

The Reformation in England and Thomas Cranmer

I believe that the Reformation was the most important and far-reaching event in the history of the world since Bible times; and so the 500th anniversary of the start of it is one of the most significant anniversaries we shall celebrate in our lifetime.

I am grateful to Andrew for allowing me to participate in this series of four sermons on the Reformation. I am grateful too for his most helpful opening of the series last Sunday with a sermon on Martin Luther, who initiated the Reformation. If you missed it, do find time to listen to it on the All Saints website.

Today Andrew has asked me to give you a brief summary of the Reformation in England and Wales, and particularly on the part in it of Thomas Cranmer, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the principal compiler of the Prayer Book – the Book of Common Prayer - to give it its full title. The Reformation in Scotland and in Ireland took different paths, for which there is not time to cover in this series.

And he has asked me to speak about two particular Reformation issues, praying to the saints and the right understanding of Holy Communion.

There is no clear starting date for the Reformation in England and Wales, unlike 31st of October 1517, when Martin Luther published his 95 theses, for debate.

But there were four things which prepared the way in England.

Firstly, there had been the ministry of John Wycliffe and his followers, the Lollards, a century earlier. His attempt at Reformation did not succeed. But it was probably still spoken about.

Secondly, there had been the invention of printing, in the middle of the 15th century, after Wycliffe's time, but before Luther's. Wycliffe's followers had done a good deal of copying a translation of the Bible into English by hand, but Luther's printed books and the printed Bible translation by Tyndale and Coverdale achieved a much wider circulation.

Thirdly, King Henry VIII broke the Church of England from the headship of the Pope in Rome. I need to explain a little about this. Henry's first wife, Catherine of Aragon, had been married to Henry's elder brother Arthur, but Arthur died young, before his father Henry VII, and so Arthur was never king. The Pope at that time gave special dispensation for

Henry and Catherine to marry, even though it was against law in the Bible.

However the years passed and Catherine failed to provide Henry VIII with a son, and he had met and been attracted to Anne Boleyn. So Henry wished to have his marriage to Catherine annulled, on the grounds that the Pope did not have authority to override church law and grant the dispensation to marry. Henry had the support of many people, but for political reasons the Pope would not agree. So Henry in 1531 broke with Rome. But he remained a Catholic in belief, and beginning that year he had a number of the early reformers burned at the stake, with the support of the fervent catholic Lord Chancellor, Sir Thomas More.

Fourthly, a little-known clergyman by the name of Thomas Cranmer had suggested in 1529 that the universities of Europe should be asked for their opinion about Henry's marriage to Catherine. This pleased Henry and in 1533 he appointed the most reluctant Cranmer to be Archbishop of Canterbury. For the rest of his reign Henry defended Cranmer against all-comers, even though he did not agree with him on matters of doctrine. Cranmer for his part proved a courageous, forgiving and peaceable man, who, unlike some others, did not take advantage of his position to enrich himself.

Before I describe the English Reformation I must explain the issues about praying to the Saints and the meaning of Holy Communion.

As recorded in the New Testament, the Lord Jesus encouraged people to pray to God the Father and to pray to him, Jesus Christ. In mediaeval times it became to be taught that it was better to pray to the saints, especially to Mary the mother of Jesus, and to ask them to pray to God for us. There was a great deal of this, often in front of statues of Mary or other saints, or before altars, where the saints supposed relics were kept, parts of their body, or one of their possessions, all of which were bogus. There is absolutely no support for this in the Bible. There is not even any evidence that the Saints can hear our prayers. We are to pray directly to God.

Furthermore, supposed answers to prayers to the saints brought glory to the Saints rather than to God. The reformers insisted that glory be given to God alone. This has been described recently as one of the five Solas of the Reformation; Soli Deo Gloria – to the glory of God alone.

You may remember that Andrew showed the Solas to us last week. Sola scriptura – by scripture alone, Sola fide – by faith alone, Sola gratia – by grace alone, Solo Christo – through Christ alone, and Soli Deo Gloria – to the glory of God alone.

