THE REFORMATION--Lesson 23

THE ANABAPTISTS #7

Prayer
Scripture: Matthew 26:51, 52
Hymn: 480 "Prince of Peace! Control My Will"

THE KINGDOM OF GOD IN MÜNSTER

THE CITY:

Münster was the capital of a large and important ecclesiastical principality in Germany. The bishop was a prince of the German Empire and ruled with all the rights of both bishop and secular prince. Münster had been ruled by a succession of exceedingly dissolute and oppressive prince-bishops. The clergy filled most of the posts of government. The choice offices were reserved for the sons of the landed gentry. The townpeople chafed under tyranny and oppressive taxes. Civil insurrections, resembling the Peasants' Revolt, had been frequent. There were uprisings in 1525 and 1527; 1529 was a year of dreadful famine and plague. The city had about 15,000 inhabitants. It had a cathedral and six churches. The prince-bishop resided outside the walls of the city. Some fifteen craft and merchant gilds were very active and were fully represented on the town councils, making it possible for radical changes to come at any time. The prince-bishop and his clergy and monks had been able to keep the Reformation from gaining any standing in the city.

BERNARD ROTHMANN AND THE REFORMATION IN MÜNSTER:

In 1529 a young chaplain, Bernard Rothmann, began preaching in the Church of St. Maurice, outside the walls of the town. He was the son of a poor smith but he had gained a good Humanistic education and was gifted with great reasoning power and eloquence. He had been drawn to the teachings of Luther and had accepted his doctrine of justification by faith without breaking with the Catholic church. He had great sympathy for the oppressed and toiling masses. The artisans streamed out of the gates to hear the young chaplain whom they considered to be one of their own. The clergy of the city recognized his ability but were alarmed at his popularity. Secretly they raised a fund to send him to the University of Cologne for further education.

On the eve of Good Friday, 1531, a sermon denouncing relics and image worship so aroused the people that a mob profaned the altars, tore down the pictures and destroyed the images and decorations in St. Maurice. Rothmann had gone over to the Reformation. When the prince-bishop, Friedrich von Wied, did not molest the preacher he was suspected of Evangelical sympathies. The clergy of the city demanded that the chaplain must go. The gilds gave him money to study in Wittenburg. Rothmann quietly left Münster to visit Reformation centers. He visited with Luther, Melanchthon and Bugenhagen in Wittenburg and was greatly impressed with Melanchthon. He visited Marburg and Speyer. In Strassburg he visited Capito and Schwenfeld.

Rothmann returned to Münster in July, 1531, and the people welcomed him back to St. Maurice. His preaching soon made it a center of Reformation. The gilds and most of the citizens gave him strong support. Among his most ardent supporters was Bernhard Knipperdolling, a leading merchant. The clergy of the city and the emperor, Charles V, pressured the bishop to remove him from the church and to outlaw him. The gildsmen protected him.

On January 23, 1532 Rothmann published a creed of thirty articles. It was Lutheran except on the Lord's Supper. On February 16, 1532, Rothmann preached a Portestant sermon in the courtyard of the Church
of St. Lambert just outside the cathedral square. Inspite of protests from the bishop the town council appointed Rothmann pastor of St. Lambert and gave him the parsonage. On April 10 the council drove the priests from the other five churches and replaced them with evangelical (Lutheran) preachers. One of the five was Henry Rol at St. Giles's. Rol was one of several evangelical preachers driven out of Wassenberg by Catholic Duke John of Cleves-Jülich. In Münster only the cathedral and monasteries remained Catholic.

Rothmann and the evangelical preachers published sixteen articles against the Catholics, denying the sacrificial nature of the Mass and the real presence. They called for worship in the language of the people. In August, 1532, the town council formally authorized the Reformation. The bishop resigned two months later. He was succeeded by Duke Erich of Brunswick-Grubenhagen who was already Bishop of Osnabruck and Paderborn. The new bishop was determined to get rid of Rothmann. He made appeals to the Lutheran princes to get the moderate Lutherans in Münster to abandon Rothmann. Rothmann was ordered to leave the city. The gilds led by Knipperdrolling sent a letter to the authorities declaring they would retain and protect Rothmann at all hazards. The democracy of Münster was openly defying both Catholic and Lutheran authorities.

