

A LIGHT FOR ENGLAND  
A Sermon for Oxford Martyrs' Day, 2011  
On the Text: Propers for the Day  
By the Reverend Doctor Randolph Constantine

We in Trinity Church are Anglicans. It is part of our name. We are Trinity Anglican Reformed Episcopal Church. We are Christians first, but on top of that we are Anglicans – Anglican Christians. Our identity as a denomination and our customs of worship stem largely from events and people of 16<sup>th</sup> century England. However, as just-plain Christians our identity stems from the Life, Death, and Resurrection of one man, Jesus Christ. Our history as a church is messy and bloody. Although there is some Blood, the history of the Life and Work of Jesus Christ is in a sense, simple and straightforward; we just recited it in the Nicene Creed. If we add to the Nicene Creed the Comfortable Words of the Communion Service, we know why He came to live among us for a few years: “that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.”

Sometimes the things God has done or said are difficult or impossible to understand, but what God did or said for our salvation in the Life of His Son Jesus Christ can be understood by almost anyone. It is when we humans get into the act that things get messy. The Church, the Bride of Christ, which is defined in the post Communion Prayer of Thanksgiving in the statement that, “and that we are very members incorporate in the mystical Body of Thy Son, which is the blessed company of all faithful people”. That statement comes from what St. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 12:27 “27 Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular.” and in Colossians 1:24 “24 Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the church:” When the Risen Jesus ascended to Heaven and left the church in the hands of men, it wasn't long before things started to get messy. The Greek widows griped and it became necessary for the Apostles to appoint and ordain Deacons. It is not the Deacons' fault, but nothing has been the same since.

If you look on one of our liturgical calendars, or look on page xlvi (in the front of the 1928 Prayer book) where there begins a four-page calendar of the fixed feasts of Church year, you will find something interesting, namely that as far as the history of the Reformed Episcopal church is concerned and the Episcopal church from which we came, we do not in general celebrate or commemorate any of the saints of the church or events in the history of the church other than

events concerning the John the Baptist, the Holy Family, and the 12 Apostles. We do not celebrate, any later named saints such as St Jerome or St. Anselm as does the Roman Church. However, because we come from a church that was formed after the Revolutionary War from the remnants of the Church of England in the colonies, you will find two secular holidays in that calendar: the Fourth of July and Thanksgiving Day. This is part of our heritage from the Episcopal Church. For a holy day to have significance it should be rare. We, the Reformed Episcopal Church, broke from the Episcopal Church on December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1873, but we do not celebrate or commemorate that date, any more than we celebrate the birthday of Bishop George David Cummins who led that small company out of the Episcopal church on that cold and windy, snowy day in Philadelphia. However, at sometime in our history, the Bishops of our church decided to add one special day to our church calendar, one day to commemorate two events that took place at the same spot in Oxford England, separated in time by only five days more than five months. It was the combined effect of those two events on the people of England that ensured that the Church of England would survive as a Protestant Church and not as part of the Roman Catholic Church. And so today, we celebrate Oxford Martyrs' Day. To understand why, I have to tell you a story. It is a story of intrigue, lust, and murder as complicated as anything people are writing today and far more significant.

The story could be said to begin way back in the first century with Christ, but in order to finish this before next Sunday, I shall have to skip up to the late 1400s when two of our principal characters were born, Prince Henry Tudor and Thomas Cranmer. And even then, I have to leave out a lot of details. What I hope to show you are several things: First, why Henry VIII was not the creator of the Church of England; Second, how the church of England really came into being; Third, how the CoE almost died; and Fourth how she survived and then flourished. In all this, there is a lot of juicy stuff I can only hint at.

Henry Tudor was born in June of 1491, and as the second son of King Henry7 wasn't likely to become King of England. In fact, he was supposed to have been educated with an eye to his becoming a priest, and that would be of the Roman Catholic church. Henry became first in the line of succession after the death of his elder brother, Arthur in 1502. He took the throne in 1509 upon the death of his father.

Henry8's aspiration to be recognized as a theologian brought him honor and then got him in trouble. In a political marriage, his late brother had been married to Catherine of Aragon, the

daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain. It seems that after his brother's death, he and Catherine fell in love. However, because of his religious scruples, Henry thought he needed a dispensation from the Pope to marry his brother's widow. He applied to the Pope for it; it was granted; and they were married in 1509. Although it seemed that at the beginning of that marriage that Catherine and Henry genuinely loved each other, Henry's later desire to be free of that marriage came to be called the "the King's Great Matter". Henry got himself stuck in a theological conundrum. The Pope had allowed him to marry Catherine; then some years later, he wanted to Pope to annul the marriage. Later, not long after Martin Luther had nailed his 95 theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg on October 31<sup>st</sup>, 1517, Luther began to speak and write against the doctrine of transubstantiation; and Henry wrote a tract defending transubstantiation called the *Assertio*. The Pope liked it so much he awarded Henry the title of *fidei defensor* – Defender of the Faith, a title Henry was very proud to have.

