

Thomas Cranmer: Man to Remember

Amos 8:4–12, Romans 5:1–11

Just imagine that you'd come here to church this morning because you had a heavy heart, and you wanted to hear something from the Word of God.

Imagine that as you walk in here you find a building adorned with pictures and statues of saints. And then, there are display cases with relics of some of the saints. The teeth of Saint Hirus, a leg-bone of Saint Anne, the hair of Saint James, or even what is reputed to be a splinter of wood from the true cross. By simply looking at or touching these holy relics, you can win favour with God — or so you are told!

Imagine that when the service begins, the minister conducts it in a language that nobody understands — maybe Swahili or something. This priest, elaborately attired in vestments of various colours, spends most of the service conducting a ritual up at the altar. From time to time he, and everybody else, falls down to worship and pray to what is on that altar.

There is no sermon. Indeed, why would you want one? The reason everyone has come is to see what is done by the priest and to adore and worship certain objects on the altar.

- If you came into a church service anywhere in England just over 500 years ago, that is exactly the sort of thing you would find.

1.) A Time for Change

There was gross superstition and ignorance of the things of God. The Word of God was a closed book. To read or even possess a part of the Bible in English actually carried the death penalty.

Services were not in the language of the people. They weren't in Swahili, of course, but they were in Latin — which had the same effect. Only the educated spoke Latin — but for most of the people who came to church — and for most of the priests who read these strange words from their service books — it was all mumbo-jumbo.

Such was the state of the church of England — and in the rest of Europe — 500 years ago. Indeed it was very like what we heard from the Old Testament book of Amos – where Israel is warned that there will be a “famine of hearing the word of the Lord”.

But slowly, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, things began to change... and over the course of a few decades, a revolution took place – a revolution of hearing the word of God... a revolution that reformed the Church... hence the name for this great movement in history – the Reformation.

– There arose men who read the Bible and realised what great errors assailed the Church. It happened on the Continent first, with people like Martin Luther in the 15teens and then in England.

The printing press had only recently been introduced, and for the first time it was possible to publish and mass produce books – including the Bible – and people across Europe were reading and thinking and asking questions.

For centuries, the hierarchy of the Church – based in Rome – had been corrupt. On the most part, the word of God had been long forgotten, and the institution headed by the Pope had become an incredibly powerful political organisation, demanding total loyalty from all the kings and princes and governments of Europe. And it was corrupt to the core...

Of course, it had all the outward trappings of churchianity – but it had completely lost the plot. So – all over Europe – in many ways ignited by the German monk Martin Luther, fires of reform were beginning to burn brightly.

- There was one particular man, who, in the providence of God, had been placed

in a position where he could work for change in England — even if it was at the risk of losing his life.

That man was the first protestant Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer. He was born just over 510 years ago, on **July 2nd, 1489** — and this morning we are going to hear a little about him and the benefits which under God we receive from his work.

- You may never have heard of Thomas Cranmer. Most people haven't. And if you look at the painting of him on the news-sheet you won't even find him looking especially friendly (people didn't smile for paintings in those days!)

But lest this seem like a boring history lesson, let me say at the outset that the battle fought by Cranmer still goes on today — and in many ways little has really changed. The errors against which he laboured are still with us in our land to this very hour.

Thomas Cranmer was born in a small village in Nottinghamshire. Following a harsh early education, he went up to Cambridge to study at the University at the age of fourteen, in 1503. He excelled in academic life and went on to be ordained, which was the goal of everyone who went to university in those days. He obtained the Doctor of Divinity and lectured in that subject at his university college.

It was while he was at the university that he and others heard of what was happening across the Channel – especially in Germany. He and his friends (many of whom were to be key figures in their own right) started reading books written by people like Martin Luther. And some of them corresponded with key people who were working for reform right across Europe.

- In 1529 Cranmer came to the notice of King Henry VIII.

Henry – that lovely king who had a nasty habit of disposing of his wives – had been a great supporter of the Pope. However, the idea of collecting taxes and sending them off to Italy – as well as the small matter of the Pope refusing to

grant Henry a divorce – meant that Henry was willing to reject the authority of the Church of Rome.

And that gave the opportunity to those godly men who had been praying for a way to bring the Bible back into the Church of England.

To cut a very long story short, Henry was impressed by Cranmer, and in 1533 Cranmer was summoned to become the Archbishop of Canterbury — the highest ecclesiastical appointment in the land. Cranmer was a gentle man — and to become Archbishop of Canterbury was the last thing in the world he desired. But, in the providence of God, so it was to be.

