Ten years ago, when *Wolf Hall*, the first TV adaptation of Hilary Mantel's novels about the life of Thomas Cromwell, was aired, there was a great deal of controversy over Mantel's portrayal of Cromwell. Catholics, and those of a Catholic mind, tended to object to her rather nuanced view of Cromwell as a man with good intentions falling into the temptations of power and manipulation, but most of all they objected to her presentation of Thomas More.

Those brought up on the play *A Man for all Seasons* found their hero portrayed as a hard, ascetic, unbending man, who was as content as any other of his time to oversee the torture of heretics and political opponents in an attempt to get them to redeem themselves.

The mythology and continued black-and-white views on Reformation issues make this period very hard to study in a dispassionate manner. Though the Reformation was 400 years ago, attitudes to history and theology are still for many people conditioned by what happened or what was taught in that period. There are continued celebrations of 'our' martyrs and not 'theirs', and it was only a couple of years ago that I was confronted by a senior priest of a neighbouring diocese who, on learning that I had been ordained as a Roman Catholic, wanted to know why I had changed my views on the doctrine of grace. I said that I hadn't, and went on to ask if he had ever read the 1986 Llandaff Agreed Statement on Salvation and the Church by the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC), or the 1998 Palazzola Agreed Statement on Authority in the Church by the same body, or most importantly the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification agreed by Lutherans and Catholics in

1999. Alas, he had nothing to say. His understanding of this very central element of theology – essential to salvation – was stuck four hundred years ago.

So if Reformation issues and people are still current in people's minds and attitudes today, imagine how passionate they were at the time, especially given the widely-held view that people who believed or taught wrongly would end up being damned for eternity. Hence the widespread existence of inquisitions, the torture of those seen as heretics, and the intimate relationship between faith and political power.

During the Reformation in all its forms, there were at least three things going on. First, there were those passionate reformers who saw corruption in the church and a distortion of true teachings. Well before the period we know as the Reformation, groups of preachers went about in parts of Europe proclaiming the need for a purer form of religion. Some became part of the mainstream – mendicant orders like the Franciscans and Dominicans were among these; some did not and ended up being persecuted – movements like the Albigensians in France, and with them early translators of the scriptures like Wyclif, who were critical of the often uneducated clergy who did not teach very much worth listening to, and who wanted to create literate laypeople who could read the scriptures for themselves and form their own prayerful views of what Jesus, Paul and others really taught.

Second, mixed in with these were the people who either wielded power or wealth, or who served them. The political significance of submission to the Holy Roman Emperor in much of Europe, and to kings and princes elsewhere, should not be underestimated, nor should the political influence of the papacy and the power struggles over which noble families could control its associated power

and wealth. As the Reformation took its course, rulers could choose which sort of Christianity should prevail in their own lands and regions (this of course had always been the case) and the dictum *cuius regio eius religio* (to every area its own religion) could flourish. No more worrying by rulers as to what the Church thought of their actions – at least in theory!

Third, there were those who were rebellious by nature, some of whom would set up an argument on their own with themselves in an otherwise empty room. There is plenty of evidence that Martin Luther was such a person. Certainly he was known to be extremely disagreeable. Various historians consider that this was due to his chronic constipation or some other ailment; the reality is that we do not know for sure. But he was certainly made by nature to be a rebel against any authority, and his writings show that his natural anger was in fact matched by an equal passion for the truth of what exactly could put people right with God (and especially Luther himself, as one of his redeeming qualities was to know and acknowledge before God how unpleasant he could be).

All of this formed quite a potent mixture. Luther's Reformation was in part sparked by his anger at the preaching and selling of indulgences by Johannes Tetzel, a papal preacher who was raising money for the building of the new Saint Peter's in Rome. For centuries it had been believed that making pilgrimages to holy places would make up at the last judgement for the just punishment due to sin, even after it had been forgiven. Indulgences were a development of this, whereby if you were unable to visit the holy place, a pope or other bishop could grant you the same remission from punishment in return for a series of good deeds or penances. Selling indulgences to raise money for a place of pilgrimage was seen as a logical next step, but Luther, and it seems many others, saw it as

yet another attempt to add the wealth of the Church by taking money from the poor.

