

Why Thomas Cranmer?

When Archbishop of Canterbury and Lord Chancellor William Wareham died on 22nd August, 1532, King Henry VIII had to propose a replacement. No longer was this appointment the sole prerogative of the Pope, Henry had severed all ties between Rome and the English Church in the previous year when Archbishop Wareham had presided over a meeting of the Convocation of the clergy of the Province of Canterbury. This body had voted the sum of £100,000 for the king to avoid the penalties of praemunire, a 14th century law that prohibited any authoritative declaration of the pope, or any other foreign leader, in contravention to the supremacy of England's monarch. Convocation also accepted Henry as Supreme Head of the Church, but insisted on the addition of the face-saving clause, 'so far as the Law of Christ allows'.

The Church of England in 1532 had a number of distinguished prelates, from whom Henry could have selected the next occupant of the See of Canterbury and the Primacy of All England. The most senior candidate was Edward Lee, Archbishop of York. On 1st June, 1531, Lee became a member of a deputation which was sent to Queen Catherine to try to persuade her to renounce her marital rights after Henry had expressed his wish to annul his marriage to her. In September Henry wrote to the pope requesting authority for Lee's elevation to the Archbishopric of York. He was, thus, newly appointed, having only, in December of the previous year, been consecrated and enthroned. He was previously Chancellor of the Diocese of Salisbury, and he held Prebends of both York and the Chapel Royal.

Others senior clerics that Henry may have considered for translation to Canterbury were the Prince Bishops of Winchester and Durham, and the Bishop of London. In November, 1531, the king had rewarded Stephen Gardiner with the Diocese of Winchester which had stood vacant since the death, in the previous autumn, of Thomas Cardinal Wolsey. In August, 1529, Gardiner had been appointed as the King's Secretary. By November of that year he also held the Archdeaconries of Taunton, Worcester and Norwich, but in April, 1531, he resigned all three of these and instead took the title of Archdeacon of Leicester. In 1530 the King demanded a report from the authorities of the University of Cambridge to prove the unlawfulness of his marriage to his deceased brother's widow, Catherine of Aragon. Henry demanded this assessment to justify him in his new plan to resolve the question without the pope's intervention. Gardiner succeeded in this vital (to Henry) task.

In February, 1530, Cuthbert Tunstall became another successor to Cardinal Wolsey, this time in the Diocese of Durham. In the King's 'Great Matter' Tunstall acted as a counsellor to Queen Catherine. In general, during these troubled years he maintained a low profile and adopted a strategy of passive obedience and general acquiescence. Unlike Thomas More, who was summarily executed for refusing to acknowledge Henry's headship of the Church of England, Tunstall publically defended the King's position, while adhering firmly to Roman Catholic dogma, doctrine and practices. Much like Henry, he remained 'Catholic without the Pope'.

Bishop of London John Stokesley had a distinguished academic pedigree. In 1498 he was made Principal of Magdalen Hall, and in 1505 Vice-President of

Magdalen College. Sometime after 1509 he was appointed a Member of the Royal Council, and Chaplain and Almoner to Henry VIII; he attended Henry as his Chaplain on the Field of the Cloth of Gold in 1520. As a canon lawyer Stokesley was sent to the Papal State of Orvieto in 1527 to secure a decretal document from Pope Clement VII agreeing to acquiesce to the king's demand for a marriage annulment to be heard in England. In 1529 and 1530 he visited France and Italy as an ambassador to Francis I and to try to gain opinions from theologians in universities in those countries that were in favour of the king's separation from Catherine.

