

**“This generation shall not pass away, till all be fulfilled: heaven and earth shall pass away; but my words shall not pass away.” (St. Luke 21.33)**

Go out on the streets and ask somebody how the Anglican Church came to exist, or perhaps *who* created it and *why*, and you will almost certainly get the answer: King Henry VIII in order to divorce his wives. To that, I can't argue, because it is mostly true even though it glosses over many, many finer details. But, during King Henry's lifetime, the practice of the Church of England was hardly different than it was as a full member of the Roman church. There were some changes, yes, but to the average member of a congregation, it wouldn't have seemed all that different. The most drastic changes began to happen after King Henry's death. The architect behind these changes was none other than the Archbishop of Canterbury himself, Thomas Cranmer. Cranmer was responsible for the first official liturgy authorized in English during Henry's reign. (For anyone wondering, it was the Exhortation and Litany) And when Henry's young son Edward VI acceded the throne upon his father's death at the wise old age of nine, Cranmer quickly got to work on what would become his legacy: *The Book of Common Prayer* – the first edition of which he published only two years into the new reign, in 1549.

Cranmer was recruited in the 1520s by the Archbishop of York and King's Lord Chancellor, Cardinal Wolsey, to work on getting support for the King's annulment of his first marriage to Catherine of Aragon. For this task, Cranmer was sent to Europe, where he was able to learn about the continental reformation that began some years earlier by Martin Luther and his followers. He soon came to read the works of many other continental reformers, and his views began to shift. He learned about the reformers' long-fought work to highten the place of Holy Scripture in the Church, and went back to England years later a changed man (and even a secretly married one!).

This is not a speech about the life of Cranmer, so I will not dwell upon the details too much, but he was later appointed Archbishop of Canterbury and Primate of All England, and became the functional religious head of the Church of England with the King as its “Supreme Governor”. He did not rock the boat too much during Henry's reign because that could spell an undesired acute sickness of being without a head. So when the turbulent reign came to an end, and Henry's long sought-for son and heir was sitting upon the throne of England, the time for religious renewal in England seemed ripe and Cranmer began crafting the first edition of his *magnum opus*. The preface he included in this first volume is included in our present prayer books (on page 715), though in a modified form which, thankfully, modernizes some of the 16<sup>th</sup> century spelling which can be hard on the brain. In this preface, Cranmer lays his reformed theology out in the open for all to see. He begins, “THERE was never any thing by the wit of man so well devised, or so sure established, which in continuance of time hath not been corrupted.” Everything we touch, even if it began once with good intentions, eventually gets ruined. True enough. But what is he saying got ruined? The place of Holy Scripture in the Church.

Cranmer, in his preface blasts the way the Church had been neglecting Scripture. “commonly when any Book of the Bible was begun, after three or four Chapters were read out, all the rest were unread.” And, even worse: “The Service in this Church of England these many years hath been read in Latin to the people, which they understand not; so that they have heard with their ears only, and their heart, spirit, and mind, have not been edified thereby.” His new book opened Holy Scripture to be accessible by *all*, not just those with the privilege to read and hear Latin. He also condensed the seven daily monastic offices to two: Morning and Evening Prayer, so that all you would need to be able to pray fully every day was a B.C.P. and a Bible – not the juggling of many other books.

If you are wondering why I've spent the last few minutes telling you about Cranmer and not Jesus, I would draw your attention to today's Collect on page 97. This background information, I think, helps us to understand Cranmer's logic in writing this Collect, where he calls Holy Scripture the word of God. And, we pray that we might “hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them... [so that] we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which [God] hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ.” It's powerful, and says a lot about the theme for today: the importance of the enduring Word of God – but multi-layered as Holy Scripture *and* Jesus, the Word Incarnate. This enduring Word – the Word that will outlast the world, is what gives us hope. It is what gives us hope for everlasting life.

We see in our Old Testament lesson that the Word of God – or as it was received at the time, the Law – did not so much inspire hope as it inspired fear and obedience. When the priest Hilkiyah found the

Book of the Law in the Temple, it had been neglected for a few hundred years. It did not take long for the news to reach king Josiah, who strove to make amends with the Lord for the failures of his predecessors. But, it was too late, later in chapter 23 tells us, for the Lord's plan for the destruction of Judah was already underway. But the summary of this lesson is that they were afraid of the Lord's wrath for not following his commandments. They reacted sharply to try and get right with God again.

This fear and obedience in the time of the Kings, stands in sharp contrast to the way Paul writes about Holy Scripture. For Paul, Scripture provides the foundations of patience, comfort, and hope. Why? Because Jesus promised he would come back to finish the job of cleaning up the earth, and Scripture proves that he is truthful since he was the fulfillment of God's prophets from long ago. Because Jesus came and proved the prophecies, and has promised salvation to the whole world, it is a cause of rejoicing! Jesus has transformed the Word of God from being something that condemns and holds accountable to something that frees and promises new life even in death. What's not to be pleased about in that message?

But, once again, the Gospel perchance throws us for a bit of a loop. If Jesus is the transformer of the old to the new, then why does he prophecy about the death and destruction that is looming when he comes again? Where is the hope in what seems to be a hopeless passage about the end of the age?

Fr. Robert Crouse, in a summary of the season of Advent he addressed to a group of clergy in 1999, said that our attention is often misplaced when we encounter this lesson. The lesson highlights the end of the world, the destruction of all things. It is about the devastation of *wordly hopes*, replaced by the hope of Christ in glory. "But it is not just about end times, but *every moment* has a kind of finality to it, at every moment God's coming to our souls places us under the judgement of God's Word. Our business now is to live every moment under that judgement. In the failings of this world, now, our redemption draws near. In our insufficiency in this world, now, He comes in power and glory! The Kingdom of heaven is at hand, now all earthly things are passing. But the indwelling Word of God in the believing soul is eternal, He is our hope."

In every moment of our lives, we are experiencing a mini end-of-the-world. Every time we sin, a part of us dies, but in each time, the fact that we remain under the judgement of God's Word gives us hope. We don't need to wait for the day of *final* judgement to be held accountable for our sins, but we can find hope that in every moment we acknowledge them before God he is with us. The more we can acknowledge our unworthiness to be in his presence, the more we come to be *in* his presence, because he replaces all of our worldly hopes with his final hope: everlasting life.

While some might hear this and hear nothing but judgement and negativity, perhaps even hear captive obedience like those in Second Kings, it is the farthest thing from that. For each time we face judgement, the promise of hope is renewed to us, the more we can feel it, the more tangible it becomes. While under the law, judgement was bondage, Jesus' destruction of the bonds of sin make judgement freeing, for we don't need to fear punishment for our admissions if we truly repent for them.

When St. Paul writes, "WHATSOEVER things were written aforetime were written for our learning; that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope" (Romans 15.4), we can see this hope fulfilled through Jesus Christ. We can see the change from the Old Covenant to the New, and we know it's true because Jesus is the fulfillment of God's Word, for he *is* God's Word.

This is the radical hope that Archbishop Cranmer came to know from the Scriptures, and it was the hope he aimed to pass on to anybody who could listen. That the words "JESUS IS LORD" would be not a sign of death, but a call to life. It is a matter for rejoicing, for God's eternal Word will outlast the heavens and the earth.

And so, we must not take them for granted. We must, as Cranmer wrote in today's Collect, "hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast *the blessed hope of everlasting life*, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ."

May this Advent season be a time for us to prepare our hearts for the coming of the Lord once, twice, and each and every moment of our lives. That we "may embrace and ever hold fast *the blessed hope of everlasting life*". Come Lord Jesus, come soon!

Amen.