



The Burning Bush—Online article archive

"450th Anniversary of the Burning of Archbishop Cranmer by the Roman Catholic Church"



Archbishop Thomas Cranmer

"The memory of the just is blessed," Proverbs 10:7.

The remembrance of those who undoubtedly were righteous (the meaning of the word 'just') is a blessed thing. That is, it imparts a blessing to those who recall their words and actions. None is more the source of blessing than those who made the supreme sacrifice most deliberately, advisedly and, above all, prayerfully. The supreme sacrifice to which I refer is that spoken of by Christ in John 15:13. "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." This Thomas Cranmer did on 21st March 1556. Tonight we would honour this man of God and obtain a blessing for our souls as we ponder his memory.

The martyr fires had been burning in England since Mary, "Bloody" Mary, had come to the throne in 1553. Upon her ascension, Mary immediately went about re-establishing popery in England. She initially did this by rescinding the religious proclamations of Edward VI, which were essentially Biblical and Protestant, and replacing them with old English laws which enforced the death penalty for heresy against the Church.

In carrying out the last action, Mary earned her nickname, "Bloody Mary," because, during her reign, she had more than 300 persons burned at the stake for heresy. Among them was the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer.

In 1555, seventy-one Protestants had been burned at the stake. Included amongst this noble band were Nicholas Ridley, Bishop of London and Hugh Latimer, once Bishop of Worcester. These godly men were burned side by side in Oxford on 16th October 1555. The last words of Hugh Latimer ring out still as a trumpet blast of victory. "Be of good comfort, Master Ridley, and play the man; we shall this day, by God's grace, light such a candle in England as I trust shall never be put out." He was an old man, being over 80 years of age. But age and frailty meant nothing to popery then or now as terrorism in our land has taught us.

Such was the atmosphere in England when Thomas Cranmer was arrested, tried and burned at the stake in Oxford. He had been a target of Mary from the first day of her ascension. I wish to consider the man's life and death under a number of headings.

I. THE CENTRAL ISSUE OF THE REFORMATION.

It was that of the real presence of Christ in the elements of the bread and wine in the Lord's supper.



"Bloody" Queen Mary



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Deny this doctrine and the price was burning at the stake as a heretic!
creed of Pope Pius iv

The Creed of Pope Pius IV (1559-1565) is a document of supreme authority within Roman Catholicism. It says of transubstantiation: "I profess, likewise, that in the Mass there is offered to God a true, proper, and propitiatory sacrifice for the living and the dead; and that in the most holy sacrament of the Eucharist there is truly, really, and substantially, the Body and Blood, together with the soul and divinity, of our Lord Jesus Christ; and that a conversion takes place of the whole substance of the bread into the Body, and of the whole substance of the wine into the Blood, which conversion the Catholic Church calls Transubstantiation. I also confess that under either species alone Christ is received whole and entire, and a true sacrament."

Rejectors of this doctrine were to be burned.

We may read Thomas Cranmer's views on this subject for they are clearly stated in "The 39 Articles" of the Church of England.

XXVIII. Of the Lord's Supper.

The Supper of the Lord is not only a sign of the love that Christians ought to have among themselves one to another, but rather it is a Sacrament of our Redemption by Christ's death: insomuch that to such as rightly, worthily, and with faith, receive the same, the Bread which we break is a partaking of the Body of Christ; and likewise the Cup of Blessing is a partaking of the Blood of Christ.

Transubstantiation (or the change of the substance of Bread and Wine) in the Supper of the Lord, cannot be proved by Holy Writ; but is repugnant to the plain words of Scripture, overthroweth the nature of a Sacrament, and hath given occasion to many superstitions. The Body of Christ is given, taken, and eaten, in the Supper, only after an heavenly and spiritual manner. And the mean whereby the Body of Christ is received and eaten in the Supper is Faith.

The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper was not by Christ's ordinance reserved, carried about, lifted up, or worshipped.

XXXI. Of the one Oblation of Christ finished upon the Cross.

The Offering of Christ once made is that perfect redemption, propitiation, and satisfaction, for all the sins of the whole world, both original and actual; and there is none other satisfaction for sin, but that alone. Wherefore the sacrifices of Masses, in the which it was commonly said, that the Priest did offer Christ for the quick and the dead, to have remission of pain or guilt, were blasphemous fables, and dangerous deceits.

II. THE COWARDLY RECANTATION OF CRANMER.

Let us speak softly of his fall from steadfastness. He was 67 years of age, had been imprisoned in the Tower of London for a time and there had been subject to flattering false kindness and faced with the horrific death of the stake. Thus he was persuaded to save his life. He signed a recantation.

III. THE CRUELTY OF ROME EXPOSED.



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As ever, the devil overstepped himself. Had Thomas Cranmer been freed, his recantation would have been a serious and lasting blow to the cause of truth in the English-speaking world. But Rome decided to burn him even though he had recanted his Protestantism. That wicked and cruel decision wrought, by the grace of God, repentance and restoration in the heart and soul of Thomas Cranmer. In St. Mary's church, Oxford, on the morning of his death, he gave a bold defence of the gospel and declared his faith in Christ and renounced his recantation, declaring the pope to be the antichrist and rejected the mass. He was immediately silenced and hurriedly brought out to the stake.