In contrast to the obvious candidature of these accomplished prelates, all of whom had given stalwart service to the king, especially in relation to his 'Great Matter', what was it that persuaded Henry to ignore them all and appoint Thomas Cranmer to the See of Canterbury? In 1503, at the tender age of fourteen years, Cranmer had left his native Nottinghamshire and had gone up to Jesus College, Cambridge, to read for a degree in Philosophy and Classics. It took him eight years to gain his Bachelor's degree. Almost immediately he began a study of humanist literature, principally through the writings of Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples and Desiderius Erasmus, as well as New Testament Greek and Hebrew. He received his Master's degree after three years, and was awarded a Fellowship of the College. As a Fellow, though not yet in Holy Orders, he was bound by a strict code of celibacy. However, in 1515 or 1516 Cranmer married a woman known as 'Black Joan of the Dolphin'. Joan was reputed to be the daughter of a 'gentleman' and was related to the wife of the proprietor of the Dolphin Inn in Cambridge. Cranmer thereby forfeited his eligibility to hold his Fellowship and was reduced to taking employment as a Reader at the monastic institute at Buckingham Hall, which later became Magdalen College. He sent Joan to St Ives at the time of her confinement but neither she nor the infant survived childbirth. Extraordinarily the College authorities readmitted Cranmer to his Fellowship; there is no record of any other widower receiving this honour in the next two hundred years. Upon reinstatement as a Fellow, Cranmer began a study of theology and was appointed a University Preacher. In 1526 he was awarded his Doctor of Divinity degree.

From 1527, in addition to his duties as a Cambridge don, Cranmer assisted Cardinal Wolsey to try to satisfy Henry's demands for an annulment, and in the summer of 1529, while staying with relatives in Waltham Holy Cross to avoid an outbreak of the plague in Cambridge, he may have met the king, who was staying nearby. He was joined by two of his college associates, Stephen Gardiner and Edward Foxe, and together they discussed the annulment at great length. Cranmer proposed that they should discontinue the legal case in Rome but, instead, seek opinions from theologians at universities in what is now mainland Europe. Henry showed considerable interest when Gardiner and Foxe appraised him of this plan. It is not known whether explicit approval to proceed came from the king or his new Lord Chancellor, Thomas More, but eventually it was implemented and Cranmer was asked to join the royal team in Rome to gather opinions from within that city. Foxe coordinated the researches and oversaw the writing of *Collectanea Satis Copiosa* (The Sufficiently Abundant Collections) which gave historical and theological support to the argument that the king could exercise supreme jurisdiction in all matters within his realm.

In January, 1532, Cranmer was appointed resident ambassador to the court of the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V. While accompanying the emperor as he travelled through his realm, Cranmer visited the Lutheran city of Nuremberg and saw for the first time the effects of the religious revolution. When the Imperial Diet moved to Nuremberg in the summer, Cranmer met the leading architect of the protestant reforms, Andreas Osiander. They became good friends, and during that July Cranmer took the surprising step of marrying Margarete, the niece of Osiander's wife. This event was the more remarkable because the marriage required Cranmer to break his (now) priestly vow of celibacy. Observers of the time noted that Cranmer began to move, however moderately, into an acceptance of certain principles of Lutheranism. It is interesting to note that this development in his personal life was not matched by parallel success in his political affairs; he was not able to persuade Charles, Catherine's nephew, to support the annulment of his aunt's marriage to Henry.

Did Henry know of Cranmer's matrimonial indiscretions and the earlier loss of his Fellowship at Cambridge? With his comprehensive intelligence gathering machine, headed by Vice Regent Thomas Cromwell, it seems inconceivable that he could not have known. Some senior churchmen, over whom Cranmer was preferred, would have been keen to bring any such knowledge to the king's attention, if only out of spite. If the king did know, then he seems to have paid little heed to the news. Henry was under pressure from Thomas Boleyn, the father of both Mary, who had been his mistress, and Anne, his intended queen, to appoint Cranmer to Canterbury. Boleyn and his family had distinct leanings away from Rome and towards the religious reforms that were taking place on the continent. The appointment of the next Primate of All England was entirely in the patronage of the king, following his break with Rome and he had no wish to offend Anne's father. Also, Henry was now Supreme Head of the Church and his decision to promote Cranmer did not contravene Wareham's addendum about 'as far as the Law of Christ allows'. As far as is known Jesus never legislated on the appointment of bishops. A letter was duly despatched to Cranmer, dated 1st October, 1532, which required his immediate return to England. He arrived at the beginning of January, 1533.

