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‘FROM FEAR TO FAITH’

A sermon preached by David Samuel, Director of Church Society, at the Martyrs’ Memorial, Oxford, 1st July, 1989 on the 500th Anniversary of the birth of Archbishop Thomas Cranmer.

2 Timothy 1: 7 ‘For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control’.

Thomas Cranmer was born five hundred years ago in the village of Aslacton in Nottinghamshire. He was born into a world that was dominated by religion, but it was largely a religion of fear.

FEAR

There was the *fear of purgatory*, for the church taught that after death virtually every Christian went to purgatory on account of his sins. The sufferings of purgatory, they were told, were as intense as those of hell except that they were not of eternal duration. Remission of time in purgatory could be obtained by indulgences granted for good works, pilgrimages, fasting and prayers.

There was the *fear of the priest*, for the priest had power over the souls of people, He could grant forgiveness of sins or withhold it. He was the channel of sacramental grace: to be cut off from the sacraments was to be cut off from salvation. So the priest held a position of enormous power over men’s souls.

There was also the *fear of Christ*, for at that time Our Lord was depicted chiefly as a terrible judge, not a compassionate Saviour. The way to find mercy at the hands of Christ, people were told, was to pray to Mary; she would intercede with her son for sinners. And so Mary was called the *Refuge of Sinners*.

All this fear was the fruit of ignorance, ignorance of the Bible. The Bible was a closed book to priest and people alike. Many priests did not know the Lord’s Prayer or the Ten Commandments or where in the Bible to find them, and so could not teach the people. Instead they preached about the legends of the saints. Cranmer wrote many years afterwards of ‘the errors of the mass, of pilgrimages, purgatory, pardons and many other superstitions and errors that came from Rome: being brought up from my youth in them, and noursled therein for lack of good instruction from my youth, the outrageous floods of papistical errors at the time overflowing the world’.

All this was a travesty of true religion. ‘For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control’.

BIBLE

Thank God, the Reformation changed all that. It came about with the rediscovery of the Bible. It began in Germany with Martin Luther. Luther’s great quest was for a gracious God, how could he be at peace with God. He followed the teachings of the church; he even entered a monastery to try to make sure of salvation, but he found no peace. It came to him eventually from the Bible, when he began to study Paul’s Epistle to the Romans and understood what it means to be justified by faith, to have the righteousness of Christ counted to him as a free gift. These teachings came across the North Sea to England, and in particular to Cambridge, where Cranmer was by then a Fellow of Jesus College. He did not embrace them straightaway. He set himself to study the Bible for three years to see if these teachings agreed with it. When he had done that he spent a further three years studying the Fathers. He came to the conclusion that Luther was right. This was the true and Catholic faith, not the teaching of the Church of Rome. He wrote: ‘This (justification by faith alone)

is the strong rock and foundation of Christian religion...this whosoever denieth is not to be counted for a Christian man’.

REFORMATION

In time, Cranmer did three things to establish these great teachings of Scripture in the Church of England. He encouraged the King to set up the English Bible in parish churches. He was anxious that the people should read and hear the Bible for themselves. He wrote that beautiful prayer: ‘Blessed Lord, who has caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them...’ He believed the health and salvation of the individual depended on the knowledge of the Bible.

But more than that he believed that the Church must also be subject to the teaching of Scripture. Cranmer saw the Church in two ways. There is the church of true believers known only to God: this is always small, despised and persecuted in this world. There is also the visible church. This is the Church of Christ only if it adheres to the Scriptures. ‘If the church proceed further to make any new articles of faith, besides the Scripture, or direct not the form of life according to the same; then it is not the pillar of truth, nor the church of Christ, but the synagogue of Satan and the temple of anti-Christ. Here is a warning for the visible, institutional churches today. Scripture must be supreme and sufficient.

He substituted for the mass a simple communion service. The central concept of the mass is that it is a sacrifice for sins. But Christ made one perfect sacrifice for sins upon the cross, once for all. We come now to receive the benefits of his death, by faith. The idea of mass-sacrifice, said Cranmer, is ‘injurious to the sacrifice of Christ... it is an abominable blasphemy to give that office or dignity to a priest, which pertaineth only to Christ, or to affirm that the church hath need of any such sacrifice’.

