

## Article reprinted from *Cross†Way* Issue Autumn 2012 No. 126

(C)opyright Church Society; material may be used for non-profit purposes provided that the source is acknowledged and the text is not altered.

### PETER MARTYR VERMIGLI (1499-62)

By David Phipps

#### His Life

I remember the time before last that the England football team was in trouble, that there was a fuss because the FA imported Fabio Capello, an Italian who knew very little English. If the Press had known a little Church History, they would have seen that it was not the first occasion on which it had happened. In 1547, after the death of Henry VIII, it was possible for the Church of England to move in a reformed direction, so Archbishop Cranmer imported Peter Martyr Vermigli, an Italian who did not know much English to help out. In 1549 he became Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford, and his lack of English (I don't know whether he ever learned it) was no handicap at all because everyone in all the universities operated in Latin. This year is the 450th anniversary of his death.

At Oxford, he gathered a small circle of pupils round him, one of whom was John Jewel, of whose *Apology* we have celebrated the 450th anniversary this year. Jewel attended his lectures and acted as his notary at the famous disputation on the Eucharist held in 1549. The earliest reference to Jewel's *Apology* comes in a very modest letter from Jewel to Vermigli, whom he elsewhere refers to as 'my very dear friend and father,' and 'my most esteemed master in Christ.' It was written in February 1562, after Queen Elizabeth had come to the throne, and a few months before Vermigli died:

We have lately published an apology for the change of religion among us, and our departure from the church of Rome. I send you the book, though it is hardly worth sending to such a distance.

The same was true of Nicholas Ridley. Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* says that: 'Dr. Ridley was first called to the favouring of Christ and his gospel, by the reading of Bertram's book of the sacrament [*De Corpore et Sanguine Domini*]; and the conference with archbishop Cranmer, and with Peter Martyr, did not a little confirm him in that belief.'

What about his name and background? He was born in Florence in 1499. At his baptism he was given the name Piero Mariano Vermigli. In 1518 (the year before Luther's 95 theses) he became an Augustinian canon (just like Luther) and at that time changed his name to Pietro Martire, probably in honour of Peter of Verona, a Dominican and a member of the Inquisition, who was assassinated in 1252, and made Saint Peter Martyr.

By 1537 he had become abbot of the monastery in Naples and had learned Hebrew, and it was here that he came into contact with the writings of Bucer and Zwingli, but seemingly not of Luther, and learned the doctrine of justification by faith. He soon ran into trouble! Whilst preaching on 1 Corinthians, 3, he did not expound verses 13 – 15 to justify the Roman doctrine of purgatory. For this he was denounced as a heretic, but managed to clear himself. Slowly, several of his colleagues were converted to Christ, and they began to teach the New Testament.

When, in 1542, a warrant was issued for their arrest, he and three of his colleagues fled Italy for the safety of the Reformed churches in Switzerland, but he did not settle there. His next move was to Strasbourg, where he was invited to teach Old Testament and become a colleague of Martin Bucer. Whilst there, he married Catherine Dammartin, an ex-nun, who had similarly become a Protestant. In 1549, as the Reformation started to get underway in England, both he and Bucer came over and Bucer became Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge, Vermigli Regius Professor at Oxford.

The fact that he brought Catherine along with him caused riots in Oxford. His task was wider than Oxford. He wrote that ‘Also I was often called to convocations held at London about ecclesiastical matters.’

When Queen Mary came to the throne in 1553, Vermigli had to flee to the continent to avoid persecution. In the meantime, Catherine had died, but this did not stop the authorities exercising petty spite by disinterring her corpse and putting it on trial for heresy! Since she had not learned English, it was difficult to find evidence against her, so she was not burned at the stake but merely thrown on the local dung heap. After Mary had died, the local Protestants gathered as many of Catherine’s remains as they could find and, to prevent any further desecration, mingled them with the remains of Frideswide, patron saint of Oxford, and buried them both in the same grave.

