



Remembering the Reformation Saints and Martyrs of the Reformation

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Isaiah 53: 7–end 1 Corinthians 4: 9–13

We are made a spectacle unto the world, and to angels, and to men.

So spoke the condemned Jesuit courtier, Edmund Campion, to his companions as they waited to be hanged, drawn and quartered for treason in the year 1581. Campion was in the second, perhaps one might say even the third wave of religious-political killing in England in the course of the sixteenth century. Yet he was as surely caught in the diplomatic crossfire between papal and English sovereign power as any of the other men and women killed for religious conviction in the first generation of upheaval following England's secession from papal control in the 1530s.

Campion, in reaching for this particular Pauline declaration, demonstrated his sure sense of, and quick-witted participation in, the public theatre of early modern judicial killing. His words were reported both admiringly and by hostile commentators, but everyone got the point: through them Campion had taken control of the meaning of his brutal, extended public death. No longer was it, as the state declared, the deserved death of a political traitor. He and his companions were instead men whose spectacle had only a divine meaning, set apart and beyond the contingent human dickering for power which had crushed him in its machine. 'Ye have reigned as kings', cries Paul to his readers just before this moment – but he is not talking about any human sovereignty. 'We are made as the filth of the world', he concludes, 'the offscouring of all things', and *this* is glory. The last has become first, the suffering which bespeaks a heavenly city inherited by the weak in despite of the strong. Campion embraced martyrdom, and even the most hostile account of his sufferings could not dislodge the meanings he invoked.

Campion was not alone in his quick and starry apprehension of the martyr's crown – though his deft use of Paul's word 'spectacle' is one of the wittiest annexations of public humiliation in a large compendium of escalating competing meanings. The Protestant martyr John Bradford in 1555 wore to the stake a white shirt, which he called his 'wedding garment', thanked God for the news of his burning at Newgate, and suffered, in the words of his chronicler John Foxe, 'joyfully and constantly'. Like Campion thirty years later, his crime was deemed to be treason against the monarch; and like Campion, he refused the state's reading of the meaning of his suffering, and turned his body into one sacrificed for the glory of God.

Hugh Latimer, burnt at Oxford in the same year, with a punning presence of mind which one can only admire turned his burning body into the candle which shines in the darkness, the Word of God which is the incarnation. 'Play the man', he said to his companion, Nicholas Ridley, 'we shall this day light such a candle, by God's grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out'. The anniversary of his death – and the death of his companion Nicholas Ridley – is tomorrow, 16 October. Thomas Cranmer himself, martyred a few months later, pulled this way and that by political contingencies and a political landscape changing so fast that today's loyalty regularly became tomorrow's treason, managed his own theatrical gesture when he plunged the hand with which he had signed away his reformed convictions first into the flames.

It was about how you were seen. If you were to become a spectacle, to angels and to men, then although you might leave angelic interpretations to make shift for themselves, you would go to considerable lengths to shape the human ones. You spoke and acted with bravura symbolism. You checked that your sympathisers recorded the right things. In the following century, the much-hated Archbishop Laud kept his papers with him for his farewell speech upon the scaffold in 1647. (This was unusual, because it was a matter of professional pride to speak without notes.) 'You'll pardon my old memory' he quavered in explanation – but in reality the notes were not *his* aides-memoires – they were for his stenographer, sitting under the scaffold, close enough to be splashed by Laud's blood, ready to make sure that Laud's last words could be not be mis-reported in the wider world, that the meaning of his death was still in his hand.

One thing is certain. The modern decision to celebrate the Reformation martyrs together would have struck everyone involved, on all sides, as inconceivably sloppy thinking. These men and women did not agree about the practice and meaning of Christian living and dying – though they used very similar techniques to draw sacred attention to their deaths. How may John Bradford stand with Edmund Campion, Thomas More with Thomas Cranmer, the saintly Bishop of Rochester John Fisher with the fussy, authoritarian, conflicted and politically inept Archbishop William Laud? – if we are going to allow Laud as a latecomer into this complex company?

What would a certain nameless, uneducated old woman think of us, a woman arrested by the Marian authorities and reported in John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, who told her interrogators that she'd changed her mind once on the behest of the State, and had been convinced by the change; and to change it back again was just too confusing so she wasn't going to do it. She made no attempt to argue the point theologically, and wouldn't have had the resources in any case, but she knew that – right or wrong – a weathercock belief was no belief at all. What are we doing when we honour her along with the sophisticated and stubborn men who persuaded her that consistent conviction was worth dying for?

None of us will ever be handed the simple luxury of dying for a pure cause purely pursued. Some will be lucky enough to escape the time of trial, though in no life is it possible to avoid the challenge of acting publicly in a certain way from moral conviction. But it is guaranteed that the finest cause in the world will be muddied by its contingent pursuit on the churned-up fields of history. Once upon a time, in the early years of the reign of Henry VIII, the scholars Desiderius Erasmus and Thomas More wrote to each other about how Christendom might be made better, more Christlike, simpler, more virtuous, more scriptural. By the 1520s they were being forced further and further apart, largely because the forces of reform were also and inevitably struggles between different powerful interest groups. The saints and martyrs

of the Reformation, on all sides, have this in common: they were condemned by the state on political grounds in ways directed by political goals. Religious conviction was a weapon. It was not a map nor was it a strategy document.

There was once a man caught between an occupying force and an occupied nation with strong monotheistic convictions and practices. He called himself the Son of God and he preached that his kingdom was in heaven, where the rubbish of the world – the poor, the powerless, and the sorrowful – would receive particular honour. He refused direct political action, infuriating at least one of his followers. He turned away from violence but would not keep silent, thereby endangering not only himself but all who knew and loved him. His name was Jesus, and he knew that living without defence in this way would mean that he must, sooner or later, be crushed by the clash between opposing political forces. He *poured out his soul unto death... because he had done no violence, neither was there any deceit in his mouth*. There has only ever been one of him.

For this is not quite the story of all of these martyred men and women of the Reformation culture wars. Perhaps it was not true of any of them – though the simple and the confused will have died innocent of the sins of policy for which their betters made them pay. But in one thing they all emulate their master and saviour: in the patient endurance of the forces of violence upon a vulnerable body for the sake of the truth they saw and from which they could not turn away. In *being made a spectacle unto the world, and to angels, and to men*, which showed above all things that the offscourings of the world, the dead men walking, the prisoners who sit in darkness and the shadow of death looking for the dayspring on high, the fools for Christ's sake, have souls which are infinitely valued by God our Father. For our God has a special care for those who renounce the world for the sake of the health of their souls.