IV. THE CONQUERING GRACE OF GOD.

An anonymous bystander wrote an account of the scene and it has been preserved for us. It reads:—

"But to come to the matter: on Saturday last, being 21 of March, was his day appointed to die. And because the morning was much rainy, the sermon appointed by Mr Dr Cole to be made at the stake, was made in St Mary's church: whither Dr Cranmer was brought by the mayor and aldermen, and my lord Williams: with whom came divers gentlemen of the shire, Sir T A Bridges, Sir John Browne, and others. Where was prepared, over against the pulpit, a high place for him, that all the people might see him. And, when he had ascended it, he kneeled him down and prayed, weeping tenderly: which moved a great number to tears, that had conceived an assured hope of his conversion and repentance....

When praying was done, he stood up, and, having leave to speak, said, 'Good people, I had intended indeed to desire you to pray for me; which because Mr Doctor hath desired, and you have done already, I thank you most heartily for it. And now will I pray for myself, as I could best devise for mine own comfort, and say the prayer, word for word, as I have here written it.' And he read it standing: and after kneeled down, and said the Lord's Prayer; and all the people on their knees devoutly praying with him....

And then rising, he said, 'Every man desireth, good people, at the time of their deaths, to give some good exhortation, that other may remember after their deaths, and be the better thereby. So I beseech God grant me grace, that I may speak something, at this my departing, whereby God may be glorified, and you edified....

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 written 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 here, being admonished of his recantation and dissembling, he said, 'Alas, my lord, I have been a man that all my life loved plainness, and never dissembled till now against the truth; which I am most sorry for it.' He added hereunto, that, for the sacrament, he believed as he had taught in his book against the bishop of Winchester. And here he was suf-



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ferred to speak no more....

Then was he carried away; and a great number, that did run to see him go so wickedly to his death, ran after him, exhorting him, while time was, to remember himself. And one Friar John, a godly and well learned man, all the way travelled with him to reduce him. But it would not be. What they said in particular I cannot tell, but the effect appeared in the end: for at the stake he professed, that he died in all such opinions as he had taught, and oft repented him of his recantation.

Coming to the stake with a cheerful countenance and willing mind, he put off his garments with haste, and stood upright in his shirt: a bachelor of divinity, named Elye, of Brazen-nose college, laboured to convert him to his former recantation, with the two Spanish friars. And when the friars saw his constancy, they said in Latin to one another 'Let us go from him: we ought not to be nigh him: for the devil is with him.' But the bachelor of divinity was more earnest with him: unto whom he answered, that, as concerning his recantation, he repented it right sore, because he knew it was against the truth; with other words more. Whereby the Lord Williams cried, 'Make short, make short.' Then the bishop took certain of his friends by the hand. But the bachelor of divinity refused to take him by the hand, and blamed all the others that so did, and said, he was sorry that ever he came in his company. And yet again he required him to agree to his former recantation. And the bishop answered, (showing his hand) 'This was the hand that wrote it, and therefore shall it suffer first punishment.'

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.

His patience in the torment, his courage in dying, if it had been taken either for the glory of God, the wealth of his country, or the testimony of truth, as it was for a pernicious error, and subversion of true religion, I could worthily have commended the example, and matched it with the fame of any father of ancient time: but, seeing that not the death, but cause and quarrel thereof, commendeth the sufferer, I cannot but much dispraise his obstinate stubbornness and sturdiness in dying, and specially in so evil a cause. Surely his death much grieved every man; but not after one sort. Some pitied to see his body so tormented with the fire raging upon the silly carcass, that counted not of the folly. Other that passed not much of the body, lamented to see him spill his soul, wretchedly, without redemption, to be plagued for ever. His friends sorrowed for love; his enemies for pity; strangers for a common kind of humanity, whereby we are bound one to another. Thus I have enforced myself, for your sake, to discourse this heavy narration, contrary to my mind: and, being more than half weary, I make a short end, wishing you a quieter life, with less honour; and easier death, with more praise."



I can do no better than read the succinct account of Tho-

Woodcut of the burning of Thomas Cranmer



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mas Cranmer's death written by that great Protestant Bishop, J C Ryle, who died in 1900. "But then came the time of Cranmer's triumph. With a light heart, and a clear conscience, he cheerfully allowed himself to be hurried to the stake amidst the frenzied outcries of his disappointed enemies. Boldly and undauntedly he stood up at the stake while the flames curled around him, steadily holding out his right hand in the fire, and saying, with reference to his having signed a recantation, "This unworthy right hand," and steadily holding up his left hand towards heaven. Of all the martyrs, strange to say, none at the last moment showed more physical courage than Cranmer did. Nothing, in short, in all his life became him so well as the manner of his leaving it. Greatly he had sinned, but greatly he had repented. Like Peter he fell, but like Peter he rose again. And so passed away the first Protestant Archbishop of Canterbury." What may we learn?

1. The preciousness of the gospel of Christ. "For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" Matthew 16:26. Few things are worth dying for. The glorious gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ heads that list of few things!

Treasure it, believe it, testify of it, stand up for it in this day of betrayal.

2. The perniciousness of the devil's opposition. ". . . we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God," Acts 14:22. "In the world ye shall have tribulation," John 16:33. There are few willing to face reproach and tribulation for the gospel. Religious entertainment and wishy-washy acceptance of everything vaguely Christian are the order of the day.

3. The prize awaiting the faithful. Thomas Cranmer's name has been crowned with honour while Mary's name is odious even to this day!

"Them that honour me I will honour," 1 Samuel 2:30.

Remember. . . .

***Only one life, 'twill soon be past.
It's only what's done for Jesus will last!***