

## THOMAS MÜNTZER – A SERVANT OF GOD

### Speech given by Professor Siegfried Bräuer on the occasion of the re-opening of an Exhibition in the Museum of Allstedt Castle

Allstedt is one of the central locations of the Reformation. Even the Electoral Prince Johann Friedrich admitted this. When he found himself obliged to chastise the people of Allstedt in 1532/33, he reminded them that the reformed Gospel and Word of God was present earlier here than in any other town. In fact, Allstedt is the place of birth of the complete German Church Service. That was demonstrated beyond dispute quite some time ago. However, amidst the flood of publications of the “Reformation Decade”, I did not once come across this fact, not even in the theme for 2012: “Reformation and Music”. If that opponent of Luther, Johannes Cochläus,

had been correct when he maintained in 1545 that Luther had been incarcerated in Allstedt Castle after the Imperial Diet at Worms, things would have been very different; for then all the attention of the Reformation Decade would not have been directed on the Wartburg, but rather on the castle at Allstedt.

Why has Allstedt been overlooked in this lengthy preparation for the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary? The small size of the place does not explain it all. The main reason almost certainly lies with the man whom the town and the whole region have to thank for the coming of the Reformation: Thomas Müntzer. Luther, Melanchthon and others made sure that the name of this deviant from the Wittenberg Reformation was despised for centuries, along with his activities in Allstedt. That only began to change when the Late Enlightenment theologian, Wilhelm Zimmermann, along with Friedrich Engels and, in their wake, the workers’ movement, without any knowledge of the actual source materials, understood Müntzer to be a revolutionary. And then, after he was eventually raised by the GDR [East Germany] to the status of founder of the revolutionary tradition of the German people, he subsequently ended up in the lumber-room of the GDR legacy after the peaceful revolution of 1989.



In the last 15 years of the GDR, experts among Marxist historians became increasingly aware that the historical Müntzer was not primarily a social critic, nor was his cause a political revolution. That is why the great “Historical and Biographical Exhibition” of the Berlin Museum for German History opened in December 1989 under a rather astonishing banner: “I, Thomas Müntzer, a Servant of God”. This new understanding of his role was never properly explained. One had to be content with the definition of Müntzer “as the most consistent ideologist of the Reformation” as, ever since 1982/83, even Luther had been enrolled in the cadre of revolutionaries. In the turbulent events at the end of 1989, however, there was no time to fully digest the meaning of the exhibition. You will find some testaments from those years in the exhibition being opened here today.

If the new exhibition in Allstedt has taken up the theme of 1989, then we must ensure not only that we grasp the opportunity that was previously missed; the year that appears on the invitation makes it clear: this theme belongs to Allstedt, for it was here that Müntzer first used this expression “a Servant of God” in the signature to a letter.

The theme of the Berlin exhibition at the end of 1989 is therefore being deliberately picked up again today. But even the aforementioned year of 1523 shows that this is not just an exhibition about Müntzer in general, but rather about his reforming activity in this town and from this town outwards. It was here that he was able to be active for the longest period in his short life, almost a year and a half as *Parochus*, that is the official occupant of the pulpit at St Johannes church in the new town, as *Seelwarter*, i.e. carer of souls, as he described himself in three printed works, and finally as a Servant of God, as he signed his first letter to the Electoral Prince Friedrich the Wise, written from Allstedt on 4<sup>th</sup> October 1523. Does this description of himself sound pretentious? We do not know whether the people of Allstedt perhaps thought so from the very start. They almost certainly expected that the vacant post in the new town church would be given to a good preacher of the newly-discovered gospel. We do not know how the appointment actually occurred. Allstedt was indeed relatively distant from the residences of the Electoral court in Torgau and Wittenberg, but even here it was not completely untouched by the reforming movement. At the St Wigbert church, the erstwhile Carmelite monk Simon Haferitz had arrived from Wittenberg to take up a post. As

soon as he arrived in Allstedt, he married. The experienced Electoral Prince's administrator, the castellan Hans Zeiss, had begun by reducing and then ending the financial support of the mendicant monks and the caretaker of the Mallerbach Chapel. In the castle chapel, masses were no longer held.

We do not know in detail how the reforming upheaval in Allstedt actually unfolded after Müntzer arrived here at the end of March 1523. One thing is certain, however: he brought the citizens and even the castellan over to his side remarkably quickly, and that as "a Servant of God", as a man standing in the service of God. This title means nothing else. In the Bible, both Moses and Paul had the same title. A year earlier than Müntzer, Luther had also described Spalatin as a servant of God.

