Thomas Cranmer 22.03.2026
SJO. HC. 8&10.30

_____

Unto God be the glory,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

_____

I have chosen this morning
to indulge myself in a little
church-history.

I propose to journey back
some 5 centuries
and to consider
the life and witness
of the first Anglican
archbishop of Canterbury,
Thomas Cranmer,
whose feast-day
was yesterday.

**

He was born in 1489
in the midland county
of Nottinghamshire
early in the reign
of Henry VII.

A youth of excessive timidity,
aggravated by the over-severity
of one of his school-masters,
he early developed
a passion for horse riding.

At Cambridge
he was elected a fellow
of Jesus College,
but, quickly forfeited
the fellowship
by marrying a relative
of the landlady
of a local Tavern!

A year later,
his wife died in child-birth,
and Cranmer was restored
to his Fellowship –
resuming his study of theology.

In due course
he was ordained priest.

A life of peaceful
academic pursuit
lay before him.

But it was not to be!

**

In the summer of 1529,
plague broke out
in Cambridge.

Doctor Cranmer,
as he'd become,
temporarily took up
residence at Waltham
in Essex
as tutor to the sons
of the Cresseys,
a local family.

That same summer,
King Henry VIII
chose to visit
Waltham Abbey.

Two members
of the royal retinue,
Bishops Gardiner and Fox,
were billeted with
the Cressey family.

One evening at supper,
they met the boys'
reticent tutor.

The so-called 'King's matter'
came up in conversation.

Convinced that his wife,
Katherine,
could not bear him a son,
and perhaps already
attracted to Anne Boleyn,
Henry had sought
a decree of annulment
from the Pope.

Under normal circumstances
the appeal would
almost certainly
have been granted.

However, the Pope
was virtually a prisoner
of the Emperor
whose forces had recently
occupied Rome.

And the Emperor was
Queen Katherine's nephew.

The Pope dared not
issue a decree
- that would deprive
the Emperor's aunt
of her crown
- and render her daughter
illegitimate!

In view of the deadlock,
Cranmer suggested
to the Bishops
that the King consult
the Universities of Europe.

Alas for Cranmer's hopes
of the quiet life
of a scholar.

The King was delighted
with the suggestion.

He instructed Cranmer
to prepare a brief
on the subject.

He then sent Cranmer
to Europe
to put the case
to various foreign
universities,
even pleading it
before the Pope
in person.

On his journeys,
Cranmer met with
various Lutheran Princes
and Reformers.

One of them was
Dr Osiander of Nuremberg
whose niece, Margaret,
Cranmer promptly married.

Unbeknownst to him,
his marriage nearly
frustrated the King's
plans for him.

While he was still
away in Europe,
the Archbishop of Canterbury
had died
in the summer of 1532.

Henry at once
pressed for Cranmer
to succeed him.

A married priest
was still an anomaly
and scandal;
a married Archbishop
of Canterbury unimaginable –
as shocking in England
as in Rome.

Nonetheless,
the difficulties were overcome,
and Cranmer accepted
the appointment,
albeit, with the
greatest reluctance.

He'd no appetite
for public office,
let alone the conflict
and controversy
that must inevitably
accompany it.

He delayed
his return to Britain
as long as he could.

When he finally
did return, in 1533,
he smuggled his wife
into the country
in a travelling trunk.

Almost immediately,
he was called upon
to justify his appointment,

and duly pronounced
Henry's marriage
to Queen Katherine
null and void.

Five days later,
he declared the validity
of the King's marriage
to Anne Boleyn.

When the Princess Elizabeth
was baptised in September
of the following year,
the Archbishop became
her godfather.

**

The same year, 1534,
saw Henry's final
breach with Rome.

Initially somewhat sympathetic
to the Protestant cause,
Henry was himself
no Protestant!

Within a few years
his Catholic sympathies
reasserted themselves.

Or rather,
he was still inclined
to be Protestant
when it came to plundering
the wealth of the Catholics –
especially the monasteries.

But he was,
and ever remained,
at heart a Catholic
in matters of
- liturgy,
- ceremony,
- and the sacrifice of the mass.

**

During the last decade
of Henry's reign
Cranmer found himself
perilously exposed

- not only to the vicissitudes
of the King's public
and personal life,
- but also to
  - the proddings
  of the extreme Protestants
  on the one hand,
  - and the fears
  of the conservatives
  on the other.