The bishop died (May 13, 1532) and when Franz von Waldeck was elected bishop he immediately set about undoing the Reformation. The gilds, expecting the worst from the new bishop, pledged life and goods to the defense of Rothmann and his Gospel. Rothmann published his Theses setting forth his doctrine and calling for debates. The council took over all parochial property except the cathedral. The gilds appointed citizens’ committees to keep careful watch on developments and to keep gildsmen prepared to act on short notice. After strong protests the bishop began to take action. Catholics began hiding their possessions. The prince-bishop put chains across the principal streets to prevent communication between different quarters of the city. This meant war. A party of knights attacked the city but were driven off by armed citizens. The bishop gathered Catholic and Lutheran princes at the township of Telgte to form an alliance. While the bishop’s partisans were engaged in a December 26 revel that followed the negotiations, armed citizens surrounded the town and took the bishop’s party prisoners and carried them back to Münster as hostages. Philip of Hesse intervened to prevent full scale war and negotiated a truce in which Münster was declared an Evangelical city and enrolled in the Lutheran Schmalkald League. It was assumed that Rothmann was a Lutheran. A Lutheran, Van der Wieck, was made syndic of the town.

THE RISE OF ANABAPTISM IN MÜNSTER:

It was not long before Rothmann’s sermons made it plain that he was more Zwinglian than Lutheran. He even confessed that he had gotten more help from Strassburg than from Wittenberg. Soon it was apparent that he was more Anabaptist than Zwinglian. Henry Rol had become convinced that infant baptism was unscriptural and he persuaded Rothmann that the Bible did not teach infant baptism. They refused to baptize infants which alarmed and offended Van der Wieck and leading Lutheran citizens. Staprada, the assistant preacher at St. Lambert’s refused to baptize the children of two members of the council. On September 7, 1533, Rothmann, Rol, and Staprada were brought before the council. Staprada was banished and Rothman and the rest of the clergy were threatened with banishment if they again refused to baptize infants. Rothmann defied the council and the majority of the citizens backed him. The council had to back down and Rothmann was allowed to preach in the Church of St. Servatius. The other churches were filled
with Lutherans.

Van der Wieck and the council called for a public debate and brought in Hermann von dem Busche, noted Humanist, defender of the Lutheran Reformation, and professor at Marburg, to defend infant baptism. Catholic theologians were invited and came to support the Lutherans. Rothmann got the best of the argument and was the hero and champion of the citizens.

Rothmann lived an ascetic life and preached Christian charity and a return to the example of the Jerusalem church. Rich began sharing with the poor; creditors cancelled debts; large sums were given to Rothmann to relieve suffering and need. The wealthy mother-in-law of Bernard Knipperdolling was conspicuous for her charity.

Catholic and Lutheran princes both became alarmed that Münster was becoming an Anabaptist city. Rothmann's preaching and the power of the gilds made it impossible to keep Münster in the confederacy of Lutheran cities. Münster became a city of refuge for persecuted peoples from everywhere. The majority of the refugees flocking to the city were Melchiorites. The followers of Melchior Hofmann had been attracted by events in Münster and word began to spread among them that Münster was the New Jerusalem of the prophecies of Hofmann. Rothmann was well acquainted with the works of Hofmann and pledged himself that without reserve he would give himself to caring for the poor people God had placed in his care. Both Rothmann and the magistrates foresaw trouble and even war. Rothmann advised all who did not share his faith to leave the city.

On December 8, 1533, a journeyman smith, Johann Schroder, preached Anabaptist doctrines in the churchyard of St. Lambert's and challenged the Lutheran pastor, Fricius, to a debate. On December 11 the council forbade Rothmann and Schroder to preach and expelled all Anabaptist preachers from the city. Rothmann declared that he was subject to a higher power and he publicly preached in the Church of St. Servatius. When Schroder tried to preach again he was arrested. The gild of smiths rose up and forced the council to release their comrade. The banished Anabaptists returned to Münster. Rothmann published his Bekenntisse, one of the most influential Anabaptist works of the sixteenth century.

By January, 1534, Rothmann controlled Münster. Only the cathedral and St. Lambert's had Lutheran preachers.

DUTCH REVOLUTIONARY PROPHETS INVADE MÜNSTER:

In the late fall of 1533 John Beukels of Leyden had visited Münster, attracted by reports of what was happening there. He returned to Holland with the good news that the developments in Münster presaged the end of the old order and the establishment of the New Jerusalem. His report fired the imagination of John Mathijs who called himself Enoch. John Mathijs called for a resumption of believers' baptism and the recruitment of people for the New Jerusalem. He appointed twenty-seven apostles to spread the message. John Beukels was one of them. They urged their followers to arm themselves to defend the New Jerusalem and to destroy the infidels. Obbe Philips strongly opposed this revolutionary development.

