



Remembering the Reformation

Thomas Cranmer and The Book of Common Prayer

22 October 2017

Vernon White

Micah 6: 6-8 John 14: 1-7

He was, we are told, an instinctively mild-mannered, non-confrontational young man who came up to Cambridge in 1503. A good scholar – open-minded, intelligent, thorough, with a sublime feel for language. Perhaps a little too susceptible to both sides of an argument. But he could commit: he had integrity. So he advanced in his scholastic career at Cambridge largely content, not ambitious for public life and office.

How then did this somewhat diffident scholar find himself later as a bold ambassador of a maverick King, prosecuting the King's interests in lawless overseas crises, in perilous political processes at home, and eventually becoming Archbishop of Canterbury midwifing a bitterly divisive English Reformation which would transform wider society as well as the church, before finally being brutally burnt at the stake for his convictions? For that, in brief, is the narrative of Thomas Cranmer...

When people do extraordinary things on the public stage, it's usually the force of circumstance which plays a part, quite as much as their own character. And in Cranmer's case, that was surely so. As a student at Cambridge in those first decades of the 16th century he had entered a time of intellectual ferment, a fault line between the great tectonic plates of medieval scholasticism and emerging humanism. Scholasticism had been dealing with the nature of divinity and eternity through formal logic, taught with reference to just a few major authorities. Humanism brought an expanded curriculum dealing with human dignity and virtue, not just divinity, trawling a greater variety of ancient texts, making them more widely accessible – a natural seed bed, therefore, for the particular concern of religious reformation that all should have access to God through direct access to scripture. (So that 'even the weakest woman could read the Gospel and the husbandman could sing portions of it as he followed the plough', as humanist Erasmus, Cranmer's contemporary, wrote.) In this climate it was almost inevitable that an open-minded scholar like Cranmer would embrace the new ideas. Never underestimate the power of ideas, encountered at a critical moment, to change a life. And to change the world.

More mundane circumstances too had a role. When Cranmer once had to flee Cambridge to avoid the plague, fatefully he found himself holed up in lodgings occupied by two of the King's advisers. It only took a supertime conversation for them to realize Cranmer's calibre and enlist him in the King's cause. Cranmer was just the person to help solve the problem of the King's marriage, salve the King's conscience, help him break free from Rome. He was snared – how could he refuse!

So circumstance and serendipity played their part. And presumably there would also have been Cranmer's own inner drives and compulsions. Did they too lead him on his path? In spite of his apparently unambitious persona, was he also driven to high office by his own impulses of duty and conscience – or hidden vanities? Who knows? But what we do know is that out of this concatenation of circumstance and inner impulse his extraordinary life did take shape – against expectation, and with such extraordinary consequences.

Could this be *providential*?

I believe so. For all the perils of ascribing anything to providence from the messy narratives of human lives, especially such messy and bloody narratives of the Reformation, there are some good fruits which emerge from those narratives we just cannot ignore; outcomes which just have a smell of divinity. And this is so in Cranmer's case.

It's in his Book of Common Prayer that we find so much of this good fruit. Partly because, just in itself, it is a thing of rare literary beauty. But also because of what it conveys. Which is a rare theological integrity. It is a text which sought theological reconciliation in a time of conflict – yet without compromising key reforming principles. It held to the principle of *accessibility*: 80% of its text is a finely woven tissue of scriptural quotation, allusion, imagery, rather than abstract argument – precisely to make God more vivid, concrete, accessible. It held to the principle of *simplicity*: it stripped out the distraction of too many saints, too much elaborate ritual observance, in order to offer worshippers a more direct uncluttered relationship with God. Above all it held to the principle of *grace*: it set out to free the worshipper from the burden of thinking she was winning God's favour by such ritual observances.

These principles underlie what historian Alec Ryrie has called the protestants' 'unique love affair' with God Himself i.e., God as distinct from either religion or metaphysics: their passion for God defined as personal character and actions rather than as a reality hidden in ritual or conceptual abstraction. Cranmer's collects, those formal prayers which encapsulate the heart of each act of worship, epitomize this: many begin with God as a verb, not a concept, addressing God as personal character and agent rather than merely as an abstract reality with attributes: 'O God who declares thy almighty power most chiefly in shewing mercy and pity ...'; 'O God the author of peace and lover of concord ...'.

All this is the good fruit of Cranmer's Reformation, I believe. Abiding fruit. Not that the text of the Prayer Book itself, however elegant, must always abide; nor all its doctrines, some of which *are* only of their time. But what can and will abide is this underlying theology which finds divinity credible more in personal character and virtuous action than in metaphysics or over-elaborate religious practice. This is what remains apposite even now even in this semi-secular age. In fact especially now. For, as Charles Taylor has characterized it, this so-called secular age is precisely a time when the sense of God and transcendence has largely been lost from institutional practices of religion and over-elaborate metaphysical doctrines but *is* still found displaced in our sense of beauty and morality; especially in the power of personal relationships and virtuous action; in the experience of people 'doing justice, loving mercy, walking humbly with their God' (as our first reading reminded us); in profoundly virtuous personal narratives such as Christ's 'way and truth and life' (as our second reading reminded us). *That* is where God is now most credibly found –and not just as a symbol of virtue, but as a reality...

Could we recover this? Could we recover a passion for a decluttered personal God who is verb more than concept; a God of profound love, sacrificial action, great grace? I think we could. This was the real fire behind the Reformation love affair with God – and perhaps it is this which just might rekindle our sense of God now too...