WHEN THE SAINTS…

21st of MARCH THOMAS CRANMER

23rd of MARCH WALTER HILTON

24th of MARCH OSCAR ROMERO

THOMAS CRANMER [1489-1556] – Unlike the German reformation, in England it was ‘an act of state;’ ‘A parliamentary transaction,’ and enough work has been undertaken in the field to ascertain that, while there were abuses in the late mediaeval Catholic Church and in some religious institutions, the real prime mover in the break with Rome was Henry VIII; and while humanism had been introduced into Cambridge University from 1488, to leaven the usual scholastic education, very largely – let it be said, by the agency of John Fisher, by 1529 the vast majority of clergy remained, like Cranmer, faithful to late mediaeval religious ritual and piety. Cranmer’s accomplishments and achievements in the Anglican cause, and particularly in the ‘Prayer Book’ are well enough known and celebrated, but we must try to make sense of the man, his beliefs and the extent to which he was able to apply them.

He was born in Nottinghamshire, the grandson of Edmund Cranmer who had married into minor gentry whose family went back to the Conquest, so that as a boy he was trained to hunt, hawk and fight, and was a crack shot with a longbow. In 1545, with the threat of a French invasion, and by now in his pomp as Archbishop, he led 100 of his own guards to join in the scrap, opened his home to the wounded, whom he saw, fed and nourished, and provided with money to see them back home. He was not a milk sop; on the contrary, as an adult he enjoyed the gentlemanly pursuits of hunting and hawking which, in turn, stood him in good stead at Court.

In 1503 he entered Jesus College Cambridge at age 14. He may have suffered from excessive brutality from his teacher as a child, and, for whatever reasons, it took him 8 years to gain a BA, which would have been considered inordinately slow; an example, then, perhaps, either of a late developer, or of a primary education system that entirely failed, and often continues to fail, promising individuals. Four years later, in 1515, he achieved MA. He was fairly rapidly made a Fellow, so, despite a ‘steady’ start he had become recognised probably for his gentleness and courtesy as well as for his learning. In time he came to own a library that was the finest in England.

He appears not to have become a member of the ‘White Horse’ group, a pub that hosted the university clique who interested themselves in Lutheranism, but he did become a denizen of The Dolphin, where a very attractive niece of the proprietors worked: Cranmer married her, which completely scuppered his career as a budding academic because he had to resign his fellowship, move out of Jesus College and take a comparatively humble job at Buckingham College. When Joan died in childbirth after about a year, however, Cranmer got his position back, and was ordained in 1520 and became DD in 1526. By 1529 he was examining candidates for admission, and those applying to become teachers besides working in accounts for the college.

Some of the friends and acquaintances Cranmer made at Cambridge stayed with him throughout his adult life, notably Hugh Latymer, John Burrows, who became Bishop of Ely, and Stephen Gardiner, who became his archenemy, but died too soon to witness Cranmer’s execution.

Oddly enough, however, it was by Gardiner’s agency, in the first place, that Cranmer’s life took a new turn. In 1529 there was a bout of the plague in Cambridge and Cranmer moved to Waltham to stay with relatives. During this time Gardiner, together with John Foxe, who were both serving the king, came to dinner and the three, who knew one another from Cambridge, set about discussing Henry’s ‘great issue.’ Cranmer, who had been interested in the work of councils, suggested that, rather than trying to get a Papal dispensation by means of Canon Law, they might circumvent the Pope, and resort to debating the matter among the major universities, finding a solution based in theology, with precedents from the Bible. The Pope, whose hands were almost literally tied, would normally have had no difficulty granting the dispensation Henry required, but in the meantime he had ordered his emissary, Cardinal Campegggio, to prevaricate and procrastinate as best he could, which had led to the downfall of Wolsey in the matter.

Henry was fuming and when he called the two courtiers to seek alternative ways around the problem, they mentioned Cranmer, and Henry absolutely insisted on meeting him. Cranmer was angry to be dragged into this maelstrom having lacked the time to research the matter properly, but Henry commanded him to drop everything else he was doing in order to work on his behalf. Since 1527 Henry had been pursuing Anne Boleyn, and asked her father, whom he had created Earl of Rochester, to put Cranmer up at the family home at Durham Place, and provide him with all necessary books and writing materials, so it was by this means that he met and became friendly with Anne.