Henry had several problems, but the one that weighed on his mind the most was the fact that he did not have a son, male heir who could become King. His union with Catherine had resulted in several spontaneous abortions and stillbirths and had given him only one daughter, Mary, who, under the customs and laws of that time could not be expected to take the throne in her own right. Henry's Confessor, John Longland, the Bishop of Lincoln suggested to him that the reasons they had given to the Pope for the dispensation to marry Catherine were wrong, and that the marriage should be annulled. A petition was sent to the Pope. It was not a request for a divorce; it was a request for an annulment, a statement that the marriage was never really legitimate. This was a request that would gotten an immediate answer of yes for almost any monarch of the time; but the Pope was silent, and for a very good reason: he was being held prisoner by Charles V, the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. Catherine just happened to be Charles' aunt. If the Pope gave Henry the annulment, Charles would kill the Pope. It was that simple.

The situation was hung in a stalemate until our other principal character came to the fore. Cranmer was born in Ashlocton, Nottinghamshire in 1489, the son of an untitled gentleman. he went off to Cambridge University at the age of 14. By 1520, he had been ordained, had completed a Master's degree and was given a fellowship, but was soon kicked out of Cambridge when it was discovered he was married. His wife died at her first childbirth and so did the child. Not long after that he was readmitted to Cambridge and received a Doctor of Divinity degree in

1526. In 1529, there was an epidemic of some sort that affected both Cambridge and London. Cranmer and two of his pupils left Cambridge and went to Waltham to escape this "Plague". Henry was in the neighborhood for perhaps the same reason (escaping the plague), and Cranmer came to his attention. After some conversations between the king and his advisers, the King drafted Cranmer into his service to help out in the Great matter of the annulment, which Cranmer thought should be granted. Cranmer had been exposed to many of the ideas of Luther's Reformation at Cambridge and got an even bigger dose of Reformed theology when Henry sent him to Germany in 1532. The Pope was still being obdurate. The matter just kept dragging on, and Henry tried to keep up appearances.

Things came to a head in August of 1532 when the old Archbishop of Canterbury, William Warham died at the age of 82. The pope, while still not granting the annulment, was happy to allow Cranmer to be consecrated as the new Archbishop, which happened in 1533 in March. Things moved quickly after that; they had to, because Anne Boleyn had been discovered to be pregnant in January. In May, now-Archbishop Cranmer convened a court at which he declared the marriage to Catherine annulled because it had been "void from the beginning". He also announced that Henry had married Anne Boleyn. That marriage had to be valid for any child she bore to become a valid heir to the throne. In September Anne gave birth to a girl, who was named Elizabeth. The Pope quickly pronounced a sentence of Excommunication on Henry; but he didn't seem to care.

For years, Henry had sparred with the Pope about other matters that were very different from the matter of the annulment. Over the centuries the popes had tried, and usually succeeded, to obtain secular power in all the countries in which the Roman church was the main church. Usually, they succeeded. The popes felt they had the right to tax part of the income of churches in England through a device called *annates*. At Henry's behest, Parliament responded by passing an act that conditionally cut off the payment of annates. That got the needed approval to consecrate Cranmer as Archbishop, but just made things worse. The announcement of Henry's marriage to Anne Boleyn was the last straw for the Pope and resulted in the excommunication. Not long after that (1534), an Act of Supremacy was passed that made the King the Supreme head of the Church in England. That was not the founding of the Church of England; for Henry still considered himself to be a Catholic, and he still wanted nothing to do with Luther's Reformation. Much of this happened before John Calvin came on the scene. It was Cranmer

who wanted to reform the church in England. As it was, the Church in England still looked, smelled, and sounded like with Roman Catholic Church with services in the same buildings with the Latin liturgy and incense. Cranmer wanted the people to have Bibles, . . . in English, and he wanted the services to be in English; but Henry would have none of it. Over the years after 1534 Henry wavered back and forth. Cranmer made agonizingly slow progress at reforming the church. During that time many people lost their heads to Henry's axemen, many more than his five remaining or soon-to-be wives.

Cranmer walked a fine line and kept his head. Anne Boleyn together with some members of the court lost their heads over allegations of her infidelity. Henry then married Jane Seymour who died shortly after childbirth giving him a male heir, Edward on 12 October 1537. She was followed by an arranged political marriage to Anne of Cleves whom Henry disliked at first sight and whom he divorced as soon as it was politically feasible on 24 June 1540. This time it was his chancellor, Thomas Cromwell who had arranged this marriage who lost his head. Henry did not wait long to marry the vivacious, 20-year-old Catherine Howard; He married her on 28 July 1540, the day Cromwell was executed. She was decidedly unchaste and did not keep her adulteries well hidden. She was executed in January of 1542, barely a year and a half from the date of their wedding.

Henry married his sixth and last wife, Catherine Parr, on 12 July 1543. She outlived him. King Henry VIII died on 28 January 1547, probably of gangrene from diabetes. His 9-year old son succeeded him as Edward VI. The Church *of* England had not yet been constituted, but there had been a small amount of reformation of the Church *in* England. Cranmer had been allowed to write and use a Litany in English, the one we still use. Readings from the Bible in English had also been allowed, but the services were still mostly in Latin.

