

# “ IN THE HOUR OF TRIAL ”

by CARL S. MEYER

**T**HE fourth centenary of the martyrdom of Thomas Cranmer has been worthily commemorated in his own land in a wide variety of ways—nowhere more worthily, we may mention, than in Dr. G. W. Bromiley's timely books, "Thomas Cranmer, Theologian" (Lutterworth Press, 12s. 6d.), and "Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop and Martyr" (Church Book Room Press, 10s. 6d.). THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY'S contribution to his commemoration comes from one who is an American and a Lutheran. Dr. Carl S. Meyer, a graduate of the University of Chicago, is Professor of Historical Theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri. On the four hundredth anniversary of Cranmer's death, March 21, 1956, Dr. Meyer conducted the evening devotion, "At Close of Day", broadcast by Radio Station KFJO, Concordia Seminary, and by his kindness we are permitted to reproduce his words in the following pages.

## *In nomine Jesu :*

On this day, the 21st of March, exactly four hundred years ago, in 1556, in Oxford, England, a man by the name of Thomas Cranmer was led out to be burnt at the stake. It was a foul and rainy morning in that University city, but nothing would deter Cranmer's execution. Two of his friends, Latimer and Ridley, had been burnt on that self-same spot five months previously, on October 16, 1555. Nor were these the only victims of a misguided religious zeal of that day. Almost three hundred men and women lost their lives in a short space of forty-five months in England in the years between 1555 and 1558. We number them in the noble army of martyrs.

Thomas Cranmer might not seem so noble. True, he had held the highest church office in England; he was Archbishop of Canterbury. He had reorganized the order of worship and his *Book of Common Prayer* is still in essence used in the Anglican rites. He had furthered the study of Scriptures. He had written a confession of faith, a confession which still lives in the Thirty-Nine Articles. In many other ways he had promoted the teaching and preaching of the Reformation ideas, for he had become quite acquainted with Lutheran theology while he was in Germany. He

was a learned theologian, an eminent churchman, a spiritual leader among his people. However, while languishing in prison he was seduced by fear of burning and the hope of being released. Six different times he signed recantations of his faith and had a seventh statement ready on the day of his death. His recantations did not save him ; yet when the time came to die he staunchly and courageously confessed his faith. Since his right hand had signed the recantations he thrust that hand in the fire first, crying out, “That unworthy hand”. He died with the prayer, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit”.

We would not condemn Cranmer for his recantations. We recall another disciple who, too, was cowed by a fire. Simon Peter in the courtyard of Caiaphas denied that he was one of the disciples of Jesus. A second time he was questioned, and a second time he denied it. A third time he was taunted with being a follower of Jesus—his provincial brogue was cited in evidence against him—and yet he persisted in his denial. The second crowing of the cock at break of dawn, however, reminded him of his Master’s prophecy, and just then the passing glance of Jesus recalled for him the Redeemer’s love. Sorrow and contrition filled his heart and tears streamed down from his eyes. He had sinned in denying his Saviour ; he was in need of forgiveness.

The hour of trial comes to each of us—the hour in which denial seems to be the easiest and the most expedient course of action. There are times when it seems to be much safer to say: “We know Him not. We are not followers of this Jesus and we don’t know what you’re talking about when you say that our speech betrays us. We don’t even know this man”. Very often it’s just that we feel that, well, after all, we do not have to speak up ; we’ll just be quiet and say nothing. Our silence, however, speaks for us, saying, “We know not this man”. This was recognized by a Moravian minister of a little more than a hundred years ago (1834) by the name of James Montgomery, who knew from first-hand experiences these dangers of falling away from the faith or of denying Christ. He composed a prayer, stretching out his hands for strength to stand in the evil day.

In the hour of trial,  
 Jesus, plead for me  
 Lest by base denial  
 I depart from Thee.  
 When Thou see’st me waver,  
 With a look recall  
 Nor for fear or favour  
 Suffer me to fall.

Let no one say: "Others may deny their Lord Jesus; I will not". Let him that is so certain that he will stand, be on his guard, lest he falls. In time of temptation many fall away. Their faith is like a plant that has only a few insignificant roots; it is like a house of cards that collapses from a gust of wind.

You ask: "What are some of the temptations that may lead us to deny Christ? An awareness of them may put us on our guard against them". The poet says:

With forbidden pleasures  
Would this vain world charm  
Or its tempting treasures  
Spread to work me harm.

We need not think merely of the glittering allurements of a care-free café society that seems to lack morality and to spurn the conventions of decency. In a crowd like that, Jesus does not have a place. There are other temptations besides sensuous ones and other ways of denying Jesus than by a love of the world, and love of the things of the world, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life. These are indeed forbidden pleasures by which this vain world seeks to charm the child of God and lure him away from God and the things of God. The love of money, the desire to get rich and to remain rich, has caused many a man to forget that Jesus said to him, "Follow Me". It's so hard to follow Jesus and to pursue the almighty dollar simultaneously—one just simply cannot go in two directions at the same time. Others are fired up by ambitions. A man wants to make a name for himself and in doing that forgets that there is one name above every name, the name whereby we can be saved, the name of Jesus. O Lord, "when Thou see'st me waver, with a look recall".