Soon Henry sent Cranmer to Rome, together with Bishop Stokesley of London, and Anne’s father, who brought his dog, who grabbed the Pope’s big toe when His Holiness put his foot out to be kissed, while the English delegation remained steadfastly on their feet – an unpromising beginning to a largely fruitless expedition. Stokesley had come armed with a thousand crowns to effect a few bribes to university bigwigs, so Cranmer got a flavour of ‘Reale politique’ among the great and the good in the church.

Anne seems to have had genuine sympathies for Lutheranism, but in 1530 Cranmer met Simon Grinaeus, a Hungarian Lutheran, who had connections with the Swiss reformers.

Henry appointed Cranmer as his Royal Ambassador in Residence to Emperor Charles V, which brought him to the German lands. Charles was looking for allies to help defend Austria against the Turks, and had reason to expect help from the English, but henry never intended anything of the sort; rather he wanted Cranmer to network among the German princes in order to raise their resistance and weaken Charles into releasing his strangle-hold on the Pope. In pursuit of Charles’s army Cranmer had to rough it and learned enough about diplomacy to be able to hold on for six months until Autumn 1532 before giving Charles the bad news. All this acted as a baptism of fire for Cranmer into the trials of courtly life, and it is difficult to imagine how he might have retained any vestiges of the innocent Cambridge academic after all this.

Moreover, Cranmer had burned his boots in another way. Before catching up with Charles, he had spent some time in Nuremberg and the town council had been struggling to stay out of the religious controversy, but soon it became plain that Lutheranism was on the rise, and clergy started marrying. Cranmer was staying with Andreas Oleander, the pastor of an important church there, and he fell for and married Margaret, the niece of Oleander’s wife the pastor himself probably officiating.

You might wonder how it was possible for Cranmer to self-sabotage for the second time, but as Royal Ambassador, he had every reason to believe he would be settled in secular life and might be abroad for some years. It was in late 1532, when Cranmer had been married for only 4 months, that he received a summons from Henry to return to England to become Archbishop of Canterbury. Not only did Cranmer not want the job, in the tradition of the best bishops, but he took his time journeying home in the hope that Henry might lose patience and pick somebody else.

That somebody else might well have been Stephen Gardiner, who had served longer, and would have been better placed, had he not opposed Henry’s moves to take over the Church in England, a position from which he eventually resiled, but Henry probably saw Cranmer as having all necessary qualifications in learning and personality to serve his cause. … … …

Having traced Cranmer’s route to Canterbury, we need to examine his motives, his principles and how they may or may not have been put into execution.

Cranmer managed to survive Henry’s reign which, in itself, required almost superhuman self-control and diplomacy: he was an exceptionally affable and gentle character, a fact acknowledged even by his opponents and his enemies. When Gardiner, his archenemy, lost his seat on the Council, Cranmer put himself out when the opportunity arose, to bring him back. People said of him that such was his warmth and friendliness that even a stranger felt they had known him for years. As for policy:

1. Cranmer was reputed a conscientious scholar rather than a bright original thinker:

he saw himself as an agent of the sovereign; an Erastian, who viewed church and state as one inseparable body, a position he retained throughout his life, even when to do so went against his own interests and convictions. It was only on the last morning of his life that he broke from it solely to proclaim his own truth once he realised for sure that he was going to die. If God’s representative on earth failed to understand God’s will for said representative, Cranmer believed that his duty was to advise, but that if his advice failed, duty compelled him to carry out his sovereign’s will, even when, as in Mary’s reign, that will might be directed straight towards his own destruction.

2 Cranmer’s opinions changed and developed during the 20 years of his ministry as archbishop: in 1533 he had to have John Frith burned at the stake for denying transubstantiation: at his own trial in 1554 it was pointed out that he himself had become guilty of the same anti-Catholic heresy, but Cranmer could hardly be blamed for not being able to foresee that his views might change 13 years later. His detractors, nevertheless, have seen him as ‘woolly’ ever since.

3 By means of the ‘Six Articles’ and Henry’s ‘Bishops’ Book’ Henry had more or less put the lid on Cranmer’s own Protestant ambitions for the English church, but in Edward VI’s reign, with a Protestant boy in minority, Cranmer was in a stronger position, and able to see many of his projects through, although opposition never ceased, either from conservative churchmen or Evangelicals who wished for further changes.

4 Cranmer grew to dislike Luther and felt that he should have given way when the verdict of the council went against him. He moved gradually towards the position of the ‘magisterial reformers’, and during Edward’s reign he exchanged views with people such as Martin Bucer and Philip Melanchthon, - themselves theologians, and made a serious attempt to bring reformers of every stripe together in a ‘worldwide’ council of reformed churches, but without success.