On the eve of Epiphany, 1534, two of the twenty-seven apostles of John Mathijs appeared in Münster, Bartholomew Coekbinder and William de Kuiper. They captivated Rothmann with the wild dreams of John Mathijs and John Beukels and persuaded Rothmann and Rol to be rebaptized as a requirement of the New Covenant. Within eight days fourteen hundred citizens had been rebaptized. Anabaptists poured into the city. John Mathijs and John Beukels led bands of followers into Münster calling for the destruction of all who rejected the message of the new birth and the New Jerusalem. The town council tried to check
Rothmann and his new allies but the citizens rallied behind Rothmann. The bishop appealed to the Lutheran princes to join him in raising an army to besiege the city. Henry Hol and others were sent out to recruit defenders for the New Jerusalem. Multitudes from all over the Netherlands and Germany answered the call, armed themselves as best they could, and headed for Münster by land and by sea. Catholic and Lutheran princes arrested and killed many of them. Catholics and Lutherans slipped out of the city as they could. The burgomaster Tylbeck was baptized. Van der Wieck fled from the city only to be arrested and slaughtered by the bishop. The bishop ordered the besieging army to kill every Anabaptist they could find. On February 23 inside the besieged city Bernard Knipperdolling and Gerhard Kibbenbroick were elected burgomasters and an entirely Anabaptist council was elected.

On February 25 John Mathijs who called himself the prophet Enoch called for the killing of all the "godless" who refused the baptismal covenant. Knipperdolling persuaded him to give the citizens until March 2 to be baptized. Almost all were baptized because they knew if they tried to escape from the city they would be killed on sight by the bishop's soldiers. A blacksmith who dared to call Mathijs a false prophet was killed on the spot by the prophet.

COMMUNISM IN MÜNSTER:

Mathijs and Beukels sent out more ambassadors calling for Covenanters to speed to the holy city of Münster to escape God's judgment. Many tried to answer the call but were turned back or killed. Inside Münster food and provisions were soon running short. Food was made public property. Soon all real property was declared to be common. Doors to houses had to be kept open day and night with only small gratings allowed to keep out pigs and fowls. The supervised communism was partly an outgrowth of military necessity and partly an attempt to restore the primitive church. Boys, girls and women were trained to use weapons. The men started occasional sorties against the besiegers, inflicting and suffering heavy losses.

On the evening of April 3, 1534, John Mathijs believed he received a revelation from the Lord that he should lead one of these sorties the next day. He cried out, "Loved Father, not my will but Thine be done." He arose, shook the hand of each of his companions, kissed each one and then left the room accompanied by his wife. The next day, Easter Sunday, April 4, he and twenty companions went out of one of the gates and fiercely attacked the enemy. Mathijs was killed.

POLAGHY:

John Beukels of Leyden immediately took control of Münster. He dissolved the council and declared himself king. He chose twelve elders or judges and published a new and much stricter law code. Any breach of discipline was to be punished by death. He found authority in Romans 13 that the ruler does not bear the sword in vain and in Amos 9:10 that the sinners should die by the sword. He called the people "Israelites."

In July, 1534, John Beukels called a meeting of the preachers and elders at which he propounded that they inaugurated polygamy. He argued with them for eight days that polygamy was the only way they could fulfill the law of God. God had commanded them to be fruitful, multiply and replenish the earth. There were three women for every man. The only way the women could hope to fulfill God's command would be by polygamy. They should all hasten to fill up the number of the 14,000 of the redeemed. They should follow the example of the patriarchs of the Old Testament who had more than one wife. Paul limited bishops to one wife but others were free to have more than one.

Finally the preachers and elders accepted his proposal and for three days Rothmann preached polygamy in the market place. All
men had to take wives. Every woman had to be under the care of a husband. Every woman had to accept the first man who asked her—later the women demanded the right to refuse unwelcome suitors provided they could find a welcomed suitor.

The men rushed to gather as many wives as possible. John Beuks set the example. He had fallen in love with the beautiful and intellectual young widow of John Mathijs, Divara. He first took her and then added fifteen others. Rothmann took nine wives.

A group of citizens who opposed polygamy, led by Henry Mollenhecke, surprised and imprisoned John Beuks. When he refused to give up polygamy they held a meeting to consider turning the town back to the bishop. While they were deliberating the townspeople with the women being most vocal in their support of polygamy, freed John Beuks. Mollenhecke and forty-eight others were put to death.

The Münsterites were able to capture some supplies and weapons from their enemies. They continued to sent out messengers to recruit reinforcements and to gather supplies that were smuggled through the lines of the besiegers. Hille Fayken, a girl of Münster, tried to follow the example of Judith who murdered Holofernes. Pretending that she wished to betray her city to the bishop she left the city on June 16, 1534, intending to poison the bishop. When her mission was discovered she was beheaded.

