear son, listen to him.” For baptism does not make men free to act over their body and possessions, but only over their souls. And the Gospel does not say that property is held in common, except for those who do it of their own free will, like the Apostles and disciples did – and they did not claim the property of Pilate or Herod as their own, like our insane peasants do, but only their own possessions. But our peasants want to hold the possessions of others in common and keep their own for themselves alone. Such fine Christians these appear to me ! I think that there is not a single Devil left in Hell, for they have all come up and taken possession of the peasants. Their raging has gone beyond all reasonable limits.

Now that the peasants have brought upon themselves the wrath of both God and men and have made themselves so deserving of death in body and soul, many times over, submitting to no law and awaiting no judgement, but rather continuing with their raging, then I am obliged to instruct the secular authorities in how they should proceed with a clear conscience from now on. Firstly, I will not stand in the way of any ruler who, being able and willing (I even include those who do not tolerate the Gospel), strikes and punishes these peasants without firstly offering to submit them to a legal process. They have the right to do so, since the peasants are now no longer fighting for the Gospel, but are openly disloyal, perjured, disobedient, rebellious murderers, robbers and blasphemers, and even heathen rulers have the right and the power to punish them – indeed, they are even duty-bound to punish such rascals. For that is why they carry the sword and are God’s servants to punish the evil-doers, Romans 13.

But if the ruler is a Christian and one who tolerates the Gospel, so that the peasants can have no case against him, then he must proceed with caution. To begin with, he must take the matter to God and confess that we have deserved such things, recognising that perhaps God has stirred up the Devil to punish all of Germany. And then he should pray humbly for help against the Devil, for we are here fighting not only against flesh and blood, but against the spiritual evil-doers in the airs around us, which must be attacked with prayer. Then, when our hearts are thereby opened up to God that we let his divine will govern us, whether or not he will allow us to be princes and lords, then we should act beyond our duty and offer terms to the mad peasants, even if they do not deserve it. After that, if that does not help, then we should swiftly grasp the sword.

For a prince and lord must remember here that he is God’s office-holder and the agent of his wrath, Romans 13, and has been ordered to raise the sword against such rascals.

And if he does not punish and protect, and does not carry out his office, then he commits a sin before God that is just as great a sin as is murder carried out by one who has no right to the sword. For if he can punish someone for murder or shedding blood, but does not, then he is guilty of all the murder and evil that such rascals commit. For if he deliberately neglects God's command, he lets such rascals continue to carry out their wicked deeds, even although he was able and duty-bound to prevent them. This is not the time to slumber. And this is not time for patience or mercy. The time for the sword and for anger is here; this is no time for leniency.

So the rulers should now press on and take action with a good conscience, as long as the blood flows in their veins. For the advantage to them is this: that the peasants have a bad conscience and an unjust cause, and any peasant who is killed here will lose both body and soul and eternally belong to the Devil. But the rulers have a clear conscience and a just cause and they can say to God with confidence in their hearts: See, my God, you have made me a prince or a lord, of that I can have no doubt, and you have given me the sword to use against the wicked, Romans 13. This is your word and it cannot lie, so I must carry out the duties of my office or lose your favour; it is obvious that these peasants have earned death many times over in your eyes and in the eyes of the world and have been sent before me for punishment. If it is now your will that I should be killed by them and have my lordship taken away from me and be defeated, then so be it, I will die and be defeated by your divine command and word, and in obedience to your command and my office. So I will punish and smite as long as the blood flows in my veins. You will judge thereon and make things right.

So it is that, if anyone is killed while fighting on the side of the rulers, he will be regarded as a true martyr of God, and so he can fight with a clear conscience as I have set out above. For he acts according to the word of God and in obedience. On the other hand, anyone acting on the side of the peasants will burn in Hell for eternity, for he takes up the sword against the word of God and against obedience and is one of the Devil's own. And even if it happens that the peasants gain the upper hand – may God forbid ! – for with God all things are possible, and we do not know if he perhaps wishes to use the Devil to destroy all order and authority and cast the world upon a mound of devastation in preparation for the Last Day; even then, those who have taken up the sword in fulfilment of their office will die in confidence and go to the scaffold with a good conscience, and will leave the kingdom of this world to the Devil and exchange it for the

everlasting kingdom. For we now live in such strange times that a prince is better able to enter Heaven by shedding blood than other men can do with prayer.

Finally, there is one other thing which will readily spur the rulers to action. The peasants will not rest content with belonging to the Devil, but will force and compel many good people to join their devilish league against their wills and will make those same people participants in their wickedness and damnation; for all those who yield to them will also go to the Devil and will be guilty of every piece of evil which they commit, even if they do so because they have so little strength of faith that they could not resist. A pious Christian should rather suffer one hundred deaths rather than giving in to the peasants' cause by one hair's breadth. Oh, how many martyrs could now be made because of these bloodthirsty peasants and prophets of murder ! Now the rulers ought to have mercy on these prisoners of the peasants; if they had no other reason for taking up the sword against the peasants and using it with a good conscience, thereby setting at risk their own body and property, then the following would be more than enough reason: they would be rescuing and helping all those souls who had been forced into the devilish league of the peasants and obliged to commit horrible sin against their wills and must be damned, for those souls are truly in Purgatory, indeed, they are held fast in the bonds of Hell and the Devil.

And so, dear lords, you must rescue, you must save, you must give aid ! Take pity on the poor people ! Let anyone who can stab, smite and slay ! And if you lose your life in doing so, then good for you, for no one can earn a more blessed death: you will die in obedience to the word and command of God, Romans 13, and in the service of loving your neighbours, who will thus be rescued from Hell and the bonds of the Devil. And so I now beg you, flee from the peasants if you can, for they all belong to the Devil. But if you cannot flee, then I pray that God will enlighten and bring them to righteousness them [*the peasants*]. As for those who are not to be brought back to righteousness, may God grant that they have neither good fortune nor success. And to this everyone pious Christian will say: Amen. For my prayer is just and good and I know it will greatly please God. If anyone should think this is too severe, then let him consider just how intolerable is rebellion, and that the destruction of the world is to be expected at any moment.

*Translated by Andy Drummond, January 2016
from
Martin Luther: Werke. Band 18, Weimar 1888, pp. 357-361*