5 Despite having sanctioned two executions of Protestants on religious grounds during Edward’s reign, without having condemned a single Catholic, Cranmer saw himself as steering a middle road between conservative Catholic sympathisers, whom he regarded as ‘unlearned’ and therefore not at fault – and more extreme Protestant reformers, whom he viewed as doubly damned because having found the ’right way,’ their errors were not only considered as desertions from the fold, but as bad examples to the ‘unconverted.’ He had every parliamentary act enabling prosecution for heresy since the time of Richard II removed from the Statute Book.

6 It is important to understand that the concept of ‘religious tolerance’ as we term what should more correctly be ‘religious freedom,’ was not one ever practised in the sixteenth century, even if it was advocated in More’s ‘Utopia,’ and he, of all people, never applied it. State and church policy practically everywhere at the time was aimed at conformity; so that within the bounds of what was possible, Cranmer steered the nearest he could to tolerance, [permitting dissensions that might otherwise be prosecuted]. … … …

A good deal has been written about Cranmer’s trials, degrading, mistreatment and subsequent execution, much of it in the mode of hagiography, principally by John Foxe, and it is rather distasteful to think that subsequent generations of Anglicans were encouraged to execrate Roman Catholics because one of its least worthy representatives – the one Tudor monarch with no perceptible sign of charity, wisdom or grace, needed to take out her accumulated anger, hatred and vengeance on the three people she chose to be whipping boys for the humiliations she had suffered through no fault or wrongdoing perpetrated on her by any of them.

This is not to say that Mary did not accomplish a good deal during the five years of her reign in the Catholic cause which has been overlooked by later historians. And much has been written on her behalf to redeem the utterly negative reputation attributed to her because of her bigotry; but the fact is that her reign began with popular sympathy and acclaim, with the thwarting of Northumberland’s totally self-seeking plot to bring the Protestant Lady Jane Grey to the throne, and by the time of her death very few tears were shed. It is also just to remind ourselves that whereas Mary sanctioned 300-odd executions on religious grounds, her half-sister Elizabeth could double that total, although most of her victims were executed as traitors.

It is this very distinction between religious heretics and traitors to the state that was part of Mary’s difficulty dealing with Cranmer, who had, after all, headed up the petition in favour of Lady Jane Grey. Mary pardoned everybody who took part in the original plot to keep her from the throne, except Cranmer; not a good look, so she positively had to get him convicted as a heretic in order to make certain of seeing him off.

Having abdicated her governorship of the church in favour of the Pope, however, Mary had to cede the necessary authority to Rome, which occasioned all the attendant bureaucratic delay. Cranmer had been consecrated under Papal authority, so there was no cleric in England with the authority to degrade him. What this meant was that Cranmer was effectively tried twice; once with Latymer and Ridley, and a second time by commissioners appointed by the Pope. Cranmer was content to make obeisance to those appointed under English Royal Authority, but he kept his hat on before the Papal appointee.

Latymer and Ridley were certainly undaunted in their maintenance of their Protestantism, so that their dispatch was relatively uncomplicated, given that their trial, together with Cranmer’s first ordeal, was virtually a music-hall performance, with beer handed out; hissing, hooting, jeering and coughing, while each prisoner was assigned to one doctor for cross-examination, but with every other commission member free to pile in at will; but even at the conclusion, the commission’s prolocutor, Dr Weston, complimented Cranmer:

‘Your wonderful gentle behaviour and modesty is worthy much commendation: you deserve most hearty thanks in mine own name and in the name of all my bretheren.’ At this all the doctors present raised their hats to Cranmer.

One of the quite unnecessary cruelties perpetrated on Cranmer was to bring him to the window of his lodging to witness the burning of his friends Ridley and Latymer: Latymer died quickly, whereas Ridley’s death took far longer and was the more gruesome: Cranmer had probably never witnessed such an execution before.

Robert Atwell remarks with very great discernment, that Cranmer was ‘perhaps too fair-minded and cautious to be a ready-made hero in reformation disputes,’ but, having signed no fewer than six recantations, most of them with hidden ambiguities that the authorities would ultimately reject, having suffered both physical and mental torments and public and formalised humiliation, Cranmer finally publicly proclaimed his Protestant beliefs, and died, supposedly placing his right hand first into the flames, as having been the instrument of his vain attempts to save his hide.

His own achievements during the six years that he was free to pursue his true ambitions, have lasted and travelled a good deal longer and more widely than those of his spiteful persecutors.