The promotion of Cranmer to Canterbury caused much surprise, especially as he had previously only held minor ecclesiastical appointments. The acquisition of the necessary documentation from Rome to allow the consecration was facilitated by royal funding and instructions from Pope Clement VII to the Papal Nuncio to accommodate Henry's demand so that, certainly in the view of the Vatican, a rapprochement might be achieved, notwithstanding the fact that the king had formally separated from Rome two years previously. Cranmer was consecrated on 30th March by the Bishops of Lincoln, Exeter and Saint Asaph. While awaiting the arrival of the papal bull Cranmer continued his work on the annulment, the more so after Anne announced that she was pregnant; she and Henry were married secretly in January, 1533. Cranmer did not learn of this event until some weeks later. In order to bring a conclusion to the 'Great Matter' Cranmer, together with the bishops of Winchester, London, Bath and Lincoln, met in the Lady Chapel of Dunstable Priory, on 23rd May, and pronounced the marriage between Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon to be null and void. This was not a divorce; inclusion of the clause *void ab initio* meant that, in law, Henry had never been married to Catherine. He was free to marry Anne Boleyn.

Following from his overseas visits Cranmer clearly saw the significance of reformist thinking on the Church, especially in regard to its sacramental life. In this he was supported by the Boleyn family, but the time was not right to try to persuade Henry. The king had accepted some elements of religious reform proposed by Cromwell, including the introduction of an English Bible, but any suggestion of alterations to the Mass, or a change of the language of worship to ‘a tongue understood of the people’ would have incurred the monarch’s wrath. In 1521 Henry had written, possibly with the assistance of Thomas More, *Assertio Septum Sacramentorum* (In Defence of the Seven Sacraments) in part to refute Martin Luther’s denunciation of indulgences. For this Pope Leo X rewarded him with the title *Fidei Defensor* (Defender of the Faith). Apart from Henry’s indifference to doctrinal and liturgical change Cranmer had to combat the traditional opinions of his brother bishops, not least from Stephen Gardiner. Gardiner had argued the necessity of a belief in transubstantiation, wherein the bread and wine of the Mass are physically changed into the body and blood of Christ, only the appearances (the accidents) remained. Cranmer wrote his polemical response under the title *Answer unto a Crafty and Sophistical Cavillation devised by Stephen Gardiner*.

Cranmer clearly had the structure and content of a single volume Prayer Book in mind long before Henry’s death in 1547. This was introduced to the Church of England on Whitsunday, 1549, but it is important to remember that Cranmer relied in part on the reformed Roman Breviary of the Spaniard, Francesco Cardinal de Quiñones, and also on a book on doctrine and liturgy by Hermann von Wied, Archbishop of Cologne. In his singular work Cranmer provided: A Table and Kalendar for Psalmes and Lessons; Ordre[s] for Matins and Evensong; The Introites, Collectes, Epistles and Gospelles; Baptisme, bothe publique and private; Confirmacion, where also is a Catechisme; Matrimony; Visitacion of the sicke, and Communion of the same; Buriall; Purificacion of women; and A declaracion of scripture, with certein prayers to bee use the firste daye of Lent, commonlye called Ashwednesdaie. In addition to this comprehensive list of services he provided: A Preface; Of Ceremonies omitted or reteyned; and Certein notes for the more plain explication and decent ministracion of thinges contened in this boke. In the following year he added: The Forme and maner of makyng and consecratyng of Archebishops, Bishops, Priestes and Deacons. Apart from the time needed to finalise and proof-read the texts, many months must surely have been spent getting sufficient copies printed, bound and distributed to all the churches in England.

The first page of Cranmer’s monumental First English Prayer Book has the title: *The booke of the common prayer and adminiftracion of the sacramentes, and other rites and ceremonies of the Churche:after the ufe of the Churche of England*. It led directly, a century or so later, to the edition of 1662, which today, over 350 years later, is still enshrined in English law through its associated Act of Uniformity. This latter is a volume which must rank highly in any competition for the longest title: *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church, according to the use of the Church of England, Together with the Psalter or Psalms of David, pointed as they are to be Sung or said in churches: And the Form and Manner of Making, Ordaining, and Consecrating of Bishops, Priests, and Deacons* (61 words!).

Congratulations must most assuredly be offered to Archbishop Thomas Cranmer for his foundational English Prayer Book, but, perhaps more importantly, a significant debt of gratitude is owed to King Henry VIII for having the vision to promote this lowly, yet learned, Clerk in Holy Orders to the Throne of Saint Augustine. He could have had no inkling of the effects that this appointment would have on the Church of England and its doctrine and worship, all of which would certainly have been vastly different had he chosen any other candidate for the See of Canterbury back in 1532. Deo gratias.