And how did Müntzer win over the people of Allstedt? By means of his sermons, of course, but also by his re-structuring of the whole cycle of church services in the German language. He had already done some initial work on this in the preceding year in various places. But these were mostly limited to the sermon and the baptism, or the words of the communion. Luther had long seen that it was necessary to conduct the entire church service in the German tongue. Sympathetic priests had been pressing him to carry this out himself. But given all his other duties, he did not get around to this for a long time. Indeed he maintained that the congregations were not yet ready to accept new rites and services before they had properly grasped the new teaching. He considered that preaching the word of the Bible was paramount. Müntzer did not share this reticence in the matter of new liturgical forms. Rather, he was convinced that participation in church services were lessons on the road to true belief, as long as the whole congregation actively took part in singing and praying. For weekdays, he took the daily Office of the monasteries and clerics as his template; for Sundays and holidays, the Mass. These church services had, above all, to be shortened and re-worked according to the new insights of the Reformation.

And it was precisely that which Müntzer began, probably as early as Holy Week 1523. He selected large parts from the Matins, from the Laudes and Vespers for each of the five church festivals - Advent, Christmas, Passion, Easter and Whitsun. Where there were already German translations to hand, he adopted or adapted them according to his own

interpretation, even using some of Luther's translations. For the most part, he translated them himself, in particular the 35 psalms from the *Vulgata*, the Latin Bible. He approached the Mass in the same way, but also the other religious occasions – baptism, the marriage ceremony, the communion for the sick and the funeral service. In the matter of the marriage, he was perhaps the first to introduce a kind of marriage sermon, for he considered marriage to be a holy thing, a sort of training ground for the new world of God. That is why, shortly after Easter, he also married one of the aristocratic nuns who at that time were leaving the nunneries in their droves, stirred up by the re-discovered Biblical message. We only know the name of the former nun whom Müntzer married: Ottilie von Gersen. We have no idea where she grew up or which nunnery she abandoned, and we know nothing of what happened to her subsequently.

For Müntzer it was obvious that his marriage and his family were not merely private matters, but a kind of staging-post on the road to the greater goal of the new world of God. It is probable that Ottilie shared her husband's viewpoint. And certainly not only her, but also many of the people of Allstedt. Müntzer in fact considered his whole work in Allstedt to be the preparation of the congregation for the great goal of a world which was governed by the Fear of God and no longer by the Fear of Man. He considered the congregation at Allstedt to be a sort of testing-ground for this ultimate goal. That is why he often described the congregation as 'The Elect', especially in his translations from the Bible. But he was fully aware that the people of Allstedt did not automatically belong to The Elect. Whether someone could be described as Elect depended on whether that person was prepared to set himself on the road to true belief. This road was hard, for it was necessary to submit to a totally and personal conviction. But according to Müntzer this could only be achieved by someone who not only worshipped the crucified Christ, but was also prepared to live and to suffer like him. He described this as following the bitter Christ.

Again and again in his texts from the Allstedt period, Müntzer invited and advised his readers to follow the demanding road of personal belief and not to squander the time before God turned the world upside down. The Elect should not be diverted from their decision by any obstacles or dangers, nor by any persecution. These warnings were not just plucked out of thin air, for the administrative area of Allstedt lay as an Electoral Prince's exclave, an

island in an area in which the regulations of the traditional Roman church held sway. In the Spring of 1523 the rulers were instructed by another Imperial mandate to permit the preaching of the gospel only in traditional church forms. Count Ernst von Mansfeld, whose territory directly bordered that of the Allstedt lands, was the first, in the summer of 1523, to forbid his subjects from attending the Allstedt services.

It was not only the subjects of Count Ernst von Mansfeld who arrived in Allstedt in droves to hear the church services, in which they could hear everything and participate in their own language. Word got around to other neighbouring areas, and to towns like Eisleben and Naumburg. Soon hundreds came from outside town. Of course, the charm of novelty also played a part, for, like the early Christians, Müntzer did not use the altar to adore saints and their relics. It had once more become a simple table, behind which the minister would stand with his face to the congregation and distributed the communion of the Lord as both bread and wine. In the exhibition here today, this is hinted at by the bare altar and the human figures.