PREACHING

Cranmer brought preaching back to its proper place - to the forefront; to where it had been when our Lord taught the multitudes; to where it was when St. Paul preached the Gospel throughout the known world. Cranmer and the other Reformers spoke of preaching as ‘the office of salvation’. Take away preaching and you take away salvation, for ‘faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the word of God’.

Thus the religion of fear was replaced by that of power and love and self-control. Power - to come into the presence of God by the blood of Christ without any human intermediary. Love - for God, which is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit: ‘for we have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear but the spirit of adoption, whereby we cry “Abba, Father”’. A sound mind - discernment, understanding, an intelligent grasp of the truth in place of ignorance. That was what the Reformation did for men and women. Bishop Ryle sums it all up in these words: ‘The Reformation found Englishmen steeped in ignorance and left them in possession of knowledge; found them without Bibles and left them with a Bible in every parish; found them in darkness and left them in comparative light; found them priest-ridden and left them enjoying the liberty Christ bestows; found them strangers to the blood of atonement, to faith, grace and holiness and left them with the key to those things in their hands; found them blind and left them seeing; found them slaves and left them free. For ever let us thank God for the Reformation’. And let us thank God for Thomas Cranmer, who was under God the architect of the Reformation in England.

DANGER

Now, if I could leave things there, that would be just fine; but I cannot, for the Reformation is in danger as never before. Twenty years ago John Stott said ‘It is sometimes said that we must not fight the battles of the Reformation again. This would be true if the battles then bravely fought had

been decisively won. But, alas! some of the very doctrines for the repudiation of which the Reformation martyrs died are gaining the ascendancy in the church again. The evangelical faith is in jeopardy in the Church of England as it was in the 16th century. Latimer's candle is in danger of being snuffed out!' Things are much worse now!

There are those who have been working during the last twenty years to undo the Reformation, and doing it openly! Services have been changed to bring them closer to those of the Church of Rome. A.R.C.I.C. has produced statements to compromise the teaching of the 39 Articles. There has been a timetable for reunion with Rome, which has accidentally been frustrated by the issue of the ordination of women. In his sermon at Canterbury Cathedral this Easter, Dr. Runcie said. 'The once confident prediction that the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches would be united by Easter 1990 now seems no more than a wild dream'. It was as near as that! But they will try again. In September Dr. Runcie goes to Rome and will attend a papal mass. What would Archbishop Cranmer have thought of that? who said from the scaffold in St. Mary's church 'As for the pope, I refuse him as Christ's enemy and anti-Christ, with all his false doctrine. And as for the sacrament, I believe as I have taught in my book against the Bishop of Winchester, the which my book teacheth so true a doctrine of the sacrament, that it shall stand at the last day before the judgement of God, where the papistical doctrine contrary thereto shall be ashamed to show her face'.

TESTIMONY

Yes, it will stand, for Cranmer was dealing with eternal truths. And the very stones of St. Mary's will cry out against what is now going on in the Church of England to corrupt its doctrine and join it once more with Rome. Cranmer's words were too much for those who stood by. Pandemonium broke out, 'Stop the heretic's mouth, and take him away!' cried the preacher. They pulled him down from the platform and took him out for execution. When he came to the stake, as Foxe says, 'he stood to his tackle'. Yes, he had recanted under pressure, but now he had gloriously withdrawn his recantation. The hand that signed it should suffer first.

*Makeshort! Makeshort! and so they lit the wood.
Then Cranmer lifted his left hand to heaven,
And thrust his right into the bitter flame;
And crying, in his deep voice, more than once
'This hand offended, this unworthy hand!'
So held it till it all was burned, before the flame had reach'd his body; I stood near -
Mark'd him - he never uttered moan of pain;
He never stirred or writhed, but like a statue,
Unmoving in the greatness of the flame,
Gave up the ghost, and so passed martyr-like.*

The message of Cranmer's life and death is: Stand firm in the faith of Christ and in the Scriptures. Do not compromise with Rome or with ecumenism. Hold fast the truth and, whatever the consequences, God will honour such faithfulness.

David Samuel was Director of Church Society during the 1980s and early 1990s.