His own sympathies
were increasingly
with the Protestants,
while the King tended
more and more
to veto any legislative concessions
of a Protestant complexion.

In 1539,
Henry proclaimed
his infamous *Six Articles*.

Referred to as
"the bloody whip
with six strings",
they decreed savage
penalties for anyone who
denied the validity of:
- transubstantiation,
- private masses,
- private confession,
- or clerical celibacy.

Cranmer was compelled
to send his wife
into exile for a time.

****

Given what one historian
has described as
'...the ruthless rough and tumble
of Tudor ecclesiastical politics',
we must be the more
impressed by
Cranmer's longevity
and achievements.

As Primate of all England,
he could and did
significantly influence

the course of the infant
Church of England.

*

It was through his influence
that Thomas Cromwell
prevailed on the King
to authorise the placing
of an English Bible
in every parish church
in the realm.

Because it contained
a Preface written
by the Archbishop
it is sometimes known
as ‘Cranmer’s Bible’.

A few years later,
Cranmer’s magnificent Litany
was published and ordered
‘…to be said or sung in Processyons’
regularly in parish worship.

****

Henry died in 1547,
and was succeeded
by his young son, Edward.

Edward was sympathetic
to the Protestant cause.

He encouraged Cranmer
to realise his long-cherished
desire to produce a complete
English book of worship.

The first English Prayer Book
was published in 1549.

The second,
more Protestant
than the first,
in 1552.

*

Sympathetic to
Protestant doctrine,
Cranmer was less inclined
to favour Protestant practice.

He insisted on a measure
of outward reverence
and ceremony
especially in celebration
and receiving
of Holy Communion.

His aim was always
reform of abuses
rather than religious revolution.

****

We come finally
to the tragic denouement
of Cranmer's career.

It was unfortunate for him
that he allowed himself
to be persuaded
to put his name
to the document
by which the dying Edward
was induced by his
unscrupulous advisor,
Northumberland,
to bequeath the crown,
quite illegally,
to his luckless cousin,
Lady Jane Grey.

Cranmer signed under protest.

But to no avail.

The plot failed,
and Mary Tudor
came to the throne.

Cranmer
and the other conspirators
were accused of high treason,
tried, sentenced, and executed –
all that is save Cranmer.

For reasons of her own,
Mary ordered that
his life be spared –
for a season, at any rate.

In the meantime,
she ordered that he
be deprived of his
orders and office,
and kept in prison.

*

As a convinced Catholic,
Mary undertook to
restore England to Rome,
- outlawing the Prayer Book,
- re-establishing the Latin Mass,
- and ruthlessly persecuting
all Protestants.

Over the next three years,
nearly 300 persons
were burned at the stake
in London alone.

After three years
in prison, Cranmer,
together with Bishops
Latimer and Ridley,
was taken to Oxford
to be tried for
blasphemy and heresy,
Cranmer also for unchastity
because of his marriage.

All of them
were found guilty
and sentenced to death.

Cranmer was compelled
to watch as Latimer and Ridley
were burned at the stake.

Over the next few months,
he was persuaded
- to recant many of his
Protestant convictions,
- to assent to several
Roman doctrines,
- and to acknowledge
the Pope's authority.

If he entertained
any hopes that his
about-face would save him,
he was soon to be disillusioned.

On 21 March 1556 in Oxford,
after preaching a sermon
in which he recanted
his recantation,
reaffirming his Protestant
convictions,
he was led from the Cathedral
to the stake and burned,
thrusting the hand,
with which he had
signed his earlier recantation,
into the flames.

Cranmer achieved
a nobility and heroism
in his death.

But neither by temperament
nor by aspiration
was he a hero or a martyr.

Perhaps we may best say
he was a good man:
- irreproachable in his private life,
- devout and sincere in his religion,
- gentle and tolerant
even towards his opponents.

Under constant
and conflicting pressure
from Rome and Geneva,
he was, in the words
of one historian:
'...the anvil upon which
the Anglican *via media*
(middle way)
was in process of being
hammered out'.

A suitable epitaph
to his life and ministry
is provided by
a catholic bystander
at his execution:
'His friends sorrowed for love;
his enemies for pity;
strangers for a common
kind of humanity
whereby we are bound
to one another'.