Müntzer wanted to return to the times of the Apostles. He did not recognise later church forms of service. The decisive element was a person's own confident faith, tested against the Bible. But the Bible itself was not the living word of God. It was rather a guiding principle of historical words spoken by God, a sort of divine 'constitution'. The time of the Apostles was still very near to him. That is why it is to be heeded in the practise of piety. But it was not only the new form of service which attracted so many people to Allstedt. The sources are quite clear about that. It was rather the questions of the goals of life, of the correct way to behave in one's own life, the impression that the traditional relationships were fracturing and great changes were in the offing. Naturally, Müntzer's sermons on hope for a new Christianity, indeed for a return to the original divine order, would have sent out an important message to the whole world. That, too, can be seen in the sources.

It was precisely at this point that the conflict arose which had wide-reaching consequences for both Müntzer and for Allstedt. Müntzer saw himself working towards an apocalyptic goal. Whoever blocked his way was also being an obstacle to God. So it was that he warned Count Ernst von Mansfeld without mincing his words from the pulpit; he called him an

heretical sinner and a tyrant. When the Count complained, he reacted even more severely. Since the people of Allstedt refused to arrest Müntzer, the complainant asked the Electoral Prince to intervene. Müntzer's written justification to the territorial prince can only be understood in the light of his theological convictions. He sets out uncompromisingly the apocalyptic dimension of his divine calling. His duty was to prepare the congregation for the arrival of Christ the Judge. His reforms to the church services and his teachings served that end. According to the prophets, he had to set himself up like an iron wall against the persecutors of the congregation of the Elect such as Count Ernst. It was obvious, he claimed, that God intended a special grace for the Ernestine Princes: but they would gamble it all away if they did not use their power to protect the Elect. But if they placed themselves at God's disposal, their might would be mercifully broken when the Lord Himself took power. For at that time Princes would of course become superfluous.

With this letter dated 4<sup>th</sup> October 1523, Müntzer the Servant of God laid his cards on the table. We do not know of any direct reaction from the Electoral Prince. The injured Count merely received a note from him to the effect that Müntzer had promised to behave responsibly and to refrain from further attacks. That was not the final failed attempt by Müntzer to win over the Saxon princes. The most well-known is the so-called "Sermon Before the Princes", which took place in the court-chamber of Allstedt castle on 13<sup>th</sup> July 1524. He appeared before Duke Johann and his son as a "Servant of the Word of God" – this is how he described himself in the title of the printed version. When he preached that the princes needed a new Daniel who would reveal what God required of them, he doubtless meant himself. He did not balk at imposing a twofold responsibility on the princes: the protection of the Elect and, if necessary, the destruction of the Godless. He drew the justification for this terrifying consequence from the Book of Deuteronomy [13:6]. But the duty of the princes to march forth as avenging angels against the enemies of God – this he took from the New Testament (Matthew 13, 39-42). If they should withdraw from their responsibility, then the sword would be taken from them. He closed his sermon with the words: *"So be bold! He to whom all power is given in heaven and on earth is taking the government into his own hands. May he preserve you, my most beloved, for ever. Amen."*

For reasons of time, I cannot detail the events which followed. The most important events are concisely documented here in the exhibition. It is up to you to study them and to knit them together into a narrative: the defence of the Allstedt gospel in pamphlets which directed themselves more and more against Luther; the destruction of the Mary's Chapel at Mallerbach; Luther's demand to the regional rulers to intervene against the use of violence; the formation of a defence-league, at first in secret on the town defences, later with the entire citizenry – and others from outside town – in the town-hall. After that the persecution of the visitors to the church-services took on a threatening character, especially in Sangerhausen and in the territory of the nobleman Friedrich von Witzleben. Refugees sought shelter inside the town. In June it was feared that the fleeing subjects would be taken back by force. Müntzer was firmly convinced that it was God's will that the protection of the refugees outweighed the laws of the land.

