

The Four Lübeck Martyrs

Last Friday I talked about the visit some of us made two weeks ago to the historic German city of Lübeck and the project to remember victims of National Socialism. At the same time we were taken to one of the two memorials to the four Lübeck clergymen who stood up against the regime.

Three of these were young priests at the city's Roman Catholic Church of the Sacred Heart: Johannes Prassek, Hermann Lange and Eduard Müller. The role of the Roman Catholic Church in Germany in the nineteen thirties and forties was somewhat ambivalent. Much of the population and many Christians supported the regime if not actively at least by default. However, the three priests came to see that National Socialist ideology was contrary to Christian teaching. For them the racist and atheistic ideology of the regime was irreconcilably at odds with Christian belief. This was reflected in their preaching and in practical action. For example, one of them, Eduard Müller, set up a rival youth group that met at the same time as the official Hitler Youth.

The three Lübeck priests received pastoral but not open support from the Church. They were arrested and on the 10th of November 1943 they were executed by beheading.

The fourth martyr, Karl Friedrich Stellbrink, was Lutheran pastor at the Luther Church in Lübeck. He was older and served in the First World War. The Lutheran Church at the time was to a large extent anti-Catholic and anti-Jewish, and Pastor Stellbrink at first shared those views. However, he too came to see the incompatibility of the National Socialist ideology and practices with the Christian Gospel. Unlike the Roman Catholic priests he received no support from his Church. Indeed he was disowned.

In the days before ecumenism he became friends with the three priests and was indeed executed with them. It is said that after their execution the blood of the four men mingled together. In 2011 the three priests were beatified by the Roman Catholic Church and Pastor Stellbrink is included in the Lutheran calendar of saints. There are permanent memorials and exhibitions in both the Church of the Sacred Heart and the Luther Church.

What can we learn from the story of these four men? I would suggest two thoughts. The events of the nineteen thirties and forties belie the assumption that the majority is always right. History has shown that it was courageous men and women like the four Lübeck Martyrs and also the members of the small Confessing Church who upheld true Christian values summed up in our Lord's words in today's Bible reading. Secondly – and it may seem contradictory to say this in this church and within the context of this service – that was not a time for reconciliation. The place for that was after the War. What was needed then were voices to speak up for humanity and justice and for the assurance of God's love. The challenge is always to discern which is appropriate and required.

*15 July 2016
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