

THOMAS CRANMER

THE LESSON: GOD'S POWER MADE PERFECT IN WEAKNESS

“Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.”

(Ephesians 5:15-16)

The fire of reformation lit by Martin Luther in 1517 did not take long to reach the shores of England. In England, as throughout the west, there was a sense that the Roman Catholic Church had strayed in its theology and become corrupt in its political interventions. Although these concerns were widespread, it was for reasons of state rather than of faith that the English Church initially rejected the authority of Rome. The English King, Henry VIII, wanted a new wife to produce a male heir and he wanted a church that would sanction this for him. It was in the throes of this separation that reformers found their opportunity to begin to realign the Church in England with its roots.

“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

(2 Corinthians 12:9)

Thomas was a “second son” born in 1489 in Nottinghamshire, England. His older brother was destined to inherit and so Thomas was pointed towards a career in the Church; an arrangement which was very common at that time. While still at his studies, Thomas was very drawn to the reformation, being inspired by what was coming out of Germany in those years. In fact, he and his group of friends were sometimes called “Little Germany”.

Thomas, having become a priest and teacher, saw legitimacy in King Henry VIII’s complaint with Rome and supported him in the annulment process of his first marriage. Then, in 1532, Thomas went to Germany, where he secretly married the niece of one of the theologians he met. The marriage had to be secret because priests were not permitted to marry. Thomas was made Archbishop of Canterbury in the next year, and would go on to support Henry VIII in the notorious decade during which the king married five different women in succession (for a total of six wives).

While Thomas’ convictions were for reform, the king’s were not – once he had obtained his goal of severing England from papal authority. But when Henry VIII died in 1547 and his son Edward VI was made king, Thomas was given an opportunity to make a lasting contribution in the Book of Common Prayer, which was largely written and revised by him during these years, along with what would become the “39 Articles”, the core Anglican statement of faith in response to both Catholic and Protestant challenges. In the words of eminent Canadian theologian Robert Crouse, Cranmer’s 1549 prayer book produced “a liturgy at once Catholic and Protestant: Catholic in its continuities and in its general character as liturgy; Protestant in its care to subject every element to the judgement of the Word of God in Scripture.”

“Let those who suffer according to God’s will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.”

(1 Peter 4:19)

Edward VI’s reign was brief. He died in 1553, and after a failed attempt to place his cousin on the throne, Mary I, a staunch Roman Catholic, became queen. She immediately set about trying to undo the English Reformation. Thomas was arrested and tried for treason. He was forced to watch the execution of his friends. His imprisonment was a long one. Thomas’s captors wished to make an example of him, coercing him to sign statements taking back the work he’d done in reforming the English Church. But in 1556, Thomas was given an opportunity to make a statement before being executed. His enemies expected a public recantation, but instead Thomas, strengthened by the nearness of his death, affirmed his beliefs and disavowed his recantations, declaring that the first part of his body to burn should be the hand that had signed them. When Thomas reached out his hand to be burned, the powerful symbolism of this act gave fresh courage to the reformers.

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Thomas's life was not without mistakes. Nevertheless, he was often a voice speaking for mercy during bloodthirsty times. He had the humility to recognize his own need for grace, and when the opportunity arose for him to use his gifts in the service of the Church, he took up the task with dedication. The Prayer Book, which he in large part authored, is a work of devotion, combining orthodox theology with linguistic beauty. Of his liturgical work, the renowned theologian J.I. Packer wrote:

“Cranmer’s services first make us face our present badness; then they tell us of the new life of grace; finally they lead us into the right response, which is multiple – prayer and praise for pardon; joyful trust in God’s promises of mercy; learning of God from his Word; asking for help both for ourselves and for others, professing our own faith, and giving ourselves directly to God out of gratitude for all he has given to us”.

(SOURCE ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: BRITANNICA.COM, “THOMAS CRANMER” | ROBERT D. CROUSE, “THE FORM OF SOUND WORDS: THE CATHOLICITY OF THE PRAYER BOOK” | JUSTO GONZÁLEZ, “THE STORY OF CHRISTIANITY, VOLUME 2” | J.I. PACKER, “ROOTED AND BUILT UP IN CHRIST: THE PRAYER BOOK PATH” | WIKIPEDIA.ORG, “HENRY VIII OF ENGLAND” AND “THOMAS CRANMER”.)

AT-HOME CHALLENGE

Each morning and evening, follow your own rule of prayer.

(IF YOU DON'T HAVE ONE, TRY SAYING THE MORNING AND EVENING PRAYERS FROM THE “FORMS OF PRAYER TO BE USED IN FAMILIES”, WHICH BEGINS ON PAGE 728 OF THE BCP. IF YOU DON'T HAVE A COPY, YOU CAN LOOK IT UP HERE: [HTTP://PRAYERBOOK.CA/RESOURCES/BCPONLINE/FAMILY-PRAYER.](http://prayerbook.ca/resources/bcponline/family-prayer))

Review today's lesson. Choose a line of scripture or a phrase from the story of Thomas that you find edifying, inspiring or instructive:

Throughout this week, spend some time prayerfully reflecting on the phrase you've chosen. Decide on one concrete action you can take this week based on your reflections, *and* come back next week prepared to share a bit about your reflections and the action you took.

- AND/OR -

Take some time to pray through the following prayer.

Almighty God, by whose grace and power thy Martyr Thomas was enabled to witness to the truth and to be faithful unto death: Grant that we, who now remember him before thee, may likewise so bear witness unto thee in this world, that we may receive with him the crown of glory that fadeth not away; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with thee and the Holy Spirit liveth and reigneth, one God, for ever and ever. Amen. (SUPPLEMENTARY COLLECT OF A MARTYR, P. 310)