Thomas Cranmer

1489–1556

'The word of God is not bound'

It was once fashionable to decry Cranmer's liturgical rhetoric as overblown and repetitive. People often held up as typical the echoing sequences of which he and his colleagues were so fond. 'A full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction'; 'Have mercy upon us, miserable offenders; Spare thou them which confess their faults; Restore thou them that are penitent'; 'succour, help and comfort, all that are in danger, necessity and tribulation'; 'direct, sanctify and govern'; and, of course, 'earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust'.[1]

The liturgical puritan may well ask why it is not possible to say something once and for all, instead of circling back over what has been said, retreading the ground. And, in the same vein, many will remember the arguments of those who complained of the Communion Order in the Book of Common Prayer, that it never allowed you to move forward from penitence to confidence and thanksgiving: you were constantly being recalled to your sinful state, even after

you had been repeatedly assured of God's abundant mercies.

Whether we have quite outgrown this reaction, I'm not sure. But we have at least begun to see that liturgy is not a matter of writing in straight lines. As the late Helen Gardner long ago remarked, liturgy is epic as well as drama; its movement is not inexorably towards a single, all-determining climax, but also – precisely – a circling back, a recognition of things not yet said or finished with, a story with all kinds of hidden rhythms pulling in diverse directions. And a liturgical language like Cranmer's hovers over meanings like a bird that never quite nests for good and all – or, to sharpen the image, like a bird of prey that never stoops for a kill.

The word of God is not bound. God speaks, and the world is made; God speaks, and the world is remade by the Word Incarnate. And our human speaking struggles to keep up. We need not human words that will decisively capture what the Word of God has done and is doing, but words that will show us how much time we have to take in fathoming this reality, helping us turn and move and see, from what may be infinitesimally different perspectives, the patterns of light and shadow in a world where the Word's light has been made manifest.

It is no accident that the Gospel that most unequivocally identifies Jesus as the Word made flesh is the Gospel most characterized by this same circling, hovering, recapitulatory style, as if nothing in human language could ever be a 'last' word. 'The world itself could not contain the books that should be written,' says the Fourth Evangelist, resigning himself to finishing a Gospel that is, in fact, never finishable in human terms.

Poets often reinvent their language, the 'register' of their voice. Shakespeare's last plays show him at the edge of his imagination, speaking, through Prospero, of the dissolution of all his words, the death of his magic. Yeats painfully recreates his poetic voice, to present it 'naked', as he said. Eliot, in a famous passage of the *Four Quartets*, follows a sophisticated, intensely disciplined lyrical passage with the brutal 'That was a way of putting it'. In their different ways, all remind us that language is inescapably something reflecting on itself, 'talking through' its own achievements and failures, giving itself new agendas with every word. And most of all when we try to talk of God, we are called upon to talk with awareness and with repentance. 'That was a way of putting it'; we have not yet said what there is to say, and we

never shall, yet we have to go on, lest we delude ourselves into thinking we have made an end.

So the bird is bound to hover and not settle or strike. Cranmer lived in the middle of controversies where striking for a kill was the aim of most debaters. Now, of course, we must beware of misunderstanding or modernizing. He was not by any stretch of the imagination a man who had no care for the truth, a man who thought that any and every expression of Christian doctrine was equally valid; he could be fierce and lucidly uncompromising when up against an opponent like Bishop Stephen Gardiner of Winchester.

Yet even as a controversialist he shows signs of this penitent scrupulosity in language: yes, this is the truth, this is what obedience to the Word demands – but, when we have clarified what we must on no account say, we still have to come with patience and painstaking slowness to crafting what we do say. Our task is not to lay down some overwhelmingly simple formula but to suggest and guide, to build up the structure that will lead us from this angle and towards the one luminous reality. 'Full, perfect and sufficient'[2] – each word to the superficial ear capable of being replaced by either of the others, yet each with its own resonance, its own direction

into the mystery, and, as we gradually realize, not one of them in fact dispensable.

We can see a poignant concomitant of this in Cranmer's non-liturgical prose. When he wrote to King Henry in unhopeful defence of Anne Boleyn and Thomas Cromwell, the convoluted sentences and sentiments show not only a constitutionally timid man struggling to be brave (and all the braver for that), but a man uncomfortably capable of believing himself deceived and of seeing the world in double perspective. What both letters in effect say is: I thought I saw the truth about this person; if I was wrong, I was more deceived than I could have thought possible. How in this world can even the King of England know the truth of his servants' hearts? I see both what I always saw and the possibility that it has all been a lie. Is this a world where we can have certainty enough to kill each other?

And in his last days, this was Cranmer's curse. If there was no easy certainty enough to kill for, was there certainty enough to die for? That habit of mind which had always circled and hovered, tested words and set them to work against each other in fruitful tension and sought to embody in words the reality of penitence and self-scrutiny, condemned him, especially in the midst of

isolation, confusion, threats and seductions of spirit, to a long agony, the end of which came only minutes before his last hurrying, stumbling walk through the rain to the stake.

It is extraordinary to think of him drafting two contradictory versions of his final public confession, still not knowing what words should sum up his struggles. But at the last, it is as if he emerged from the cloud of words heaped up in balance and argument and counterpoint, knowing almost nothing except that he could not bring himself to lie in the face of death and judgement.

What he has to say is that he has 'written many things untrue' and that he cannot face God without admitting this.[3] He cannot find a formula that will conceal his heart from God, and he knows that his heart is, as it has long been, given to the God whom the Reformation let him see, the God of free grace, never bound by the works or words of men and women. Just because he faces a God who can never be captured in one set of words, a God who is transcendently holy in a way that exacts from human language the most scrupulous scepticism and the most painstaking elaboration possible, he cannot pretend that words alone will save him. 'If we deny him, he also will deny us.' He must repent and

show his repentance with life as well as lips, 'forasmuch as my hand offended, writing contrary to my heart, my hand shall first be punished therefore'.[4]

He is not the only theologian to have found at the last that words failed. Aquinas, after his stroke, spoke of how all he had written seemed so much straw. Disarmingly and mischievously, Karl Barth summed up his *Church Dogmatics* to an interviewer in the words, 'Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.' But neither Barth nor Aquinas would have said that there was any other way to this simplicity and near-speechlessness except by discovering in the very experience of struggling to talk about God that limit beyond which no human tongue can go. 'The word of God is not bound' (2 Timothy 2.9). At the boundaries of speech, we are only at the beginning of the fullness of the gospel.

So Cranmer draws the terrible and proper conclusion from a lifetime of skill and balance, of 'rightly dividing the word of truth' (2 Timothy 2.15, KJV): what appears bit by bit in our words about God as they are prompted and fired by the Word Incarnate is the realization of the God who is always in excess of what can be said. The rhetorical excess of repetition and rhythm is not just

a stately game to decorate or dignify a basically simple act of acknowledgement directed towards God. It is the discipline that brings us to the edge of our resource; just as the insistent reversion to penitence in the Communion Order is not neurotic uncertainty but the sober expression of the truth that we never 'move on' from being saved sinners, and our amazement at God's free forgiveness has to be spoken out again and again. The edge of our resource: that is where faith belongs, and that is where the language of worship has to lead us.

It led Cranmer, as it led so many others in that nightmare age, and as it led the martyrs of our own age – Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Maria Skobtsova, Janani Luwum – to something more than a contemplative silence: to a real death. When we say that the word of God is not bound, we say that death itself can be the living speech of God, as the Word was uttered once and for all in the silence at the end of Good Friday. Cranmer speaks, not only in the controlled passion of those tight balances and repetitions in his Prayer Book, but in that chilling final quarter of an hour. He ran through the downpour to the town ditch and held out his right hand, his writing hand, for a final composition,

a final liturgy. And, because the word of God is not bound, it is as if that hand in the flames becomes an icon of the right hand of Majesty stretched out to us for defence and mercy.

A sermon preached on Tuesday 21 March 2006 at the University Church of St Mary the Virgin, Oxford, to mark the 450th anniversary of the martyrdom of Thomas Cranmer, creator of the Book of Common Prayer.

William Tyndale

1494–1536

God and the economy of debt

William Tyndale, the great biblical translator and Reformed theologian, was a better theologian than he is sometimes given credit for being. People know him best as a translator, as somebody who brought back into the speech of faith in English some of that salty, vernacular touch that we find in the very best earlier, medieval writing. 'So the Lord was with Joseph, and Joseph was a lucky fellow' was one of Tyndale's great phrases from his translation of Genesis. Very often, if we look at what the Authorized Version, the King James Version, does with Tyndale, we see a very consistent rearguard action to make Tyndale's English a little bit more restrained.

But Tyndale was not just a gifted, pithy and entertaining translator; he also had a profound and far-reaching vision of the social order. For Tyndale, God was shown in the world by particular kinds of social relation. The Church is the community of those who live in Godlike relation to one another.