

## Counting the Cost: Thomas Cranmer by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> March 2021 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst (the fifth in a sermon series entitled: Counting the cost: Heroes of the faith)

Readings: 1 Peter 5:1-11, Psalm 119:105-112 (BCP), John 12:20-26

### Introduction: making sense of worship

Have you ever been on holiday abroad and wandered into a church where a service was being held – in a language you don't know? I can think of times when I've been in Greece and done just that. Priests were intoning prayers – or maybe they were singing a psalm or a piece of scripture. Whatever it was, it was all Greek to me. Now, of course, there's more to worship than understanding what is being said. You can be drawn into the atmosphere, the sense of being in a holy place and being part of something beyond yourself. But humans are also thinking beings, so being able to use your mind in worship can also help you in your spiritual growth.

### Introducing Thomas Cranmer



Thomas Cranmer in 1545, by Gerlach Flick

Today's "hero of the faith" is a man whose mission was to enable people to hear the Word of God speaking to them in the Bible and to respond in worship that was understandable and engaged the mind. As the Archbishop of Canterbury at the height of the Reformation in England, Thomas Cranmer was in a unique position to support the introduction of Reformation principles into the worship of the Church of England. And 1549 was a watershed year.

1549 was when the first Book of Common Prayer in English was published. Cranmer had already published a few pieces of liturgy in English, but this containing all the services and prayers that would be needed for Sunday worship, weekday worship, baptisms, weddings, funerals – the works. Although

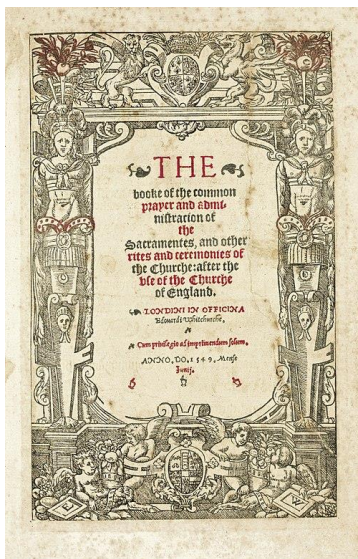
it passed through a committee of Bishops and other worthies, it mostly came from the pen of Thomas Cranmer himself, the fruit of many years of study by this Cambridge academic turned reluctant Archbishop. The Book was published under an Act of Parliament that made it the only form of worship that could legally be used. No more Latin masses. And anyone using a form of worship not contained within the Book would be punished.

You might perhaps think that after centuries of hearing services in Latin that they didn't understand, the people of England would have welcomed the change. But when it comes to religion, people on the whole tend to be rather resistant to

change. We are comfortable with the familiar. How many of you remember the introduction of the Alternative Services in the 60's and 70's? They were especially controversial when "thee" and "thou" were swapped for "you", when speaking to God. Some people felt it wasn't right speaking to God in such familiar terms. And what about that new-fangled idea of sharing the peace with other people in the church – how embarrassing to have to give a religious greeting to the person in a pew near you!

And in the same way, when the Book of Common Prayer was introduced in 1549, there was an uprising against its use in Devon and Cornwall which had to be put down by force. At the same time, many of the Protestant theologians from the Continent, who were invited to England once Edward VI became king, criticised the book for being too Catholic. It seems that Cranmer himself wasn't fully satisfied with it either, but saw it as a first step towards making Church of England worship thoroughly Protestant. And so 3 years later, in 1552, a new version was published, which is pretty much the same as that which is still used today, except for a few minor changes under Elizabeth I and James 1, and again under Charles II in 1662.

So what was Cranmer's thinking in creating this new Prayer Book?



### **The Reasons for the Book of Common Prayer**

The Preface to the 1549 Book of Common Prayer<sup>1</sup> begins with these words:

**THERE** was never any thing by the wit of man so well devised, or so sure established, which in continuance of time hath not been corrupted: as, among other things, it may plainly appear by the Common Prayers in the Church, commonly called Divine Service...

In other words, the original forms of church worship have been corrupted over the years. The ancient custom of the Church, Cranmer says, was to have the Bible read in services so that the clergy might

be stirred up to godliness themselves, and be more able to exhort others by wholesome doctrine, and to confute them that were adversaries to the truth; and further, that the people (by daily hearing of holy Scripture read in the Church) might continually profit more and more in the knowledge of God, and be the more inflamed with the love of his true Religion.

You can hear the Reformation principle of making the Bible accessible to everyone. The Preface goes on to claim:

But these many years passed, this godly and decent order of the ancient Fathers hath been so altered, broken, and neglected, by planting in uncertain Stories, and Legends, with multitude of Responds, Verses, vain Repetitions, Commemorations, and Synodals;

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<sup>1</sup> <http://prayerbook.ca/resources/bcponline/original-preface/>

that commonly when any Book of the Bible was begun, after three or four Chapters were read out, all the rest were unread.