On August 31 the bishop's troops stormed the city but were beaten back by the citizens who fought fanatically. The women even poured boiling lime on the soldiers trying to scale the walls.

To celebrate the victory John Beuks had himself formally crowned king of righteousness by the limping prophet, John Dusentschuer. A former priest, Henry Krechtung, became chancellor. Three times a week King John appeared in the market place for his people to prostrate themselves before him and Queen Divara.

On October 13 King John called the people together and announced that he was going to lead them forth to greet Covenanters from the Netherlands who were bringing relief to the city. Then he surprised the people with the announcement that it was a test of their faith and loyalty. The king and queen then invited the people to a type of messianic banquet at which they themselves served the people.

On another occasion the king announced that God had deposed him from the kingship and that he was stepping down. The limping prophet declared that God had just given him a revelation forbidding the king to step down.

King John realized that the city could not hold out much longer without great outside help. He sent out twenty-seven apostles to get help for Zion. All but one, Henry Graess van Borken, were captured and put to death.

Rothmann was the king's royal spokesman. In October, 1534, he published his Restitution, setting forth in detail the Münster program as the restoration of the primitive church. It was printed and smuggled out of the city and widely distributed in an effort to gain more outside support. It called on all true Israelites to take up arms in defense of Münster, the New Jerusalem. Obbe and Dirk Philips and Manno Simons stoutly condemned the Münster revolutionaries and all who tried to support them.

Conditions in Münster grew more serious. King John sent out more messengers with money to buy food in November. By Christmas they had succeeded in getting some food into the city. On Christmas Eve a new mission that included Henry Graess was sent out. Henry Graess had secretly turned traitor but his treacherous plans were discovered and John van Geelen, a member of the mission, was able to repair most of the damage. In February 1535, King John sent out five groups but they failed and the situation grew more serious. On March 23
eight more envoys were sent out. They gathered a gang of three
hundred who made a successful assault on a fortified Cistercian Abbey,
The Old Cloister. Menno Simons' brother, Peter, was killed in the
battle. This led Menno to powerfully preach against the poor, misled
Anabaptists who were following the wild Münster revolutionaries who
were false prophets.

Life grew more wretched in Münster. King John had to appoint
twelve dukes in May to guard the gates of the city. Discipline was
maintained by the severest measures. John promised victory by Easter
and assigned duchies in a victorious and enlarged kingdom. When one
of his wives criticised his rule he had her beheaded in the market
place and he himself trampled on her body while the other wives looked
on. He gave dances and put on shows to keep up morale.

In June, 1534, food was so short that he sent many of the women,
children and aged men out of the city. The besieging army brutally
murdered them. Discouragement and disparagement filled the city.

THE FALL OF MÜNSTER:

The tragic kingdom of Münster came to an end when Hans Eek and
Henry Gresbeck deserted and betrayed one of the gates to the bishop.
With clay models they showed the bishop how to take the whole city.
On June 25, 1534, after a terrible bloody last stand by the defenders
in the market place the city was taken and almost all the inhabitants
slaughtered. Divara was the first woman to be executed but she met
her fate in queenly fashion, steadfastly refusing to recant. Rothmann
was apparently killed in the fighting and no trace of his body was
discovered. Rumors circulated for years that he had escaped and
handbills were scattered describing him and calling for his arrest.

King John, Bernard Knipperdolling, and Bernard Krechtling were
captured and exhibited throughout Northern Germany. Knipperdolling
and Krechtling remained loyal to the Anabaptist faith. King John tried
to recant and offered to persuade Anabaptists to give up violence and
to submit to the authorities if he were spared. The three were turned
over to the executioners to be subjected to the cruelest tortures
they could devise, including red-hot tongs. They were tortured and
executed on January 22, 1534, and their seared bodies were placed
in iron cages and suspended from the tower of the church of St. Lambert.

After the fall of Münster all Anabaptists were accused of all
the extravagances of Münster. Catholics maintained that Münster was
the inevitable and logical result of Protestantism and of breaking
with the pope. Lutherans and Zwinglians accused all Anabaptists
of anarchy, communism and polygamy—Münster was the natural and final
fruit of Anabaptism. Hatred and persecution of the Anabaptists was
greater than ever. Everywhere they were distrusted, hated, hunted
down and put to death.

Obbe and Dirk Philips and Menno Simons worked diligently to
spread the message that all Anabaptists were not Münster revolutionaries
and they labored to gather the persecuted and scattered Anabaptists
that the primitive church might be restored.