The clear evidence from history is that Cranmer lived and bore his exceptionally onerous responsibilities as a true saint although the title of Leslie Williams’ short biography: ’Emblem of faith untouched’ would seem to over-egg the pudding just a bit..

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WALTER HILTON [?-1396] – Of the four famous 14th-century English mystics – Richard Rolle, Julian of Norwich and the author of the ‘Cloud of Unknowing’ Walter Hilton is the guide who explains the most clearly what the journey of contemplation involves, and how to undertake it. He was a respected spiritual director in his lifetime, and Christians read his book ‘The Ladder of Perfection,’ for generations after his death. Walter is the mystic who de-mystifies contemplation.

As with so many important figures of the Middle Ages, very little is known of his life: he was born in Nottinghamshire and joined St Peter’s Priory of Augustinian Canons regular at Thurgarten but must have passed some time as a solitary, either a hermit or a Carthusian monk. The canons were a learned community who occupied themselves in the study and translation of scripture into English, and became involved in various controversies on the official side, dealing, among other things, with some of the whackier ideas circulating among the Lollards, and were no great fans of Wyclif either.

Walter wrote several books both in English and Latin on contemplation, but his ‘Ladder of Perfection’ was addressed to an anchoress, that is to say a woman who had been licenced to live her life enclosed as a solitary. [The distinction between an anchorite and a hermit is that the latter may occasionally leave the hermitage: many lived in places and situations where they could act as guide or even as toll keepers, whereas an anchorite would have been expected to remain in their cell for life, and sometimes even walled into it]. We are probably to assume that the addressee is a real nun, although the book’s value and effectiveness would not have suffered had she been a literary device. At all events Walter’s teaching is clearly grounded in tradition and his own experience.

Having been examined, usually by the diocesan bishop, for her suitability for the calling of an anchoress, it was important for such a person to have been well grounded in the spiritual life. She would be supported in her anchorage, usually in or near a town, by her local community who, in turn, would rely on her as a respected source of prayer and counsel. Such people would undergo a ceremony not very different from a burial service before being formally led into her cell and the order given to lock or even to brick in the door. A window would usually connect the anchoress with her community, and occasionally visitors were permitted, so that in some instances there must have been a little flexibility: Margery Kemp, for example, visited Mother Julian for some days.

Some such people, if not properly motivated or grounded, could run away or go mad. There were those who, for whatever reason, set up as enclosed solitaries without going through the formalities of a licence from the bishop; for instance, we are not entirely certain that Mother Julian herself received such authorisation. Nowadays we celebrate Julian as a visionary; a theological and spiritual genius despite her marked unorthodoxy in one or two areas where she departs from church doctrine that she otherwise deeply respects. Such individuals are viewed as necessary outriders who are become accepted and trusted as such, but Walter clearly understood his task as keeping his directee as close as possible to ‘scripture’ and received doctrine: any aspirant anchoress could consider herself truly blessed to be in possession of such authentic wisdom.

One reservation that may be put forward is that, like so many writers in the Early Church and Middle Ages, Walter took it for granted that anybody who disagreed with received church doctrine must of necessity suffer from the sin of pride, and therefore be bad and sinful people; a position perfectly understandable and excusable given his steady preoccupation with Wyclif and the Lollards, and in truth it was probably sound training to keep a directee focussed, in the first place, on accepted doctrine, not to mention that he may himself have experienced the dangers he warns against in straying too far from the flock.

As a guide for modern Christians today, however useful the ‘Ladder’ may be in teaching authentic wisdom in the life of prayer, six hundred years of subsequent written experience from other luminaries might teach modern seekers after contemplation to be a little less anally retentive about strict adherence to the bible, the fathers, and the letter of church doctrine – particularly for Anglicans, although most of us are, by reputation, so indifferent to the thought of God’s open hand and arms that the matter might hardly arise!!!I

In chapter 61 of the first book, Walter also assures his reader that there are two kinds of rewards available apart from the greatest of all, which is the love of God himself: There is a special secondary reward called an aureole granted to martyrs, preachers and virgins! The last of these was a special preoccupation among men from the 4th century; martyrdom we have also explored, but preaching? Walter does make it clear that motive is everything in gaining this second special reward, but he goes on to assure his directee that an anchoress would gain one, as would somebody – like herself, who had entered a religious order validated by ‘holy church.’ Priests come just below this, but a bishop wins a greater reward because of his status; Walter fails to elucidate!!!

