

LUTHER AT WORMS

New York Times
April 17, 1921, pg. 26

Martin Luther was called before CHARLES V's first Diet at Worms somewhere about 6 o'clock 400 years ago today. He went under the Emperor's safe-conduct, but such a guarantee was doubtful in those days. His friends feared for his safety. CHARLES had no use for rebels against authority in Church or State, but to be chosen Emperor, in one of the most amusingly or distressingly corrupt of elections, he had to make a lot of "pledges." This he had to promise FREDERICK of Saxony, who was "mentioned" as a candidate, that no subject of the empire should be outlawed without a hearing. The heretic's journey to Worms was through a sort of popular triumph. When brought before the Diet the titles of certain books, containing his theological opinions, were read. He was asked if he was the author and if he would recant those opinions. He was taken by surprise. He had expected to meet explicit charges and was prepared to defend his opinions. He therefore asked for time.

On April 18 he appeared before the Diet again. Would he defend all the books whose authorship he admitted or would he recant in part? So he was asked, in German and in Latin. He said he would recant and throw his books into the fire if it could be proved by Scripture that his teaching was erroneous. Would he say "Revoco," I recant. He would not:

"Unless I am convicted by Scriptures or by right reason (for I trust neither Popes nor Councils, since they have often erred and contradicted themselves) **** I neither can nor will recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to act against conscience. God help me. Amen."

That may be said to be his culminant hour. There he won a popular sympathy greater than he was always to retain. From Worms

he went to the Wartburg, under the protection of FREDERICK the Wise, where he was to stay for almost a year. The Edict of Worms, putting him under the ban of the empire and ordering his surrender to the Government on the expiration of his safe-conduct, was passed on May 26. His future career, like much of his past, must always, perhaps, be seen through theological or national prejudices. Strange to many of this age appear those old ferocious controversies, but when Heaven or hell was thought to depend on a dogma there seemed justification for the ferocity.

Politics was inseparably mixed up with theology. In Germany as in England nationalism had a considerable part in the revolt against ecclesiastical authority, a revolt unconsciously caused in part by social and economic movements and soon accompanied by class insurrections. About the essential causes of the Reformation, as about its results, there is to be apparently endless controversy. To the intellectuals of our time "justification by faith" is hardly more than a futile husk of words; but every great fermentation of thought, every passionate conflict of ideas, must remain a permanent interest to thoughtful men. It is by belief and symbol that men have mainly lived. The Franco-Prussian War, and still more the Great War, produced in France and elsewhere a reaction essentially unjust against LUTHER. The worship of power, the exaltation of the State, even the megalomaniac theories of NIETZSCHE, have all been set down as sequels of LUTHER, of his "haughty and aristocratic reform," as MR. DENYS COCHIN called it. His will always be a name of division. Yet, setting aside all questions of religious tenet, what an inexhaustible vigor, power, humor, this peasant, this ecclesiastical authoritarian rebel against ecclesiastical authority had!

There were no "cobwebs on his mouth." What a brilliant, easy, unbuttoned book is the "Table Talk"! Some of his hymns are

Luther at Worms

New York Times. April 17, 1921

Pg. 26

strong and fervent. His translation of the Bible remains a great monument of German literature. If he called COPERNICUS “a great big fool”; if he was no democrat or friend of social amelioration, he is to be judged accordingly to the lights of his own time and not of ours – which posterity may judge just as severely. A salient and abounding personality, whose word and work continue to influence millions of men, he has given his name to that great religious confession, the Lutherans, who will have an especial part and pride in commemorating the anniversaries of today and tomorrow. In a man who has touched the inner and the outer life of so many generations there must have been an enduring vital and creative quality. Skeptical, accomplished and usually tolerant GEORGE SANTAYANA made the singular remark that no one could be more unintelligent than LUTHER. On the contrary, a fiery intelligence – and temper – characterized him. So hard it is even for a philosopher to be just to the minds whose opinions he scorns.