A dithering ecclesiastical Hamlet, an heretical schismatic, and an heroic defender of reformed Christianity, Thomas Cranmer has been vilified and praised with such words by his own and every succeeding generation.

Born in 1489 in Aslacton, Nottingham, the son of a village squire, he was educated there and afterwards entered Jesus College at Cambridge University, where he received an M.A. and married his first wife, Joan. After her death during childbirth he became a fellow of the same college and was ordained and went on to earn both a B.D. and a D.D. His intense study put him in contact with continental reformed theology that emphasized the strong role of both the Bible and secular authority over against the authority of the Pope in governing the Church.

When, in 1529, the divorce proceedings between the King, Henry VIII, and the Queen, Catherine of Aragon, were on the point of breaking down in a way the King didn't much like, Cranmer suggested that the question of the King's marriage be considered by the universities of Europe. This idea was so warmly received by the King when he heard about it that he quickly put Cranmer in his pay to help carry this out.

In 1532 while on an embassy to the Emperor, Charles V, about the King's marriage, Cranmer married his second wife, Margaret, the daughter of a Lutheran theologian. After his consecration as Archbishop of Canterbury in 1533 she disappeared from public view to conform to the King's opinions of clerical marriage until King Henry's death and the reforms of his son, Edward VI, formally allowed the clergy to marry.

But Cranmer was moved by more than his King's opinions on every issue. In the reign of Henry VIII he worked to publish an officially authorized translation of the English Bible, beginning at a time when owning even a part of the Bible in English carried a death sentence.

He did not participate in the official government policy of dissolving the monasteries and he openly opposed some laws that limited the Church's authority including those that forced him to banish his wife whom he had already sent into hiding.

In the brief years of Henry's son, Edward's reign (1547-1553) he dramatically carried forward the project of reform in his own terms. He promoted Biblical preaching in a Book of Homilies and, what he argued was, more Biblical worship in the Book of Common Prayer of 1549 and 1552.
It is surely unfortunate that these two Prayer Books have been used by subsequent generations of Anglicans as sticks with which to beat each other.

The Eucharist in the first book has been regarded as more 'catholic' than the second. Often cited are the words of administration: in the first book, "The Body of our Lord Jesus Christ preserve your Body and soul unto everlasting life, The Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ preserve your body and soul unto everlasting life"; in the second book beginning with Jesus' own words at the Last Supper: "Take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for thee, and feed on him in thy heart by faith with thanksgiving, Drink this in remembrance that Christ's Blood was shed for thee, and be thankful".

Cranmer is criticized as a receptionist (not the kind you meet in a dentist's office) for teaching here and elsewhere that Christ is received by the faithful Christian in Communion in a way that does not depend on the bread and wine by themselves but on the heart of the believer. [Elizabeth I in restoring the Prayer Book in 1559 printed both forms of administration, and both have been printed together ever since.] Exactly, he would say, to say more would be "to overthrow the nature of a sacrament". The sign would be confused with the thing that it signifies. Moreover, both of Cranmer's Prayer Books represent a profound and mystical theology of incorporation and transformation into Christ by Christ. He does not speak of a dead Christ or an absent Christ.

The Bible is to be read through by the whole congregation, heard and received as the nourishment of the new life in the risen Christ. The Gospel Sacraments are celebrated as "mysteries and tokens of his love", baptism, "to make us like unto him", the Eucharist, "to enable us to dwell in him and He in us".

King Edward was succeeded by his sister Mary, a convinced Roman Catholic, who remembered Cranmer's responsibility for her mother's unhappy divorce from her father. Accused, tried and sentenced to death for treason, he was spared by Mary until he was finally tried for heresy.

Sentenced for that offense and publicly degraded, Cranmer recanted almost his whole position, affirmed transubstantiation (a more physical belief in the presence of Christ in the bread and wine at Communion) and the supreme authority of the Pope in the English Church.

Nonetheless he was sentenced to death, when finally given the opportunity to speak before and during his execution (at Oxford on March 21st, 1556, by burning at the stake, a form of execution restored by Mary that he had abolished) he renounced his recantations and his cowardice, holding the hand with which he had signed the documents outlining his recantation into the flames.
That final apparent indecision and weakness is in fact, I think, the result of his deep consistency. He genuinely trusted in the role of lay authority, represented by the King or Prince, in the Church's life.

The final difficulty of Cranmer's life was that Mary, the Prince whom he obeyed, was obedient to the Pope.

We must honour Thomas Cranmer and be grateful to him, for in the English Bible, the Book of Common Prayer, the Book of Homilies, he helped translate and reform the faith and worship of the English speaking world, recalling it to a simpler more direct proclamation of Christ and the Gospel. His faith enriches ours day by day and week by week whenever we pick up the scriptures, open the Prayer Book, and indeed, whenever we open our mouths, for along with Shakespeare, the English Bible (revised again in 1611, admittedly) and the Book of Common Prayer are as formative of our very language as they are of our faith.