Modern readers need to be alert to the occasional oddity in what is in every other respect a thoroughly useful guide to the life of prayer even for today. Apart from this slightest of reservations, however, any modern reader could usefully follow at least in the early stages of the ‘Ladder’ profitably, and in the assurance that as teacher, Walter Hilton shared his experience with honesty and humility, and understood some of the main pitfalls in the pursuit of God through prayer and contemplation; but judge for yourself:

Walter Hilton’s ‘Ladder of Perfection’ is available in Penguin, and the fact that both books together only require the very minimum – three pages – of explanatory notes should assure you of everything written here.

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OSCAR ROMERO [1917-80]; ARCHBISHOP of EL SALVADOR – Oscar Romero came from a poor family in a remote part of El Salvador, a small strip of Pacific coast in Lower Central America. He was a pious boy and experienced the call to the priesthood from an early age; graduating from the Gregorian University in Rome, he became secretary to his diocese. In 1970 he was created Assistant Bishop; in 1974 Bishop of Santiago de Maria, and in 1977 Archbishop of El Salvador itself.

El Salvador is Spanish for ‘the saviour,’ but anybody living there in the 1970’s could not possibly have overlooked the irony of the country’s name, with a tiny group of rich people exploiting and tyrranising a predominantly peasant population.

The original population were Amerindian, with a Mayan civilisation between 100 and 1.000 C E, but the Spanish conquered the country in the 1520’s, and after independence in 1821 government remained unstable throughout the rest of the century, and in the 20th there was a series of military dictatorships. The economy is still dependent on coffee, sugar and cotton, with 90%of the population mixed race, 9% white and only 1% of the original Amerindians remaining.

Oscar Romero had been the kind of ‘drone’ that the church was used to, and saw, on the whole, as being appropriate to a country like el Salvador. He was, apparently, somewhat prickly and not particularly likeable, but was clever and had a good radio presence which he used to effect in regular religious broadcasts. Whatever his beliefs, he was never an advocate of liberation theology.

Because there is little information about his personal life nobody seems quite sure what occasioned the transformation that brought him to be the first Archbishop since Thomas a Becket to have been assassinated while in process of conducting worship. What is known is that while he was still Bishop of Santiago de Maria, a death squad murdered five peasants in a hamlet in his diocese, and he made a sharp protest. When he visited Rome for an audience with the Pope he lodged seven dossiers recounting conditions in his country.

Perhaps rapid promotion and his celebrity as a radio personality had taken him away from his roots, but once Oscar came to understand that he could not hold back and acquiesce in the violence, corruption and injustices perpetrated by his government, he began to inveigh seriously against what was going on; reading out the names of the latest victims during sermons from the cathedral pulpit; setting up support groups for the poor and relatives of the junta’s victims, and making serious proposals for improving the lives and the people, and giving them civil rights.

Opposition was inevitable, although it must be emphasized that the violence came from left-wing rebels as well as the extreme right-wing government, the latter ably assisted with arms from the United States, whose primary foreign policy aim in the region was to keep communists away from their back door. Oscar’s concern was not party-political, but he was no longer able to avoid the reality that the work and outreach of the church involves succouring the poor and oppressed. Neither was he ever involved in the various theological and liturgical controversies following Vatican II: his authentically sound prophetic ministry simply arose from his concern, as first representative of the church in his country.

When Oscar proposed various programmes to improve the lot of the poor, particularly in the field of housing, government agents sat in his congregation with tape recorders, taking note of what was being proclaimed from the pulpit. Newspapers carried articles against him supposedly written on behalf of ‘The Salvadorean Catholic Association,’ and ‘The Catholic Women’s Association,’ neither of which actually existed.

Like Martin Luther King before him, towards its close, Oscar had no doubt whatever how his life would be brought to its end: he moved into a cancer hospital run by a religious order to escape the pressures of office, and whilst in process of conducting the funeral Mass for the mother of a friend, one shot rang out, and the killer was never caught.

Nobody, including Oscar himself, could have predicted that he would become such a thorn in the flesh of a repressive government to the extent that, even as Archbishop, he could be gunned down at the altar, but the assassination of the Archbishop of Uganda two years previously had warned the world that there remained nothing and nobody sacred to a ruling clique ruthlessly determined to retain their own wealth and power at any cost.

With whatever horror and revulsion we may look back at such violations of human rights and dignity by governments that we place safely in the past and beyond the pale, perhaps we should be wondering to ourselves whether our cautious attitudes to those abuses may have coloured our tolerance of equally serious, if less blatant abuses of power by contemporary governments with which we insist on treating as legitimate and friendly for whatever expedient motives.