So in the Reformation prayers to the saints were removed from church services.

Now about the meaning of the service, which the Prayer Book entitles, following the Apostle Paul, The Lord's Supper or, as printed in smaller type, The Holy Communion. In mediaeval times it had come to be taught that the bread and wine become Christ's actual body and blood, in everything except outward appearance. This change was said to happen when Jesus' words instituting the service of communion are read during a service. This doctrine of change is called transubstantiation, and it has led to a number of misguided practices, especially the reservation and worship of bread and wine.

At the Last Supper that the Lord Jesus had with his disciples, on the evening before his crucifixion, as we heard in our reading, he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and said "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me". Then he took the cup saying "This cup is the new covenant in my blood: do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me."

The Apostle Paul helpfully added "For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

As Jesus was present in his body and blood when he spoke the words "This is my body ... This is my blood" is surprising that anyone would take him literally. On the contrary he told his followers that this was to be done "in remembrance of me". In remembrance of him.

The bread and the wine are reminders of Christ's body broken for us and his blood shed for us. We benefit not by literally eating Jesus's body and drinking his blood, how would we benefit from that anyway?

But we benefit by being reminded of what he has done for us. And that is not just a bare reminder, but a reminder that can bless us in various ways, as I have compiled on the sheet you have been given to take away this morning.

But how did the Reformation, come about?

As I said there is no clear date the start of the Reformation in England, but during the 1520s and 1530s both Martin Luther's various books and copies of the Bible in English began to be circulated. Here and there, particularly in Cambridge University, a number of clergy began to accept Luther's teaching on justification by faith.

Also reading the Bible, for the first time, they discovered various other ways in which the teaching of the church had gone astray from Scripture.

In 1537 Henry VIII agreed to Cranmer's suggestion that a copy of the Bible in English should be placed in every church in the land.

One most gifted preacher of those days was Hugh Latimer. In 1535 Henry appointed him to be Bishop of Worcester, but after four years hard work in a most neglected diocese he was tricked into resignation.

Another leading reformer was Nicholas Ridley. In 1546, the year before Henry VIII died, he helped Cranmer and Latimer to see that the Catholic doctrine of the mass was not in accord with the Bible. He became Bishop of Rochester and then in 1550 Bishop of London.

Henry died in 1547. He was succeeded by his only son, the nine-year-old Edward VI, who was a believing Christian, as was his regent or Protector, the Duke of Somerset. In the following year Cranmer took the opportunity of producing some parts of the mass in English. This was just a preliminary to his production of the first Prayer Book in 1549, which Parliament accepted after much debate.

However the Bishop of Winchester, Stephen Gardiner, a fervent Catholic, said he could still find the doctrine of the mass in ten places in the 1549 service of Holy Communion. So Cranmer set to work again and produced a second Prayer Book, to supersede the first, in 1552. In each of the ten places Gardiner had mentioned Cranmer made a change in the service. I have not time to go through them all. I will just explain four of them.

One was Cranmer's removal of the words "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord", words which had been said about the Lord Jesus at his entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. These words were in the first Prayer Book service in a place where they could be understood to mean that Jesus was about to come into the bread and the wine.

Similarly the words “O Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world, have mercy on us”, said or sung just before receiving communion, were thought to be addressing Jesus, present in the bread and in the wine. So Cranmer removed these words too.

Another point was the use of the word “altar”. An altar is a stone edifice on which a sacrifice is made, as in Old Testament times. Catholics understand the Holy Communion to be a re-sacrificing of Christ.

An act of the Privy Council in 1550 had already ordered the removal of stone altars, and their replacement with wooden tables. These tables were to be moved away from the east wall of the church, as appropriate for a meal. Cranmer removed the word “Altar” from the Prayer Book and put “The Lord’s Table” instead.

Holy Communion was a symbolic meal, not a sacrifice of Christ. Cranmer also wrote into the service that Jesus had been “once offered, a ... sufficient sacrifice”.

