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THOMAS CRANMER

Martyred Oxford, 21 March 1556

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When Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, was burned at the stake on 21 March 1556, it looked as though his lifetime's work had come to nothing. All that he had laboured for in the reform of the Church of England had been undone and he had seen some of his closest friends and allies walk to their gruesome deaths for the same cause. Yet, 450 years later we continue to benefit from Cranmer's labours and we give thanks to God for all that He did through the Archbishop. It was Cranmer's musings, before he became Archbishop, which caused Henry VIII to make the first step in securing independence for the nation from the political power of the papacy. It was Cranmer who under Edward VI produced the Book of Common Prayer which survived the turmoil of the next 110 years to become part of what has marked out the Church of England as a Reformed Catholic Church.

It is always sobering to read the historical accounts in Scripture because they give us a "warts and all" picture of the men and women whom God used. Whether it be doubting Abraham, adulterous and murdering David or denying Peter our heroes are just as fallible and weak as we are. For this reason the Lord Jesus Christ shines out all the more in Scripture as the one who was without sin. There is no point therefore seeking to see perfection from the heroes of later years and this is so with Cranmer. Like John Jewel, Cranmer was at heart a quiet and peaceable scholar and when it came to the crunch he denied his convictions to save his life. Unlike Jewel, recantation did not work for Cranmer, he was too great a prize for his opponents, and Cranmer was able to walk the Martyrs path that Latimer, Ridley and so many others had walked before him. It could be argued that Cranmer thus got no more than he deserved because as his office required he presided over the trial and execution of men and women because of their beliefs. However, it is recognised that Cranmer did go to great lengths in seeking to spare the lives of his opponents and on occasion incurred the wrath of Henry VIII for doing so.

Cranmer's Life

Cranmer was born in Nottinghamshire in 1489, his family were neither rich nor noble but they appear to have been reasonably well-to-do with some standing. Thomas' father died when he was just 10 and in common with many boys of promise he was sent away to University at the age of 14. At Cambridge he made the most of his studies and around the age of 20 his studies shifted to Erasmus and Luther. He remained at the University as an academic and grew a strong attachment to the Scriptures and to their authority.

By the mid 1520s it is reckoned that Cranmer was convinced that the power of the Papacy over England needed to be broken. It was a comment of his made at a dinner party which set in chain the events that led not only to this break but also his own rise to prominence. At this time Henry VIII was seeking to have his marriage dissolved. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the case the Papacy had dissolved similar marriages (where the monarch had produced no heir) but refused to do so for Henry. Cranmer's dinner time comment was to suggest that the King should consult the Universities for their opinions rather than the papacy. When word reached Henry, Cranmer was recruited for the task of consultation.

Apparently out of gratitude and because Henry saw the qualities of Cranmer the King proposed him as Archbishop and this was confirmed by Papal Bull in 1533. Cranmer was far from happy about leaving academia for what was a political role as Archbishop nor was he willing to make the necessary oaths without qualification. In a public declaration he asserted that his oath to the Pope should not be seen as over-riding his loyalty to the King and nation.

The Archbishop

As Archbishop under a despotic King, Cranmer had to tread carefully. Nevertheless, he was perfectly prepared to stand up to the King where necessary. This did not always please Henry but it also meant that the King came both to respect and in particular to trust Cranmer. When most of your advisors only tell you what they think you want to hear, how can you truly trust them? Because Cranmer was not afraid to stand up to the King he thereby demonstrated that he was not duplicitous.

Cranmer's theological views seem to have developed during his time in office. He longed to reform the Church and to see greater understanding of the Bible. Indeed many of the reforms under Henry were intended to set the Word of God free – for example by ensuring that English translations of the Bible were permitted and not only permitted but required by law to be placed (and chained) in every Church. However, he came only fairly slowly to understand the full consequences of his own beliefs. Accepting the supreme authority of the Bible meant that much of the Roman-catholic teaching had to be rejected because it did not derive from the Bible, had arisen late in the life of the Church and indeed contradicted the plain teaching of Scripture. Thus with time Cranmer came to a fully reformed position.

However, in order to use his office to bring about reform Cranmer had to go slowly. Part of his task was to educate Henry. Whilst there were significant concessions during Henry's lifetime by and large the old King remained catholic in doctrine and resisted the further reform of the Church. However, Henry was quite content for Cranmer and other reformers to take the lead in teaching the young Prince Edward. During these latter years Cranmer was a target for those seeking to suppress reform and several attempts were made to discredit him and turn the King against him. It was largely because Henry was so fond of Cranmer and had such great trust in him that these tactics failed, though it was a close thing on occasion.

When Henry died and Edward ascended to the throne he was himself ready and willing to embrace fully the reformed teaching and Cranmer and those others close to the boy King made hay whilst the sun shone. The changes did not happen all at once but were gradually introduced and were incomplete when Edward died.

Cranmer had reluctantly and belatedly agreed to support Jane Grey as Queen in favour of Mary Tudor. For a time he stood against the Marian reforms but it was inevitable that he would become a victim of the new regime. He was charged with treason and imprisoned but not sentenced to death for this. Instead it was for heresy that Cranmer was tried and executed. It took a long time to break the peace loving man but after threats and promises, deprivation and long imprisonment Cranmer did break and signed a recantation of his firmly held beliefs. Realising that he had been deceived, and would not be released, Cranmer set about having the last word. As he stood before the pyre he used his final public prayer to profess his reformed faith, to repudiate the error of transubstantiation and to denounce the Pope as Antichrist. Then, as the flames licked about him he put the hand that had signed his recantation into the fire first with his famous last words "This hand hath offended."

So it was that he died apparently having lost the battle, the work of reform for which he had laboured all undone. But in the plans and purposes of God the Reformation in England was not to be won simply by the scholars pen and the preachers words, but by the blood of the martyrs. When the persecution ended and God removed Mary from the throne the tide turned again and under Elizabeth the nation consolidated its Protestantism and the English Church returned almost entirely to the reformed doctrines and liturgy which Cranmer had laboured to introduce.

Cranmer's Legacy

Cranmer presents an interesting figure in so many ways. In a day when we have witnessed evangelicals seeking to gain power in order to change the church it is possible to see Cranmer as an example. There is no doubt that he did have to be prepared to compromise in his own convictions in order to bring forward the reformation step by painful step. The difference from today is that he did this not simply to win favour with others, but because Henry wielded immense power and the only way to bring change was to recognise that it would come painfully slowly. But Cranmer did not change his views as many today seem to do when they gain positions of authority, indeed he became more reformed. He never stopped trying to move Henry and the Church further along the road to reform and when the opportunity came he took hold of it with two hands and acted.

Until fairly recently we would have said that Cranmer's greatest legacy was the Book of Common Prayer. It epitomises what the post-Reformation Church of England has sought to be. His liturgy preserved the sense of continuity as the English branch of the one holy catholic and apostolic church. But he firmly reformed that heritage under the Word of God so that running through the BCP is the authority of Scripture (and plenty of it), the centrality of the atoning sacrifice of Christ and that we are justified by faith alone.

It has been alleged, in fact it was said to my face by a Bishop, that reformed theology cannot be detached from 16th Century language. Because reformed theology is biblical theology and because we do not insist on using the original languages of Scripture I can see no reason in principle why we cannot express the same great truths in contemporary English. What I find disturbing about modern evangelicalism is that our liturgy is often shallow or non-existent and whilst preaching is not lost the reading of scripture and of scripturally rich texts which is such a feature of the BCP is replaced by notices, introductions, linking comments and sometimes banal choruses.