Events came to a head. The territorial lords came under pressure to intervene from the Abbess of Naundorf and Duke Georg. They invited Müntzer, the leading members of the town council and the castellan, to Weimar. The negotiations took place in separate sessions. The representatives of the council, whose ranks were already divided sharply, were ordered to sack the printer, dissolve the league and punish the guilty parties in the Mallerbach affair. Müntzer was admonished to moderate his sermons and to prepare himself for further directives. Only after his return to the castle at Allstedt did he learn from the mayor, council and castellan of the orders from Weimar. There was a flare-up which both sides reported back to the Electoral Prince. Müntzer repeated the argument from his first letter to the territorial princes, but this time supplemented them with the open statement: "*I preach a Christian belief which is not in accord with Luther's*". He was obliged, for the sake of the many people who attended his sermons, to defend them orally and in writing against Luther's distortions. If that should be forbidden to him, then the Prince should take warning from the destruction of the impenitent kings, as set out in the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of Joshua. He had also given a written version of his sermon to the castellan, on how to avoid future insurrection in a godly manner. This time he signed himself as "an earnest Servant of God".

Four days later he secretly left Allstedt, since it had become clear to him that his work for a new world under the rule of Christ had come to an end in this town. The openly

revolutionary phase of Müntzer's life which now followed took place without any contact with Allstedt. Only at the climax of the insurrection in Thuringia, which Müntzer understood to be God's action to establish the world anew, did he address the people of Allstedt with his expectations. He wrote his powerful call to struggle in God's cause with language that fairly hammered out its message: "*Go to it, go to it, while the fire is hot*" etc. It remains the most-printed piece of all his writings, and is even adduced as an example in modern books on rhetoric. Luther printed it immediately as evidence of a murderous prophet. This last stage of his life takes up only a small space at the end of this exhibition.

It is no simple matter to set up an exhibition of Müntzer as a Servant of God, especially as there is no object of his that has come down to us. The usual museum displays are just not possible. On top of that, the time of Müntzer is just as far away as that of Luther. And Müntzer's person and his teachings, against which Luther railed even in his very last sermon, is for us today even more strange. The positions of Luther and Müntzer cannot be reconciled without falsifying them both. So do both of them have to be taken seriously in the "Reformation Decade"?

My answer, as a church-historian, must be: yes. This is dictated first and foremost by scholarly facts. Luther's position as the "first-born" in the Reformation movement cannot be disputed. But Müntzer was also part of the process of abandoning the conventional contractual understanding of religious life and faith: "if you offer me something, I'll reciprocate" with the very heart of Jesus' teaching: life and its final goal are from beginning to end pure gift. In this matter, both Luther and Müntzer were of one mind and both left the Middle Ages far behind. But they differed in their view on how to use that gift. From his own experience, Luther wanted to release Man from the burden of his Past by preaching the Word of God, so that he could fashion the Present in thankfulness and prepare himself for the Future. Forms of worship and services are of secondary importance. Müntzer was concerned that the promised absolution did little to commit people to the establishment of a new order. He had to experience and suffer the liberating proximity of God in his own person. Forms of worship and service assisted this.

Luther's evangelical model has provided many initiatives for modern culture and politics within a framework of regional churches and evangelical territorial princes. Müntzer's model on the other hand has been carried forward in a republican reformed church structure and especially in "free" churches. His apocalyptic teaching certainly led him to catastrophe, but at the same time made it possible to stand before the rulers on an equal footing and to use the time to make changes. The constitutional right to resist [Widerstandsrecht] and the very history of revolution have picked up his example, whether justifiably or not. When, in 1975, the *Bund der Evangelischen Kirchen* (Federation of Evangelical Churches) for the very first time actually commemorated Müntzer, a whole catalogue of unanswered theological questions about the Reformation was opened up. The central question of justification belongs here just as much as political responsibility and the question of the Future.

In these and other questions of consequence, Müntzer had other priorities than the man from Wittenberg. So he also influenced history. Until now, that has been taken into consideration far too little, let alone been seriously researched. The management and planning of the Reformation Decade, with its one-sided orientation on Luther is proof enough of that. Müntzer's life has been broken off at the point where Luther published his Theses. The Allstedt experiment of a new congregation ended after a year and a half. But it is not just in art and literature that an incomplete phrase points to something wider. As an historian of the Reformation, I welcome the fact that the town of Allstedt, and the Sachsen-Anhalt Region have decided on a new permanent exhibition of the Servant of God, Thomas Müntzer. Such a thing can even be extended. The man, whose outline only can be seen on the invitation, was anything other than faceless. He and his works and his errors belong firmly in the Reformation. The tension remains between him and Luther in the basic questions remains. That tension influenced the modern world. Now it is time to discover it in this new exhibition and to let it bear fruit.

Siegfried Bräuer.  
(*trans. Andy Drummond*  
*With advice from Peter Matheson*)