Luther's bald statement when defending his thesis that salvation comes from faith alone and not from good works, or even payments toward good works, was 'Here I stand, I can do no other'. Rulers, especially in those lands which later would become part of a united Germany, also saw the opportunity to get away from the domination of the Church and have their own local Church that owed allegiance to them and not to some foreigner. Luther had obligingly pointed out the teaching of Saint Paul that Christians ought to submit to the local ruler whose authority came from God.

Similar movements took place in the cantons of Switzerland, always keen to assert their own independence, so that great theological teachers like the first Swiss Reformer Zwingli (with the so-called Affair of the Sausages) and later Calvin became the church leaders of their various areas.

In Britain, at first, the Reformation movements tended to centre around agitation to get the scriptures available in English, and to simplify the various complicated liturgies and so-called Uses which existed in England and beyond, centred on great cathedrals such as Salisbury, Hereford and York. Once printing became widespread, of course, such movements intensified, alongside the production of pamphlets and other written material spreading the new ideas that were taking hold on the Continent.

I have a couple of books in my library containing the texts of documents from the later Middle Ages concerning the relationship of the Church in England (even then called *ecclesia Anglicana*) and Italy and Rome. By and large, and with the quite notable exception of the occasional interdicts that basically shut down

the sacraments and means of salvation, thus leaving people in fear for their immortal souls, England was far enough away from Rome not to be caught up directly in the politics of the Papacy or the Holy Roman Empire, and the civil and church authorities were quite happy to get on with things without a great deal of rebellion.

This was at least partly down to the concentration of those in power on that persistent rivalry between competing claims to the throne which eventually gave rise to the Wars of the Roses, but once that was settled through the victory of Henry Tudor in 1485, and the work of establishing unity in the kingdom begun, conditions then became favourable for an English sort of Reformation. Hilary Mantel's portrayal of Henry's son, Henry VIII, is I think quite accurate, as a man of deep thought, culture and learning – a Renaissance man – yet one addicted to the gaining and retaining of power by any means. Up until the end of the Middle Ages, power was usually represented by land, which was the key to wealth. With the beginnings of industry, new forms of trade, together with the rise of the printed book, meant that money became more important than land, and printed ideas could be more easily shared – and were harder to repress. Henry's Reformation was about concentrating his power by acquiring the land and financial base of the Church, and making the Church as a whole answerable to him and not to someone who might not share his aims and intentions.

Henry's Reformation was inseparable from Henry's politics and his determination to centralise power in a male dynasty issuing from him alone. In fact he got neither, and the long list of British Reformation martyrs is testament to the instability of the reigns that followed his, with barons and churchmen

vying to influence the boy king Edward VI, and foreign dignitaries loyal to the Pope and the King of Spain vying to influence Mary, the queen who followed.

Ironically for Henry, it was to be his second daughter who unified both Church and kingdom with her drive for general tolerance, as long as her throne was not threatened. In my view, the martyr priests of the first Elizabethan era were martyrs to the political power of the King of Spain, and of the Pope, who blessed his plans to invade and unseat Elizabeth: power games and church politics all rolled into one.

So what can we learn from all of this?

The Church falls apart when we stop listening to each other. Reform did take place in the Catholic Church through the work of the Council of Trent, which produced a lot of teaching that if used diplomatically could have been a source of renewed unity in the Church. Sadly this teaching was followed by harsh condemnations that put the Protestant reformers beyond the pale. Any possible dialogue was closed before it could even get going.

As we learned from earlier times, the marriage of Church and power is a dangerous one. It can lead to a polarisation and to extreme views and practices that are destructive of faith.

Unity – whether in affairs of state or in matters of faith – is only going to come about when people are tolerant and understanding of each other, and when they are ready to learn from each other.

In next week's Address we shall see just how many of the rifts begun at the Reformation have lasted through into the present day, and just how much damage this has done to the Church in general.

But for tonight I leave you with a prayer attributed to the Swiss Reformer

Zwingli:

Almighty, eternal, and merciful God,
whose Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path,
open and illumine our minds,
that we may purely and perfectly understand thy Word,
and that our lives may be conformed to what we have rightly understood,
that in nothing we may be displeasing unto thy majesty,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

PC, 23rd March 2025