Although in potentially great danger, because people easily fell out of favour with Henry and went to the stake, Cranmer was now in the ideal position to be able to work for reform in the Church of England.

Let me say that, despite what some people say, the Church of England was not a new denomination set up against the Church of Rome – rather it was the centuries old Church of England that was being reformed to get it back to genuine, biblical Christianity.

There are three related areas that we're going to mention this morning as we remember Thomas Cranmer.

First, then, there's his zeal to see the Bible in English. That's our second point.

2.) The Bible in English

Cranmer clearly understood that the key to wiping away great ignorance of the things of God was for the Bible to be available in the language of the people. It was only when the teaching of the Church could be openly tested against the Word of God that truth could prevail.

And so, starting in 1534, Cranmer began to work with others for the authorisation of the Bible in English. This was particularly dangerous work.

Just two years later, in 1536, William Tyndale was executed as a heretic for publishing his English translation of the New Testament. And he was executed on the orders of Henry!

Tyndale's dying words were, "**Lord, open the King of England's eyes!**" That prayer was to be answered.

Cranmer pushed on, convinced that the Bible in the language of the people was the only way to be free from the errors taught by the church.

And by the grace of God, this work culminated in 1539 when Henry's consent was obtained for the sale of the whole Bible. Every parish church in England was given 12 months in which to purchase a copy. It was to be chained in the quire of the church so that it couldn't be removed, so that anybody and everybody could come and read it or hear it read. (You can see a copy in St. Andrew's Cathedral.)

This Bible greatly influenced all other translations in English up until the NIV in 1978.

Secondly, Cranmer laboured for a recovery of Scriptural teaching...

3.) How we get right with God

The key teaching of Scripture which had been lost for hundreds of years was that of justification by faith alone. It was rediscovered by Thomas Cranmer and others, as they read the Bible for themselves.

What does justification by faith alone mean? Quite simply this... Because of my sinful state, I can never be good enough to stand in the holy presence of God. As it says in Isaiah 64:6, "*all our righteous acts are like filthy rags*" Only by God's

mercy can we ever be accounted righteous (pure, innocent) before him — and he has chosen to do that on the basis of Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross.

Jesus paid the penalty for our sins once for all. So, if we trust in Jesus as our Lord and Saviour, God regards us as having our sins paid for by Jesus. If we try to add to what Christ has done by trying to do extra good works to make us acceptable, we are in effect saying that Jesus' death wasn't enough to win our forgiveness!

That's what justification by faith alone means. We are set right with God — solely on the basis of what the Lord Jesus Christ has done for us.

That's what Paul means in Romans 5:6, from the second Bible reading we heard...

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly...

verse 7... While we were still sinners, Christ died for us

But from the Middle Ages, much of the Church was teaching that the way to get right with God is by good works. In other words, we need to earn enough good points to deserve to be saved and to go to heaven.

Of course, these “good works” were made to seem very acceptable. These religious duties were given the cloak of acceptability by the church. And at the very centre of this idea of “good works” was the Mass.

It's very important to understand what the Mass was (and still is in today's Roman Catholic Church) all about, because to the casual observer there are many external similarities with what we do today. But at heart, they are worlds apart.

- The Mass was understood to be a way of earning favour with God. It was the best “good work” that anyone could do.

The very reason you would come to church would be to see the miracle of the Mass — where, you were told, the bread and wine actually were transformed into

the literal body and blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. (What is known as “transubstantiation”.) And by offering up that real flesh and blood as a continuing sacrifice to God, you could, by this meritorious work, earn the forgiveness of your sins...

So the Holy Communion was not simply a remembrance of what Christ has done for us. Instead, it was thought to be an actual offering up of Christ’s body and blood again to God — repeating, or somehow entering into – the sacrifice of Calvary.

And because people believed that the Lord Jesus Christ really was physically present in place of the bread and wine, they would fall down and worship him and pray to him there on the altar.

As Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer wrote books and preached against the doctrine of the Mass.

But rather than just attacking error, he taught the truth of the Bible. And he and his fellow English Reformers saw that the way ahead was for people to read the Bible for themselves and for it to be the focus of what they did in church.