You may have noticed that all those changes which Cranmer made have been reversed in some modern Church of England services, reintroduced by Catholic minded Anglicans.

Also the words said to each communicant in the 1549 Prayer Book were “The body of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was given for thee, preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life”, and “The blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was shed for thee, preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life”.

It is easy to see that those words could be taken literally, as Gardiner did. So Cranmer replaced them in the 1552 book with the words “Take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for thee, and feed on him in thy heart by faith with thanksgiving” and “Drink this in remembrance that Christ’s blood was shed for thee, and be thankful”. (0800: We are going to use just those words at the administration of communion this morning.)

So now there was a Prayer Book that largely accorded with Scripture. But within a few months King Edward VI, who had tuberculosis, died. His last prayer was

“O my Lord God, defend this realm from papistry, and maintain thy true religion; that I and my people may praise thy holy name, for thy son Jesus Christ’s sake”.

He was succeeded by Queen Mary I, the daughter of Catherine of Aragon, and a fervent Catholic. Mary replaced the Prayer Book with the mass, and removed the reforming bishops and others from their posts, and set about having them burned at the stake, though some escaped abroad. In Mary's short reign of five years around 300 Christian leaders were burned. Bishops Latimer and Ridley were burned together in Oxford in 1555. Latimer's last words have gone down in history –

“Play the man Master Ridley; we shall this day light such a candle, by God's grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out.”

Cranmer was not put on trial until the following year, because the legal procedures took longer the case of the former Archbishop of Canterbury.

Great pressure was put on him, as it had been on Latimer and Ridley earlier, unsuccessfully, to recant of their Biblical beliefs. But Cranmer broke under the strain and recanted. However before his death he repented and withdrew his recantations. When he came to the stake he held out into the flames his hand, which had signed the recantations, so that it was burnt first.

What a pity people could not agree to disagree, rather than burning those who disagreed with them.

After a five-year reign, Mary died in 1558, and was succeeded by her half-sister Elizabeth I, the daughter of Queen Anne Boleyn. Elizabeth was a Protestant, though maybe more out of political expediency than of conviction. She restored the Prayer Book in 1559, with very few changes. One change she did make was to unite the 1549 and 1552 words of administration in the Communion service, so that on giving the bread to each communicant the minister said “The body of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was given for thee, preserve thy body and soul to everlasting life. Take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for thee, and feed him in thy heart by faith with thanksgiving”. The words spoken with the administration of the wine were combined in the same way.

This made the administration longer, and usually these days in Prayer Book Communion services the first half of the words are spoken to the first communicant, and the second half to the next, and so on alternately down the row.

A little later in Elizabeth's reign the 39 Articles of Religion were agreed as the doctrinal basis of the Church of England. It was the practice in

reformed churches in different nations to make such a statement of their faith.

Cranmer had written 42 Articles of Religion, but Edward VI had died before they were put to Parliament. These were shortened and amended, to make the 39, which are still the doctrinal basis of the Church of England today. You will find them at the back of the Prayer Book, or perhaps more easily these days on line. Catholic and liberal minded Anglicans mostly tend to ignore them. Most evangelicals taken them seriously.

A number of people were executed during Elizabeth's reign, but these were people like Mary, Queen of Scots, who were involved in plots to kill Elizabeth, with the encouragement of the Pope.

In the following century the Prayer Book dropped out of use during the time of Civil War and then of Oliver Cromwell, but after Charles II came to the throne it was restored, in 1662, substantially the same as in 1559.

I hope this brief introduction to the English Reformation will encourage you to read more, either in books or on line. I particularly recommend the book *Masters of the English Reformation* by Marcus Loane, which is obtainable through Amazon. *Masters of the English Reformation* by Marcus Loane.

I close by reminding you of Latimer's dying words – "we shall this day light such a candle, by God's grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out." As Marcus Loane added "That light is now in our keeping: God grant that we may never allow its flame to go out!"