A further problem, it continues, is that the service is in Latin:

... And moreover, whereas St. Paul would have such language spoken to the people in the Church, as they might understand, and have profit by hearing the same; the Service in this Church of England these many years hath been read in Latin to the people, which they understand not; so that they have heard with their ears only, and their heart, spirit, and mind, have not been edified thereby.

The Preface goes on to complain about the complexity of rules governing services and about the diversity of forms of service in use. All of which, it is claimed, will be solved by everyone throughout the land using this new Book of Common Prayer.

By the time he wrote and then re-wrote the Book of Common Prayer, Thomas Cranmer was a committed Protestant. And it is Protestant theology that is embedded in the Prayer Book, most notably in the service of Holy Communion. The Catholic understanding of the Mass was that when the priest said the Eucharistic Prayer and consecrated the bread and wine, they became by a miracle physically the body and blood of Christ (the doctrine of transubstantiation), which the priest then offered to God as a sacrifice. This had two important implications: first, that Christ's sacrifice on the Cross must be insufficient for the salvation of the world, if priests had to offer further sacrifices for sins, and second, that believers depended on the mediation of priests, and the Church as an institution, for their salvation. This had led to the practice of people paying priests to say mass for their souls or the souls of departed loved ones, connected with the belief in purgatory. So richer people could get time off purgatory when they died by masses being said for them.

By contrast, the Reformation teachings were that we can be saved, that is, have our sins forgiven and the promise of eternal life, through faith in Jesus Christ and his sacrifice made once for all on the Cross. Jesus is the sole mediator between us and God, not a priest or the Church or the Pope. The Bible is the ultimate authority for belief and doctrine, and everything the Church does or teaches should be tested against it.

In the 1549 service of Holy Communion, Cranmer followed the pattern of the Latin Mass, but with English wording that reflected a Protestant understanding of Holy Communion. But for other Reformers this was still too similar to the Roman Mass, and could be interpreted at a pinch as allowing for a Catholic understanding. So in 1552 Cranmer split up what we now call the Eucharistic prayer and made several other radical changes to the service. As far as transubstantiation was concerned, Cranmer had moved totally away from this doctrine, and now saw the celebration of Holy Communion as an act of remembrance of Jesus' suffering and death, and that his Body and Blood were received *spiritually* by the believer who took part in the service. So to avoid misunderstanding he changed the words that the priest says when giving the bread and wine. In 1549 the wording for the giving of the

bread was “The Body of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was given for thee, preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life”. In 1552 it was changed to “Take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for thee, and feed on him in thy heart by faith with thanksgiving”, so that no one would think that they were actually being physically given the body and blood of Christ. (The reason why both phrases appear in the 1662 Prayer Book is that Elizabeth I, trying to keep everyone happy, ordered that both should appear in the edition of the Prayer Book which she authorised in 1559, leaving open belief in the Real Presence of Christ in the sacrament.)

Cranmer’s other measures to introduce Protestantism into the English Church included publishing a book of homilies (sermons) to be read in services, some of them written by himself, and the Forty-Two Articles of religion, a statement of Church doctrine, which was later cut down in the reign of Elizabeth to thirty-nine.

Neither the 1552 Prayer Book nor the Forty-Two Articles lasted long, as in 1553 Edward VI died and Mary became queen, taking the Church of England back to Roman Catholicism. But they were both revived, with revisions, under Elizabeth, and form the basis of Church of England doctrine to this day. The words of the Prayer Book, like those of the King James Bible in the next century, have had a profound influence on English language and literature. The translation of the Psalms that Cranmer used was made by Myles Coverdale and came from the Great Bible, which Henry VIII had authorised to be placed in every church in 1539. Because of their familiarity, they were retained in the 1662 edition of the Prayer Book, even though by then the King James Bible was in use. The psalm we used today was in the version by Coverdale used in the Prayer Book of 1549.

### **Cranmer the man**

So much for the history. So who was this man who steered the Church of England from Catholicism to Protestantism and left a legacy that has shaped the church for over 400 years?

Thomas Cranmer never wanted to be a bishop, let alone an archbishop. He was by nature affable, very intelligent but humble with it. Born in 1489, he was admitted to Jesus College, Cambridge, at the age of 14. He became Bachelor of Arts and then Master of Arts, and was given a fellowship of the college, which he had to relinquish when he married the daughter of a local innkeeper. When she and their child died in childbirth, Cranmer resumed his fellowship, was ordained and would have been happy to stay at Cambridge as an academic. However, comments he made at a dinner-party about King Henry VIII’s desire for a divorce were passed on to the royal circle, and he was chosen as one of a team to visit theologians in Europe to seek advice about the theological grounds for Henry’s marriage to Catherine of Aragon to be annulled.

In due course Cranmer came to the attention of the King and found himself appointed against his will to the post of Archbishop of Canterbury. Henry was



probably not aware at the time that Cranmer, while touring Europe and meeting many Reformers, had married the daughter of one of them, even though priests were not allowed to marry. Cranmer was by this time convinced, through his reading of the Bible, that the head of each national church should be the monarch of the country, not the Pope. So he was just the right person to help Henry make his break with Rome and declare himself the head of the Church of England in the Act of Supremacy in 1534.

Cranmer's enthusiasm for Protestant ideas by this time was growing, but Henry's was not. In 1539 Cranmer tried (unsuccessfully) to talk Henry out of presenting to Parliament the Six Articles of Religion which affirmed Catholic doctrine. This was a period of considerable ferment about Reformation ideas in the church hierarchy, and Cranmer was accused by his enemies of being a heretic. In the last few years of Henry's reign, Cranmer's wife and children fled to the continent for safety. But his friendship with Henry was strong, and Henry was prepared to overlook doctrinal differences for the sake of having a man he trusted as Archbishop of Canterbury. Cranmer was godfather to Princess Elizabeth, and when Henry died, it was Cranmer who held his hand and prayed for him using Protestant liturgy.

The accession in 1547 of the boy king Edward VI, who had Protestant sympathies, gave Cranmer the opportunity to start his reform of the church liturgy. But after six years Edward died of tuberculosis. Cranmer supported Edward's choice of Lady Jane Grey for queen, and as a consequence when Mary came to the throne in 1553, was accused of treason and imprisoned in the Tower of London. Cranmer was also tried for heresy, together with bishops Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley.



Martyrdom of Latimer and Ridley, depicted in John Foxe's *Actes and Monuments of these Latter and Perillous Days, Touching Matters of the Church*, popularly known as *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*. Cranmer is shown watching from a tower to the right of the picture.

Together they were held in the Bocardo prison in Oxford, and Cranmer was forced to watch as Latimer and Ridley were burned at the stake in October 1555. Because

of his status as Archbishop, Mary, a strong Catholic, consulted the Pope about Cranmer's fate, and in December the Pope declared that Cranmer should be the responsibility of the secular authorities. He was deprived of his status as Archbishop, and sentenced to death for heresy.

The story of the next 3 months shows Thomas Cranmer in all his human weakness. He wrote several recantations of his Protestant beliefs, and in the final one declared that he accepted the supremacy of the Pope and transubstantiation, and that there was no salvation outside the Catholic Church, to which he was joyfully returning. According to canon law, he should at this point have been pardoned. But Mary was determined to have Cranmer out of the way. His execution by burning at the stake was set for Saturday 21<sup>st</sup> March, and he was invited to make a public recantation at a service in the University Church before it took place. He wrote a sermon which he submitted in advance. On the day he stood up in the pulpit and began his speech. But after a few lines he departed from his script and, to the horror of the supporters of Catholicism, made this statement:<sup>2</sup>

And now I come to the great thing that troubleth my conscience more than any other thing that ever I said or did in my life: and that is, the setting abroad of writings contrary to the truth. Which here now I renounce and refuse, as things written with my hand contrary to the truth which I thought in my heart, and writ for fear of death, and to save my life, if it might be: and that is, all such bills, which I have written or signed with mine own hand, since my degradation; wherein I have written many things untrue. And forasmuch as my hand offended in writing contrary to my heart, therefore my hand shall first be punished. For if I may come to the fire, it shall be first burned. And as for the Pope, I refuse him, as Christ's enemy and antichrist, with all his false doctrine. And as for the sacrament, I believe as I have taught in my book against the bishop of Winchester, which my book teacheth so true a doctrine of the sacrament, that it shall stand in the last day before the judgment of God, where the papistical doctrines contrary thereto shall be ashamed to show their face.

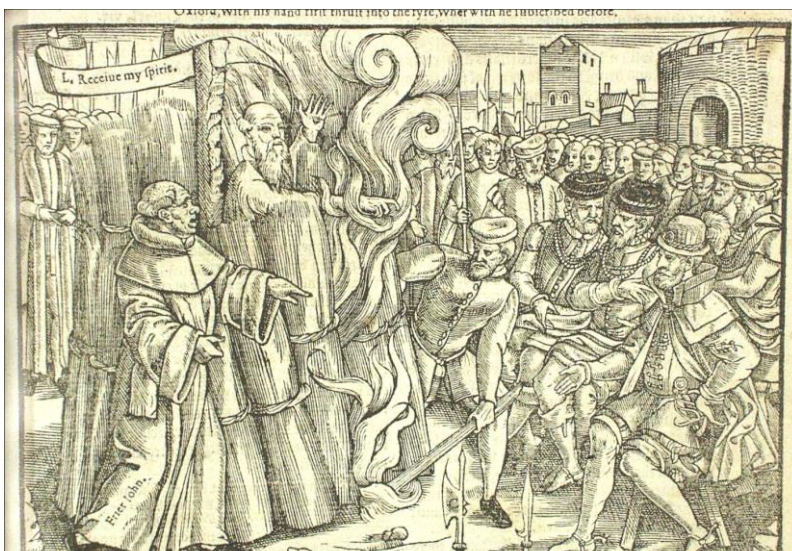


Illustration from *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*

Cranmer was not allowed to continue, but was swept out of the church to the place of execution. Upon being exhorted by a priest to renew his recantation, he replied, 'This was the hand that wrote it, and therefore shall it suffer first These words were reported by an

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.luminarium.org/renlit/cranmerspeech.htm>

eyewitness who was himself a convinced Catholic. His testimony continues as follows:

Fire being now put to him, he stretched out his right hand, and thrust it into the flame, and held it there a good space, before the fire came to any other part of his body; where his hand was seen of every man sensibly burning, crying with a loud voice, 'This hand hath offended.' As soon as the fire got up, he was very soon dead, never stirring or crying all the while.

## **Reflections**

Thomas Cranmer belonged to a very different world to ours. The concept of people of different religious persuasions being able to live together in the same country may seem normal to us, but Europe emerging from the Middle Ages was used to a top-down approach to things. The Pope was in charge of the Church, which had its own laws that applied everywhere, and the monarch was in charge of the secular State. When the two systems supported each other, everything worked well. But the Reformation upset all that. The Catholic Church's doctrines and practices were challenged by its own clergy and theologians. Local churches broke away from the control of the Pope, and local rulers determined whether they would be Catholic or Protestant. In England, the King was committed to working with Parliament, but in reality patronage and political intrigue determined which policies prevailed. Religious truth was fundamentally important, important enough to die for, or to kill for. It is also important today. Let's ask God to help us deal with the diversity around us with integrity, faithfulness to him, and respect for others.

Cranmer was a scholar, committed to learning and the pursuit of truth. He did not choose to become Archbishop. But once in the post he did his best to find solutions to evolving situations, and to steer the Church of England on the course that he felt God was showing him, making the Bible available to ordinary people, and setting a framework for worship that would enable people to find God, worship him and live godly lives. We are his legacy. We need to pray for the leaders of our church today. Like Cranmer, they also are seeking to steer the right path through often troubled waters, with people on every side ready to criticise. They will make mistakes, as we all do. Let's pray that they may not be too many or too serious.

Cranmer was not cut out to be a martyr. When faced with death by burning, he bottled out and went so far as to renounce all the things he had argued and worked for. But in the end he made good. It's hard to stand up for what you believe when everyone is against you, and even harder when it will cost you your life. But his final stand showed what he was really made of. Let us pray for those who are persecuted for their beliefs. And let's not be afraid to stand up for ours, remembering the words of Jesus, who was faithful to the end:

Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. (John 12:24, NRSV)

### **Points for reflection and prayer:**

- Give thanks for all that Thomas Cranmer did to make the Bible and worship accessible to all. Ask God to guide us to do the same today.
- The pursuit of truth: let's ask God to help us deal with the diversity around us with integrity, faithfulness to God, and respect for others.
- We need to pray for the leaders of our church today, seeking to steer the right path through often troubled waters.
- Pray for those persecuted for their faith, and for ourselves, that we will stand up for what we believe.

### **Collect for Thomas Cranmer**

Merciful God, through the work of Thomas Cranmer you renewed the worship of your Church by restoring the language of the people, and through his death you revealed your power in human weakness: Grant that by your grace we may always worship you in spirit and in truth; through Jesus Christ, our only Mediator and Advocate, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Photographs of the spot where Cranmer was martyred and of the Martyrs memorial to Archbishop Cranmer and Bishops Latimer and Ridley:

<http://www.oxfordhistory.org.uk/broad/buildings/martyrs.html>

Other links:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas\\_Cranmer](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Cranmer)

<https://www.theanneboleynfiles.com/the-execution-of-archbishop-thomas-cranmer-21st-march-1556/>