Thus, in addition to the Bible in English, there were now to be sermons in church, and these also were to be in English (not Latin!) — for the edification and instruction of the people. For the first time in hundreds of years, you would be able to go to church and understand what was being said! And for the first time in hundreds of years, you would hear the Bible taught.

- But Cranmer clearly saw that because the doctrine of the Mass was the central error of the Church of Rome, it would not be enough to get rid of other abuses and errors without dealing with that one. He wrote,

“But what availeth it to take away beads, pardons, pilgrimages, and other such popery, so long as two chief roots remain unpulled up?

The root of the weeds is the... doctrine of transubstantiation, of the real presence of Christ’s flesh and blood in the sacrament of the altar

(as they call it), and of the sacrifice... of Christ made by the priest for the salvation of the living and the dead..."

Quite rightly he saw that to be the problem. And the way he tackled it was to teach the people of England through their prayers. Fourthly, then, we come to Cranmer — the man behind the Prayer Book.

4.) The Prayer Book

It is for this work that Cranmer is best known and remembered. Cranmer's first Prayer Book was published in 1549, and his second in 1552. Our current **An Australian Prayer Book** is largely that of 1552 with the language updated.

Up until Cranmer's time, as we've seen, services were conducted in Latin — which did no one any good at all. In fact it merely added to the superstition.

Cranmer went through the Latin service books and picked out and modified the best parts, translating them into English. But the most important aspect of the Prayer Book was its denial of the whole idea of the Mass. The service for the Holy Communion clearly refuted the notion of transubstantiation at every point.

In fact, you can get hold of his English Prayer Book and see how, point by point, he does this.

Cranmer deliberately excluded certain prayers and actions to get the point across. Now this is important to understand — there are many things which we do today which are a direct result of this Reformation debate.

- Why for example, when we give the bread at Communion do we say,

"Take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for you, and feed on him in your heart with thanksgiving"?

Cranmer put those words in because the Mass teaches that people actually,

literally feed on the flesh of Christ with their mouth. He said (and we say) “No! This is simply an act of remembrance. We feed on Christ in our hearts as we eat the bread.”

There is a real presence of Christ — but that presence is in the heart of the believer. — In the same way as when we hear Christ’s word read. Christ is with us!

This morning, as we share in the Lord’s Supper, we remember the greatest thing that anyone could remember! We set our minds on the death of the Lord Jesus Christ for us! And we put our trust in him.

So, we don’t do it lightly, or irreverently. But there’s nothing superstitious about it. There’s no hocus pocus! It’s only ordinary bread and wine... nothing more, nothing less... being eaten and drunk as an aid to help us set our minds on Christ and his death for us.

- Likewise, before the Reformation, when the priest had consecrated the bread and the wine, it used to be held up above the people so that they could see and adore in the misguided belief that there was Jesus. And after the service, they would be carried around the church or put on display in a little cabinet for purposes of worship.

Cranmer did away with such idolatrous practices. That is why we call the Anglican Church a reformed denomination... that is, a denomination that sought to reform (and is still seeking to reform) its practices and teaching to be in line with those of the Bible.

Conclusion

Well, what became of Thomas Cranmer?

King Henry VIII had died and, in his place, the boy king Edward VI reigned from

1547 to 1553. During this time the Reformation made wonderful progress in England. But when Edward died, Queen Mary came to the throne.

She was determined to return to the old order of things and to wipe out every trace of the Reformation.

The Prayer Book was banned, statues were again set up in churches. In 1554 the High Mass was again said in St. Paul's Cathedral in London, with Queen Mary in attendance. Scores of Reformers, including several bishops were burned at the stake.

Cranmer warned his fellow reformers to flee the country, but as Archbishop of Canterbury and Primate of All England, he felt obliged to stay. He was arrested.

In 1556, after more than two years of imprisonment, with constant psychological pressure from members of the Spanish Inquisition, Cranmer was condemned to die as a heretic.

Just before his execution he publicly reaffirmed his denial of the doctrine of the Mass.

Although they burned the man, Cranmer's work could not be undone.

Under God, we owe it to Cranmer for the Bible and church services in English. And we thank God that through Cranmer the great Biblical teaching of justification by faith alone was again set forth. That is the great focus of the Prayer Book.

So much was won for us 500 years ago. And yet, today many Christians know nothing of these things or of the sacrifices that have been made.

Let us thank God for the legacy of Archbishop Thomas Cranmer. And let's never lose the precious gift he helped pass down to us... the Word of God and the knowledge of salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ.