

450th Anniversary of the Martyrdom of Nicholas Ridley

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Thank you for this opportunity to reflect with you about the legacy of my predecessor Nicholas Ridley. One office which we do not share is that of Dean of HM Chapels Royal. In this place, in the Tower of London, still technically a Royal Palace, I am Mr Dean and not responsible to myself as bishop - so I can be wild. This is one of the many peculiarities which flows from our rather peculiar experience of reformation in England.

Ridley of course knew the Tower intimately. As Bishop of London he interrogated the incarcerated Bishop Gardiner of Winchester here and he was himself taken to the Tower under arrest after the failure of Northumberland's coup d'etat in July 1553. The Principal with a fine sense of history and theatre has actually seated himself directly over the remains of Lady Jane Grey.

Ridley might have been executed for treason after his involvement in this plot, especially after his sermon at Paul's Cross on Sunday 16th July in which he reiterated that both Mary and Elizabeth had been declared bastards by Act of Parliament and urged a hostile crowd to support Lady Jane Grey instead. Mary's government however with the re-establishment of traditional religion in mind chose to treat him as a heretic rather than a traitor and laboured to secure the P.R. triumph of his recantation and in particular his subscription to the mass. In consequence he was at first treated in a rather mild way within these walls.

Foxe has preserved Ridley's own account of a disputation at the dinner table of the Lieutenant of the Tower [an office which survives] during this period. Also present was the new Marian Dean of St Paul's, John Feckenham, Confessor to the Queen and soon to be Abbot of the revived monastic community at Westminster Abbey.

The conversation turned to the definition of heresy. The Dean said "as in the sacrament of the altar, Matthew doth affirm there to be Christ's body, Mark doth affirm it, Luke affirmeth it, Paul affirmeth it and none denieth it: therefore to hold the contrary is heresy. It is the same body and flesh that was born of the Virgin: and this is confirmed by unity, antiquity and universality.

For none before Berengarius did ever doubt of this and he was a heretic as Mr Doctor there knoweth full well."

Ridley in reply repudiated the notion that the bread was turned into Christ's carnal body but rather that "it is turned into his mystical body".

Here are the elements of the crisis of the first part of the 16th century. There was a debate about the proper interpretation of scripture in the light of the early exegetes whose works thanks to the printing press and more exact and critical scholarship were only just being more widely disseminated. There was also the question of what constituted reliable authority in a culture whose horizons were rapidly expanding both spatially and because the notion of historical change leading to the corruption of primitive purity in the church had begun to penetrate the thinking of scholars. At the same time as always there was a struggle to find words that were as Ricoeur says "croyable et disponible" believable and available. One of the difficulties Ridley faced was how best to express a metaphorical notion of presence in the Eucharist in the absence of a well developed doctrine of the Holy Spirit. This was not so much a problem of the Reformation as an inheritance from late mediaeval theology which had tended to elide the Holy Spirit. Cranmer's consecration prayer in the Prayer Book lacks an epiclesis not as a result of the new learning but as a reflection of an old occlusion.

Ridley attempted in the conversation in the Tower to which I have alluded, to explain one of his previous sermons at Paul's Cross on the Eucharist which had been aimed this time largely at the radicals and those who esteemed the sacrament "no better than a piece of bread". Ridley said in relation to the bread and the wine that "unto this material substance is given the property of the thing whereof it beareth the name".

Ridley and Cranmer both found it difficult to express their changing insights in a way which would constitute a distinctive and comprehensible line in a situation of theological flux. Indeed in his Paul's Cross address he had affirmed the notion of presence in the sacrament and discouraged speculation about its nature. They are, he said "worse than dogs or hogs, that would ask the question, How he was there present?"

He had only three years as Bishop of London but they were action packed years. Sometimes when professional scholars are called to the episcopal bench they find it difficult to switch to the kind of leadership that is required. They continue in their previous mode of academic commentary and posing questions rather than ensuring the renewal of Christian leadership and discipleship on the basis of faithfulness to the gospel and a re-invigoration of commitment. Not so Ridley.

He had gone up to Cambridge in 1518 when he was about 15. Two years previously Erasmus had published his edition of the Greek New Testament with its influential translation into classical Latin. It was a time of religious and scholarly ferment. Ridley had some significant contemporaries. Latimer was cross bearer to the university. Cranmer was a fellow of Jesus. But Ridley drew on wider experience. He was not a cloistered Cambridge man – unlike my own beloved tutor who when an undergraduate rudely asked “Have you really ever lived Dr Robson?” replied “Well there was that one year in Whewell’s Court.” For three years at the end of the 1520’s when Wolsey was still in power Ridley studied at the Sorbonne in Paris and at Louvain.

It was when he was already 35 that he both graduated as a BD and became Cranmer’s Chaplain. This involved him in high ecclesiastical politics. He was a Reformer by this time and he and Cranmer trod a delicate line several steps ahead of the government of Henry VIII which was nevertheless from their point of view moving in the right direction.

In 1539 the Great Bible was published with incalculable and volcanic consequences for English culture. It is one of things I long for and see signs of in our own day, a renewal of profound engagement with the word of God in the scriptures. There is no renewal of the church without this fresh engagement. The question for us is not however so much the availability of the scriptures. In many ways they are too available and there needs to be a measure of de-familiarisation before their full energy can be released.

For modern Western people the primordial innocence before the sacred text is hardly a possibility. We are trained to interrogate texts in a way that can leave them enfeebled, dis-assembled and dominated by being contained within our own field of vision. The question as Paul Ricoeur says is how to journey through the desert of criticism so that with spiritual and intellectual integrity we can arrive at what he calls “the second innocence”. The fruitfulness of this second innocence can be judged from works like “Thinking Biblically” which Ricoeur wrote in partnership with Andre le Coque.

One of the ways in which we can encounter the sacred text afresh is to study it in company with those from other times and cultures who have also sat under scripture. Much of the argument in Ridley’s time raged around the witness of patristic exegetes and we can hope and pray for a revival of these studies in our own time. If we are confined to the present moment and seek to understand the New Testament moment without the benefit of our partners in the gospel from other times and places then the result will almost certainly be eisegesis.

The trouble with much evangelicalism as I encounter it in the Diocese of London is that there is too little Bible in it, too little zeal to hear the whole symphony of scripture which becomes

available to those who faithfully use the lectionary. I encounter professed Biblical Christians who are too prone to circulate around a few immediately accessible passages.

During this period Ridley was a busy preacher. He was one of the Six Preachers of Canterbury Cathedral instituted by Cranmer and drawn 3 from the new learning and 3 from the old. When I was appointed a Six Preacher people were too tactful to specify to which category I belonged. Not all his sermons were appreciated. In 1541 he did duty at Canterbury Cathedral at a sparsely attended Matins at which Bishop Gardiner happened to be present. The subject was gluttony in view of the regulations which the Archbishop had just issued to prescribe how much the various ranks of the ecclesiastical hierarchy were permitted to eat at dinner. Bishops for example were not allowed to have more than 2 partridges or four blackbirds in a pie. It was a strange subject to choose, granted that most of the worshippers were lay people but perhaps Ridley had spotted Gardiner in the congregation and did it as a tease.

In his preaching ministry however Ridley showed public courage. He was a regular debater on controversial subjects and when he became a bishop he was an assiduous member of the House of Lords. The Christian voice struggles in our own day to contribute intelligently to public debates. There was remarkable prophecy made in the early 1980's by a Russian priest who had a reputation as a seer. At a symposium in his flat in Moscow, he startled everyone by saying that believers would soon be able to speak on the radio. The Soviet regime still looked very solid and the prophecy seemed wild. Then the staretz added "they will be able to speak and they will not know what to say". I hope that apologetics is forming an ever more significant part of the Ridley course with an emphasis on modern means of communication and not merely on the ability to write tracts of the kind that were used to confute Cardinal Bellarmine.

With the beginning of the new reign the opportunities for advancing the cultural revolution greatly increased. In 1547 Ridley was appointed a court preacher and inveighed against images which he identified with idols and he also attacked the use of holy water. In September of that year he was consecrated Bishop of Rochester. In England episcopacy was not per se the controversial subject which it later became. Everyone will be familiar with Beza's later sixteenth century analysis of good and bad bishops. *Episcopus divinus* was the ordinary pastor; *episcopus bonus* was the pastor elected by his brethren to facilitate their meetings; *episcopus diabolus* was the bishop who had arrogated to himself the power to generate new ministers – i.e. the kind of episcopacy which we continue to countenance in the Church of England.

For Ridley being a bishop appointed by the young Josiah, Edward VI, was the opportunity he had been waiting for to advance the reformed cause with royal authority.

Exactly two years later in September 1549, proceedings were begun to deprive Edmund Bonner of the Bishopric of London. This was a quite unprecedented course of action. The result was that by February 1550, Ridley was in charge of the most populous see in the country. Eamon Duffy using churchwardens' accounts from the most conservative parts of the country has sought to portray the Reformation as essentially the imposition of Tudor tyranny on an unwilling populace. This is not an accurate picture of London and the SE and the advanced school had great hopes that with Ridley in such a strategic place the evangelical cause would carry all before it. Hooper wrote to Bullinger about the London appointment describing Ridley as "a pious and learned man, if only his new dignity do not change his attitude. He will I hope destroy the altars of Baal as he did heretofore in his church when he was Bishop of Rochester."

He did not disappoint. In May and June 1550 he conducted a visitation of the Diocese and visited the churches of the city in person commanding the removal of all the altars and their replacement by tables. Stone altars had been in use of course since the early Christians had celebrated the eucharist on the top of the tombs of the martyrs.

For Ridley this was a crucial change which struck at the heart of everything he had come to detest about the corruption of the Lord's Supper and its mediaeval transformation into the theatricality of the mass.

I find here his abiding significance for the reformed Catholic tradition of the Church of England. Ridley's criticism of the mass is summed up in a pithy way in his second conference with Latimer which was also penned within the walls of this Tower of London.

"I will rehearse unto you those things which be most clear, and seem to repugn most manifestly against God's word. And they be these. The strange tongue: the want of the showing of the Lord's death: the breaking of the Lord's commandment of having a communion: the Sacrament is not communicated to all under both kinds: the sign is servilely worshipped for the thing signified: Christ's passion is injured forasmuch as this mass sacrifice is affirmed to remain for the purging of sins. To be short, the manifold superstitions and trifling fondness which are in the mass and about the same."

Instead of a piece of theatre conducted in the obfuscating language of scholarship, Ridley desired passionately that the sacrament should be a genuine formation of the whole Christian community around the word of God. He and Cranmer desired more frequent communion, preferably every week to forward this ambition instead of the mediaeval pattern of once yearly communion. He soon saw, however, that this part of the programme was doomed to fail. He wanted the gap between the dolers out of religion and the gulpers down to be bridged by the

radical expedient of transforming the altar into a moveable table around which the community gathered at the time of that newly composed prayer, "We do not presume to come to this thy table".

His visitation resulted in the destruction of all the altars in the City and soon this example was followed in the rest of the country. It is extremely rare to find a pre-Reformation altar in England although I did identify one in a cow shed in Dorset. The attack on the altars and other acts of official iconoclasm unleashed a wave of iconoclastic enthusiasm which was not always officially sanctioned. As Ridley said "from London goeth example to all the rest of the king's majesty's whole realm". One cannot miss the righteous anger in all this and the zeal to purge the Temple and to scrape off the late mediaeval barnacles which Ridley were impeding the progress of the Ark of the Church.

There was of course controversy about the authority which permitted all this change to be wrought in such a short time. Ridley and Cranmer were pressing ahead in the name of the school-boy king and were alarmed to note the rise in unsanctioned radical and even revolutionary enthusiasm. Ever since the crisis in Munster in the 1530's it had been clear where unchecked radical reform could lead. Tudor England was a violent and restless place and it was imperative that the situation should not be allowed to get out of control. Hence the spat that Ridley in the forefront, had in the summer of 1550 with a radical ally John Hooper who had been nominated to the see of Gloucester. Hooper wanted to be consecrated in his ordinary clothes and objected to the rochet as one of the rags of Popery. This was to be a constant refrain of later radical reformers even at the Hampton Court Conference one of the Puritan divines denounced the surplice as once having been worn by the priests of Isis. Ridley having took his stand on the necessity of obeying the law in things indifferent. He was unwilling to see vestments which were not specifically condemned by the word of God made into a touchstone of evangelical faithfulness. If the Church was to have any cohesion and discipline during a time of profound change then there had to be regularity and order rather than anarchy.

The central role played by the godly magistrate in Ridley's search for the authority to purge and reform was of course to lead him into difficulties after the death of King Edward and eventually to martyrdom. I am an Ehren Dom-Prediger of the great Dom Church in Berlin, the former Imperial Chapel. In Berlin faith in the godly ruler lasted longer than it did in England. It is fascinating to note the contrast in the iconography both dating to the 19th century of the Dom and St Paul's Cathedral. Both have figures upholding the central dome. In Berlin there are four leading reformers on one side and four evangelical rulers on the other. In St Paul's there are four fathers of the Western church looking East and four fathers of the Eastern church looking West. Following the legislative changes of the late 1820's and 30's in England the Church had to work hard to recover its original title deeds. Now, although technically

established, the Church of England in reality is the most disestablished folk Church in Europe and certainly much more dependent on voluntary support than the Church in Germany where the EKD last year received 4 billion euros in Church Tax collected by the government. Ridley would have been interested in this. The Edwardian reformers were very different in spirit from most of their successors in the Church of England in their fervent Protestant internationalism. There was little concept of a distinct English ecclesiastical identity and a longing for England to stand at the heart of a renewed universal church.

Having emptied the general Synod on a number of occasions by bringing back reports of our engagement with other churches in Europe I can only admire and indeed envy this breadth of outlook.

Ridley's view of the sacrament as far as he was able to develop it in the press of his busy years as a bishop and the circumstances of his imprisonment is not so very different from the Agreement on Eucharistic Doctrine which emerged from the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission meeting at Windsor in 1971. There is no trace of the gross and carnal superstitions surrounding the mass but there is also no bare acknowledgement of the eucharist as an audio visual aid to recalling the Last Supper. "The Eucharistic memorial is no mere calling to mind of a past event or of its significance" Instead as Hooker asserted the Eucharist is "performative" not "illustrative" merely "The sacramental body and blood of the saviour are present as an offering to the believer awaiting his welcome. When this offering is met by faith, a life-giving encounter results...The elements are not mere signs; Christ's body and blood become really present and are really given. But they are really present and given in order that receiving them, believers may be united in communion with Christ the Lord." It is a balanced statement which Lambeth 1988 judged was consonant with the faith of Anglicans. It deserves to be studied in full together with the House of Bishops' paper on the "Eucharist: Sacrament of Unity" 2001. One of the vices of the Church at present is the lack of care we show in using and referring to past work and ensuring doctrinal consistency. Lambeth 98 was a particularly bad example of this corporate amnesia.

One startling thing about the Windsor statement from Ridley's point of view is the relegation of the word "transubstantiation" to a footnote. In reality the word only has any currency as an attempt to explain how the real presence is effected against the background of Aristotelian physics and Aristotle's analysis of matter into essence and accidents. When this context is removed the term fails the test of "credibile et disponsibile".

That said Ridley lived at a time which was intoxicated with the Word and with words. Incidentally, his own prose is particularly clear and trenchant by 16th century standards. But he worked to rob the liturgy of drama, movement [by banning processions] and visual impact. We have not yet recovered from the malign effects of this campaign. The Word of God

according to St John “was made flesh” but there was a danger in the Ridley programme of translating it once more into words and many of them.

We can certainly all learn from his strenuousness. He rose at 5am, dressed and spent a half hour in silent prayer. After breakfast there was administration or study until Matins with his household at 10am. The dinner hour was at 11am and then recreation. At the stage of his life when he was a bishop he usually played chess. He went back to the office except when he had ordered the barge to keep an appointment and Evensong was at 5pm. Supper was followed by more labour in his office and he went to bed about 11pm. When Parliament was in session which was about 2 months in the year he was an assiduous attender and speaker. He was also much involved with those who governed London in confronting some of the social challenges of the day. Human beings, Ridley believed, were justified by faith alone but that did not exempt Christians from following the example of Our Lord and displaying practical compassion for the poor. It was one of Ridley’s sermons and the subsequent campaign which led to the foundation of three institutions which survive into our own day – Christ’s Hospital, St Thomas’s Hospital and Bridewell which has been transmogrified into King Edward’s School Witley.

After three crowded years as Bishop of London, Edward, the young Josiah died in 1553. Ridley had already experienced the unyielding firmness of the Princess Mary, Edward’s half sister and heir to the throne under the will of Henry VIII. Ridley had ridden over from his country house at Much Hadham to visit Mary in Hunsdon. He offered to preach to her. She refused and made it clear that she would continue to celebrate mass in the old way. The bishop departed in a fury telling Mary’s household that he regretted drinking wine and eating dinner in a household where God’s word was despised. He denounced them all with such vehemence that he caused a panic among them.

