

The Archbishop in His Library

INTRODUCTION

The archbishop's palace at Croydon, south of London, sat amid low-lying woods. King Henry avoided it: of another palace belonging to the archbishop he commented, "This house standeth low and is rheumatic, like unto Croydon, where I could never be without sickness."¹ But it was here that Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, kept a great library; it was here that he sifted through his vast treasure-store of biblical commentary, theology, and manuals of worship. Many of his books were very old and reflected the forms of Catholic liturgy and teaching that had dominated Europe for centuries; these had generally been written by the patient hands of monastic scribes. Others had come quite recently from the printing press and embodied the great debates that absorbed Christians throughout Europe. There were texts by Martin Luther and his followers, and by the great humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam (whom Cranmer had long admired), and by leading Catholic thinkers like the reforming Spaniard Cardinal Quiñones. Books of worship made

in centuries past by Cranmer's fellow Englishmen—missals and breviaries, psalters and processions, composed in all corners of the kingdom, from Bangor to York—were well represented. There were Bibles too, some of them in English; in 1540 Cranmer had written a preface to the one known as the Great Bible.²

The year was, let us say, 1543. Cranmer had made his first bold drafts of an English liturgy in 1538, but that work was not well received by the few who saw it, and he had learned to be more cautious. He sat at his desk and studied his books and thought of how he might produce a liturgy in English that would please a king whose moods and inclinations had become ever harder to predict. Henry had injured his leg at a tournament in 1536, and the wound had never healed; he had become fatter and fatter, probably gouty as well, and could scarcely move. For some years his attitudes toward reforming the church had vacillated. In the aftermath of the Act of Supremacy in 1534, which made him the head of the English Church and denied to the Church at Rome any authority in England, he showed some Reforming sympathies, but as time had gone by his love of older ways, and the old church language of Latin, had returned. After all, Christian worship in England had been conducted in Latin for a thousand years or more. Cranmer therefore understood the challenge of composing an English liturgy capable of gaining Henry's wholehearted approval.

We cannot guess with any degree of confidence how Cranmer calculated. He is one of the more in-

scrutable characters in English history, whose actions at times seem guileful, disingenuous, or temporizing and at other times doggedly persistent and deeply principled. All we know is that in the end he chose to compose a Litany, and that few other choices would have been so agreeable to the king.

A Litany consists of a series of petitions to God: they are spoken by a priest and affirmed by the people in a fixed refrain. The mood is generally sober, penitential; the Litany was traditionally said or sung in procession, and in 1544, when this one was first published and used, these processions would have been enacted throughout much of England. Henry, still determined to reject papal leadership, and contemplating war with France, was surely delighted to hear the priest call out,

That it may please thee to keep Henry the viii.
thy servant and our king and governor:
That it may please thee to rule his heart in thy
faith, fear, and love that he may ever have affi-
ance in [that is, reliance on] thee, & ever seek
thy honor & glory:
That it may please thee to be his defender and
keeper, giving him the victory over all his
enemies:

and after each plea to hear the people cry,

*We beseech thee to hear us good Lord.*³

Earlier in the litany the people had prayed for deliverance “from blindness of heart, from pride, vainglory,

and hypocrisy, from envy, hatred and malice, and all uncharitableness,” but also “from all sedition and privy conspiracy, [and] from the tyranny of the bishop of Rome and all his detestable enormities.” This was a service well designed indeed to win Henry’s sympathy.

As Thomas Cranmer sat at his desk at Croydon Palace, he wove this rite from many sources: little in it was uniquely his own, and its deepest roots are ancient. After the opening invocation of God as Trinity comes the first great plea: “Remember not Lord our offenses, nor the offenses of our forefathers, neither take thou vengeance of our sins,” which echoes the ancient prayers of Israel. “O remember not the sins & offenses of my youth, but according unto thy mercy think upon me (O Lord) for thy goodness” says Psalm 25, as rendered in the Great Bible. Or Psalm 79: “O remember not our old sins, but have mercy upon us, and that soon, for we are come to great misery.” The very first line of the Litany, “O god, the father of heaven, have mercy upon us miserable sinners,” derives from Jesus’s story of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18). And much of the rest of the Litany is a straight translation from a rite created at Sarum, near modern Salisbury, in the eleventh or twelfth century. Cranmer was not even original in putting these various pieces together: something similar had been done by William Marshall, an Englishman of Lutheran inclinations, in his *Godly Primer* of 1535.⁴

Yet for all its modesty and derivativeness, Cranmer’s 1544 Litany was the beginning of something

very big indeed. That single rite would be the first installment of a book, the *Book of Common Prayer*, that would transform the religious lives of countless English men, women, and children; that would mark the lives of millions as they moved through the stages of life from birth and baptism through marriage and on to illness and death and burial; that would accompany the British Empire as it expanded throughout the world. When Cranmer was still alive a version of that book was the first book printed in Ireland; a quarter-century after his death prayers from it were read in what we now call California by the chaplain of Sir Francis Drake; and versions of it are used today in Christian churches all over the world, as far from England as South Africa, Singapore, and New Zealand. That book's rite of marriage has become for many people, Christian and non-Christian alike, *the* means by which two people are joined: I participated many years ago in a Unitarian wedding in Tulsa, Oklahoma, that began with the minister's intoning of the familiar words: "Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of this congregation, to join together this man and this woman in holy Matrimony."

Whatever Cranmer was thinking when he sat among his books in Croydon Palace, in "an obscure and darke place" surrounded by trees, whatever he thought might come of his little exercise in vernacular rite-making, he was imagining nothing even remotely like what would come to pass.

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FIGURE 1. Portrait of Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, by Gerlach Flicke, painted near the end of the reign of Henry VIII. Cranmer is holding the letters of St. Paul, and one of the books on the table before him is St. Augustine's *De Fide Et Operibus* ("On Faith and Works").

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