Edward was a small and sickly boy, only 9 years old when he took the throne; but he was very bright. He, his Regent, and his advisers were mostly of the Reformed persuasion. They turned Cranmer loose to do what he did best, which turned out to be write liturgy. Henry had died in 1547, and the first printings of the first Book of Common Prayer in English went on sale in the Spring of 1549. Reformers from Europe were allowed to come into England, most notably Martin Bucer who had a great influence on Cranmer in the production of the Second Prayer Book in 1552. It seemed too good to last, and it didn't.

Edward died on 6 July 1553 at the age of 15. There was some contention over who would accede to the throne, Edward's half sister, Mary Tudor, or Lady Jane Grey. Support for Lady Jane had mostly evaporated in less than a month. Mary was proclaimed Queen on 3 August, but was not crowned until 1 October. Mary was a staunch Roman Catholic who began immediately to undo all that Cranmer and the Reformers had done. Many priests and bishops were arrested and confined, and many died by being burned at the stake. During the pretendership of Lady Jane Grey, one of the Great preachers of the time, Bp. Nicolas Ridley, declared that Mary was ineligible to be Queen because she was a bastard because her mother's marriage to Henry8 had been annulled. Mary was punctilious and did not allow herself to be crowned until she had a new dispensation from the Pope that declared her legitimacy and Elizabeth's as well. Mary also had it in for Abp Cranmer because it was he who had declared the annulment that made her for a time to be a putative bastard.

The short of it is that show trials were held in which the outcome was never in doubt. Another bishop, Hugh Latimer, was tried with Ridley on a variety of charges, mostly amounting to heresy against Catholic doctrine. They were both found guilty and condemned to be burned at the stake in Oxford on October 16<sup>th</sup>, 1555. Cranmer, who was imprisoned nearby was brought out and forced to watch. Friends of Latimer and Ridley brought bags of gunpowder to hang around the necks of their friends so that their deaths might come more quickly than it would if they were just burned. It was reported by one observer that as the fire was kindled, Latimer said to Ridley, "Be of Good comfort, Master Ridley and play the man. We shall this day light such a candle, by God's Grace in England, as shall never be put out."

The candle they lit that day in October showed the English people the darkness that was in Mary's heart. Cranmer was not executed so soon after his trial. Rather he was put under intense pressure to recant his heresies. Also, Mary felt she had to get a papal dispensation to execute the Archbishop. The dispensation came, and Cranmer, under intense psychological pressure from a former Spanish Inquisitor did in fact recant. Catholic Church law said that if he recanted he could not be executed, but Mary was adamant that Cranmer must be burned. On the morning of 21 March 1556, Cranmer was taken into the University Church to make his recantation of his heresies. Instead, knowing he would be executed anyway, he recanted his recantations. Before he could finish, he was hustled out through the rain to the stake set up at the same place Latimer and Ridley had died. The executioners had a hard time getting the fire going in the rain; but

when they did, Cranmer did something that was recorded even by Catholic onlookers: He began to speak and said, “ Forasmuch as my hand offended, writing contrary to my heart, my hand shall be punished therfor.” and then he stretched out his hand into the heart of the fire, and while he could do so, he repeated, “ This hand hath offended.” and “This unworthy right hand.” He also said the dying words of the first martyr, St. Stephen, “[Lord Jesus receive my spirit... I see the heavens open and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.](#)” It was also said that his heart was found in the ashes unburned.

Mary had been on the throne not yet three years; and at the time of Cranmer’s burning, about 200 people had been killed in her purge of Protestants. The English people had found they had had enough of all this death at the hands of Queen Mary and the Catholics. There was no open and violent rebellion, just as David did not make one against King Saul, but there was a groundswell of dissatisfaction with the monarch in tracts and papers. Only the staunch Catholics were unhappy when she died on 17 November 1558.

Mary’s health had not been good before her coronation, and she had had two false pregnancies during her short reign. It is suspected that she died of some sort of abdominal cancer. Providentially, Cardinal Reginald Pole, the man she had picked to be Archbishop of Canterbury after Cranmer was deposed, died of influenza on the same day she did. That left Queen Elizabeth with the opportunity to repair much of the damage Mary had wrought.

As to my four questions, the answers are: **1)** Henry was not the creator of the Church of England; he only made its creation possible. If any one person can be said to have created the CoE, it was Thomas Cranmer. **2)** The CoE came into being very slowly until Henry died, and it only began to look much more like it does today during the reign of Edward VI. **3)** The true CoE was forced underground and was almost destroyed by Queen Mary. Fourth and finally, that church came out of hiding and back into the light with the accession of Queen Elizabeth. In less than a year after she took the throne, the BCP of 1559 was published and the CoE began to grow again.

It was not the light from the fires that killed these three martyrs that brought the CoE back into the light; it was the light of their spirits, the light of the steadfast faith of all true martyrs. That is what brought the light of Anglicanism out from under its basket to shine upon us as it does today. May God imbue us with such faith!

AMEN!