



When godly passions conflict: A story

The story of Thomas More and William Tyndale, two determined men who opposed each other and were willing to die for their beliefs.



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Thomas More paced the room in the Tower of London. Why was he there? He had prayed all night. He had sought God with all his heart and soul, but he could not find it in him to take the oath. The King as head of the Church made a nonsense of all that he held dear, and, as far as he could see, would wreck a civilisation that had been built over hundreds of years.

His mind went back to his childhood. His father had found him a place at the Lambeth Palace school. More had gone on to Oxford and then studied law. He was fluent in English, Latin and the special French of the legal fraternity. More's family was a haven of faith, praying daily and reading from the Scriptures. He thought of his daughter, now one of the best-educated people in the land and remembered the local people in his part of London, whose cases he had taken on without regard for the fee. He had experienced the Royal Court and become one of the most respected people in the land. And now, who was he?

The former Lord Chancellor looked down; he became very aware of his body and the gift of life that could so easily be snuffed out. He knew that beneath it all he was just a man like any other. Accused of treason, More knew his life was in danger and could suffer a terrible death. However, there was one consolation in among the growing darkness of his mind. More's spies in Europe had reported that they had tracked down the heretic Tyndale and he was likely to be taken soon.

William Tyndale was hunched over his desk writing furiously. He had spent many years writing. The fire

in his belly burned for reform of the Church and his mind raced to achieve his end. Why was the Church so ignorant? Why did so many of the priests know so little? Some of them could not even say the 'Our Father'. Few knew the commandments. It had to change, and the way to change it was to make the Bible available in English. No longer would the Bible be the province of the priests, or preaching be an exposition of a single Latin verse that no one understood. Everyone should have the Bible. Then all could judge and things would change. And so he wrote, not only in translation of the Scriptures, but tract after tract, bombarding England with words about 'Cardinal Wolfsee', that 'wolf among the flock' and other attacks against the Church.

Tyndale's words had come to the attention of his great enemy, Thomas More. Aware of the great tide of tracts coming in from Germany, More had revived the ancient Lollard laws, with great public burnings of books, tight control of the printing presses and the threat of *De heretico comburendis*, the burning of heretics. The revival of this law convinced Tyndale that he must flee to Europe to avoid persecution. He escaped to Antwerp, a free city, from where he could continue translating the Bible and writing books and numerous tracts. Tyndale's tracts were countered furiously by More, who would spend evening on evening, after a day in the law courts, scribbling furiously in response to Tyndale's latest tract. More described Tyndale as 'a hell hound in the kennel of the devil ... discharging a filthy foam of blasphemies out of his brutish beastly mouth'.

Yet Tyndale was also involved in a more gracious work. When the New Testament was eventually finished, Tyndale's soaring prose would attract many souls to the faith. Bibles were smuggled into England, hidden in cargoes of grain and disguised among furs. People recognised for the first time that central Church teachings like indulgences and the infallibility of the Pope could not be justified from the Scriptures. And they began to murmur.

It was about that time that the tide also began to turn at the highest level in the land. Henry VIII's marriage to Catherine of Aragon was fruitless. The king was growing frustrated by the lack of a male heir. Ann Boleyn was beautiful, flirtatious and ripe. She was also an advocate for the reformers, while More was falling rapidly out of favour. Messengers from the King went to Tyndale inviting him in the most gracious words to return to England.

honoured in our traditions, More and Tyndale were men of fervent prayer, yet were locked in mortal conflict.

This piece is to be read as story rather than history, but it is based on these sources:

Brian Moynahan, *William Tyndale: If God spare my life: A story of martyrdom, betrayal and the English Bible* (London: Abacus, 2002)

Peter Ackroyd, *The Life of Thomas More* (London: Vintage, 1999)

Tyndale was moved to tears by the King's invitation. Something in him longed to return home. But was it a trap? Perhaps this was More's doing and an attempt to lure him back for execution? What was he to do? Maybe this was the opportunity that he had waited for? Tyndale longed for the Bible to be legally published in England. Only then would it truly have its most powerful impact. So Tyndale said to the messengers that he would return and submit to all that the King wills, including even his own death, if only the King would do one thing, and that was to publish the Bible in English. Use anyone's translation that is approved of, he said. Let there be no notes or glosses in the margins, but simply let it be published. Henry received the message and brushed it aside.

Indeed, More had wanted to lure Tyndale home so he could deal with him. If only people realised, he thought to himself, how much of the English way of life was dependent on the faith and the set of laws and customs that had grown up around it. Then they would not listen to these harbingers of chaos like Tyndale. He had spent his whole life searching for justice in the law courts. He knew the most ancient of statutes and worked with the most complex legal arguments. He treasured the inheritance of scholasticism, which recognised the importance of rational debate in a good society. His young life as a resident in a monastery had taught him that law and Church were one; they were the very framework of civilisation. And the people who were the true servants of the country were the people of character, who would not be moved by the moment, or

the passions of a temptress, people who would remain, steadfast and true, to God and his Church.

And so it was that these two great men faced their end. More, locked in the Tower of London, and in his resolve not to waver, was put on trial for treason. Tyndale was tracked down by More's spies and handed over to the continental authorities. He was charged with heresy and imprisoned in a castle near Brussels.

More was found guilty of treason and faced being hung, drawn and quartered, but his sentence was commuted to a simple beheading and he was executed in July 1535.

On the continent, heretic priests were ritually humiliated before all the people in the marketplace. Clergy clothes were gradually stripped off. Their hands were scraped as if to remove the oil they would have received at ordination. The sacrament would be placed in their hands and then removed with the words, 'We take away from you this cup of redemption.' Everyone watched as the solemn words, 'We commit your soul to the devil' were said over the former priest. Later, the heretic priest would be burned at the stake.

Tyndale's degradation almost certainly took place in August 1536. His execution was delayed until 6 October, when he was strangled and then burned at the stake.

So what are we to say about this story? Where was Christ? Was Christ in the man More with his life of principle and unwavering, faithful character? Or was Christ in the reforming zeal of Tyndale, a life given for the sake of making the Scriptures available to the people in their own language? Both men are honoured in our traditions. Both were men of fervent prayer and both played a vital role in the establishment of the Christian faith in this country. Yet they were locked in mortal conflict.

Perhaps we should give William Tyndale the last word, or rather quote something of his translation of Paul's first letter to the Christians in Corinth. They are words that both men would have affirmed, yet might also have been judged by:

'Though I spake with the tonges of men and angels and yet had no love I were eve as soundinge brasse: or as a tynklynge Cymball. And though I coulde prophesy and vnderstode all secretes and all knowledge: yee yf I had all fayth so that I coulde move moutayns oute of ther places and yet had no love I were nothyng. And though I bestowed all my gooddes to fede ye poore and though I gave my body even that I burned and yet had no love it profeteth me nothinge.' (1 Cor 13.1–3)