### **His Theological Contribution to the Church of England**

Peter’s chief contribution to the Reformation in England was in the area of sacramental theology. Calvin even wrote of this area of faith that: ‘The whole was crowned by Peter Martyr, who has left nothing to be desired.’ Professor Thomas Torrance wrote that he ‘was undoubtedly one of the finest scholars and ablest theologians of his generation, and must be ranked close to Calvin himself with whom he stood in the highest estimation and with whom he was in the fullest agreement.’

The unreformed view of the sacraments was that they always, without exceptions, were effective. The erudite expression is that they convey grace *ex opere operato*, in virtue of the work done. In the popular mind, it was almost magic when the priest said the words of consecration and the nature of the elements changed. This is illustrated by the fact that the expression *hocus pocus* is a corruption of the Latin words of institution, *Hoc est corpus meum*. This whole area is very complicated, but the mediaeval Roman view was that unless a barrier was put up, people received grace simply because the priest had performed the right ceremony in the right way. Faith does not come into it. This view has been fossilized in the Roman Catholic Church because they are committed to the teaching of the Council of Trent, which comes from this time. It said that: ‘If anyone shall say that grace is not conferred *ex opere operato*, but that belief in the Divine promise alone suffices to obtain grace, let him be anathema [cursed].’

In contrast, Vermigli helped with the 1553 version of our Article 25, which teaches that ‘In such only as worthily receive the same they have an wholesome effect and operation, and yet not that of the work wrought (*ex opere operato*), as some men speak.... But they that receive the Sacraments unworthily, purchase to themselves damnation as St. Paul saith.’

His understanding of the Lord’s Supper is that which is very familiar now to all of us. The bread and the wine are changed not into the body and blood of Christ, as Roman Catholics believe, but into signs of these things. This is rooted in the Fathers, as he says, ‘We say with Augustine that the sacramental symbols are visible words.’ The Holy Communion is therefore an event – it is the doing and receiving in which its truth lies – rather than a special object. We therefore neither reserve nor venerate the consecrated elements.

He wrote to Bucer in January 1551, criticizing the communion of the sick in the 1549 Prayer Book, which allowed communion by extension without the words of consecration being recited in front of the sick person: ‘In this affair it offended me, that what pertains chiefly to the Lord’s Supper is not repeated there; and this when – as I think you also feel – the words of the Supper pertain rather to men than either to bread or to wine.’

As his disciple, Bishop Jewel, writes in his *Apology*:

We say that the eucharist is the sacrament or visible symbol of the body and blood of Christ, in which

the death and resurrection of Christ, and what he did in his human body, is in a manner represented to our eyes, that we may give him thanks for his death, and our deliverance by it.... We say, that the bread and wine are the holy and heavenly mysteries of the body and blood of Christ; and that in them Christ himself, the true bread of eternal life, is so exhibited to us as present, that we do by faith truly take his body and blood; and yet at the same time we speak not this so as if we thought the nature of the bread and wine were totally changed and abolished.... For neither did Christ ever design that the wheaten bread should change its nature, and assume a new kind of divinity, but rather that it might change us.

This point about receiving in faith is made forcibly by Vermigli in a letter to Bullinger from 1552:

Nothing more is to be granted to the sacraments than to the external word of God, for by both these kinds of word is signified and shown to us the salvation obtained for us through Christ, which as many as are made partakers of as believe these words and signs, not indeed by the virtue of the words or of the sacraments, but by the efficacy of faith.... [It is] impossible that the sacraments should be worthily received, unless those who receive them have beforehand that which is signified by them, for unless faith is present, they are always received unworthily.

This doctrine is pure Peter Martyr, and it is pure historic Anglicanism because it is pure Scripture.

Apart from a large correspondence with the English Reformers, particularly Jewel, this was really the end of Peter's association with the Church of England. He was invited back on the death of Queen Mary, but chose to stay on the Continent. First he went to be Professor of Divinity at Strasburg. He soon moved from there to be Professor of Hebrew at Zurich, partly because his views on the eucharist were closer to those of Calvin, rather than Luther. He died in Zurich in 1562 – just 450 years ago this year.

*Revd Dr David Phipps has ministered in Coventry, Wales, Cornwall and Devon where he now lives.*