Bring to my remembrance  
Sad Gethsemane  
Or, in darker semblance,  
Cross-crowned Calvary.

The pleasures of this world cannot mean anything when we see the sorrows of the Garden, Jesus pleading for the cup to pass, but willing to do the bidding of the Father. Fame and fortune are futile as we lift our eyes to the figure on the Cross forsaken of men, forgotten of God. There He hangs, our Saviour, our Redeemer, the source of our strength to combat temptations and trials.

For many the allurements of the world are not there; they have no chance to become rich or famous. Yet for them, too, there are the hours in which temptations come close and the readiness to deny Jesus is on their lips. Hunger and pain, poverty and sickness

are filled with days and weeks when the tortured soul is ready to cry out, “My God, why?” In blasphemy and a denial of the love of God, perhaps even of the existence of God, the harassed victim wants to find some way out; his curses and deprecations, his crying and his murmuring, his snarling at well-meaning friends all indicate that he has denied God. He has denied that God loves him and he mistrusts the Providence of the Almighty. My friends, I believe that this is one of the greatest temptations that confronts us Christians today, a temptation to fall away from God as soon as things don’t go quite right with us. We argue to ourselves perhaps that God doesn’t know us or that He doesn’t care for us any longer; we say, “Why should I care about God or about His will?” Then we need faith, a faith that will say that God knows better than we do, a faith that says that God still cares even though we do not see that love of God as we ought. It is a faith which prays :

Should Thy mercy send me  
Sorrow, toil, and woe,  
Or should pain attend me  
On my path below,  
Grant that I may never  
Fail Thy hand to see ;  
Grant that I may ever  
Cast my care on Thee.

The last great trial that you and I will have to undergo is the trial of death. You know not, neither do I, in what manner death may come. Perhaps death will come with a swiftness that becomes a traumatic experience. Perhaps it will be a slow and lingering death, one which foreshadows its coming for a long period ahead. It could be a death that comes as a result of our faith—a burning such as came to Cranmer, mentioned before. Whatever it may be, in that hour we will want the comforting assurance of the presence of Christ. In that hour, which will be a trial no matter what its nature, we would have Jesus with us.

When my last hour cometh,  
Fraught with strife and pain,  
When my dust returneth  
To the dust again,  
On Thy truth relying,  
Through that mortal strife,  
Jesus, take me, dying,  
To eternal life.

Death brings with it fear, a fear of what lies beyond. Jesus conquered death in order that He might remove death’s sting for us and make us unafraid. Unafraid of death, the last great enemy of mankind, there is nothing else that we need be afraid of. Cer-

tainly, we would not be afraid of owning up that we are followers of Jesus, denying Him in our lives as with our lips. Once Jesus called His disciples together and asked them what men were saying about Him. They told Him that some believed Him to be a prophet; others believed Him to be the Promised Prophet. Jesus challenged them with the question, "But whom say ye that I am?" Then Peter in the name of the disciples spoke up and said, "Thou art the Christ". Jesus then called the people together and the disciples and He said to them:

If anyone wants to follow in My footsteps, he must give up all right to himself, take up his cross and follow Me. The man who tries to save his life will lose it; it is the man who loses his life for My sake and the Gospel's who will save it. What good can it do a man to gain the whole world at the price of his soul? What can a man offer to buy back his soul once he has lost it? Whoever is ashamed of Me and My words—Jesus said—in this unfaithful and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of when he comes in the Father's glory with the holy angels around Him. (Phillips.)

There is forgiveness, however, also for that sin of denying Jesus, of being ashamed of Him. Peter was forgiven. In his dying hour Thomas Cranmer prayed a beautiful prayer of forgiveness, one which we may be certain that God heard. And in this evening hour, at the close of another day, we would ask God for the forgiveness of all our sins, also for the sin of denying Him and doubting His love in the poignant penitential plea of pardon, uttered by Thomas Cranmer in Oxford four hundred years ago today:

O Father of heaven, O Son of God, Redeemer of the world, O Holy Ghost, three persons and one God, have mercy upon me most wretched caitiff and miserable sinner. I have offended both against heaven and earth, more than my tongue can express. Whither then may I go, or whither shall I flee? To heaven I may be ashamed to lift up mine eyes, and in earth I find no place of refuge or succour. To Thee therefore, O Lord, do I run; to Thee do I humble myself, saying, O Lord my God, my sins be great, but yet have mercy upon me for Thy great mercy. The great mystery that God became man, was not wrought for little or few offences. Thou didst not give Thy Son, O heavenly Father, unto death for small sins only, but for all the greatest sins of the world, so that the sinner return to Thee with his whole heart, as I do here at this present. Wherefore have mercy, O God, whose property is always to have mercy; have mercy upon me, O Lord, for Thy great mercy. I crave nothing for mine own merits, but for Thy name's sake, that it may be hallowed thereby, and for Thy dear Son Jesus Christ's sake. And now therefore, "Our Father of heaven, hallowed be Thy name", etc. AMEN.

*Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Mo.*