I have already mentioned his sermon of July 16th 1553 exhorting Londoners to support the succession of Lady Jane Grey. The attempted coup collapsed and Ridley was arrested at Ipswich on his way to make his submission to Queen Mary. The authority under which he had wrought so much change in such a short time had fallen into different hands.

Ridley was an intellectual and like all highly intelligent, subtle minds could no doubt have found ways of evading the fate which befell him. He was fortunate in being incarcerated with Latimer who although a less supple intellect had gravitas and the simple sense of what was essential. They encouraged one another and everyone knows the words with which Latimer encouraged his friend at the end when they were both committed to the flames – “Be of good comfort Master Ridley and play the man: we shall this day by God’s grace light such a candle in England, as I trust shall never be put out.” It would have been a devastating blow to the evangelical cause if such high profile leaders had recanted and so Ridley became known to

later generations as a martyr rather than for his work as a bishop. I remember very clearly being asked as a theological student by a Russian theologian whether I would be prepared to die for the sake and truth of the "Holy Trinity". It is a salutary question which haunts me still because I suspect that if we are not clear as ministers what we would be prepared to die for then we still have to establish what we are living for.

Ridley's legacy was of course disputed and both parties in the later sixteenth century Church of England, conformist and would be non-conformist in the very different circumstances of Elizabeth's reign, appealed to his example.

Ridley was not of course attempting to set up a new church but to renovate rather than innovate. There can only be one Church of Jesus Christ. It was not his intention to found any new sect but to purify the one Church. The one true church existed in the heart and mind of Jesus Christ as he committed his future in the world to his friends at the Last Supper. The one true Church now in Christ's good time lies ahead of us. For the moment as we know the one Church is lamentably fractured by dispute, sin and pride.

Every modern church in the West was profoundly affected by the explosion of that supernova, the old Western Church. The events of the 16th century are still with us in the shape of the churches we know. Perhaps the Roman Catholic Church, through the long running Council of Trent was in many important ways more thoroughly reformed than the Church of England. Diarmaid MacCulloch's superb book, "Europe Divided", puts the English Reformation in its wider European context and highlights its peculiarities.

Much for which Ridley worked and died has been a blessing. Thanks be to God for the liberation of the Word of God in the vernacular: thanks be to God for the emphasis on the formation of the whole community, the whole laos as it feeds on the Word; thanks be to God for the end of semi-magical and grossly carnal views of the sacrament of unity. Some of the problems he faced, however, are still with us notably the question of the source of authority for discerning necessary developments or revisions in understanding of the unchanging word of God. The role of scholarship, critical in the best sense, was clearly crucial in subverting ignorant and illegitimate establishments but where should we locate the responsibility for articulating the mind of the church on disputable matters?

Among the less happy inheritances from the 16th. century church, are a lurch into over-regulation which alas continues into our own day and the allied phenomenon of attempting to over-define mystery in a polemical interest. This is why it has been the wisdom of the Church of England not to insist on subscription to the ideas or the "summa" of some distinguished theologian. We are not Lutherans or Calvinists still less are we Cranmerians [Cranmer would have heartily disapproved of much in the present Church of England], but we have couched

our invitation thus – here is a book of worship, a mosaic of scripture, will you worship with us in this way?

Another malign inheritance from the 16th century was the tendency of every part of the church – this is not a confessional point- to ally itself with new nation states or dynasties as they sought to consolidate their realms and to mark out their territories in the age of the cartographer. The different fragments of the old Western Church all sought to absolutise themselves in alliance with secular power and became complicit in the ghastliness of the long running European Civil War of the 16th and 17th centuries. Experience of this war convinced many in our Continent that the worst wars in history are religious wars and ensured that the European Enlightenment especially on the Continent had a decidedly anti-Christian and even anti-spiritual character.

It is not just a coincidence that it was during the last decade of the horrifying Thirty Years War [1638-48] that Galileo published his “Dialogue concerning Two New Sciences” and Descartes his “Principles of Philosophy” while Newton was born. “The fragmentation brought about by warring Christian absolutisms argued the need for another type of belief system more rationally persuasive and less controversially subjective.”

We are heirs of this story also and have to evaluate the inheritance of Nicholas Ridley in this light as we seek to be faithful to the task which Jesus Christ has laid upon us in our generation to proclaim Him afresh as the way the truth and the life.