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GREAT ANGLICAN DIVINES – (3) EDMUND GRINDAL (1519-1583)

By David Dethridge

Edmund Grindal, the immediate successor to Parker as Archbishop of Canterbury, was born in 1519 at Hensingham in the parish of St Bees in Cumberland, a district which he himself described as “the ignorantest part of religion, and most oppressed of covetous landlords of any one part of this realm.” He went up to Cambridge and was awarded a fellowship at Pembroke in 1538. He was ordained deacon in 1544.

University and Ordination

His reputation for academic brilliance was noted by Strype in these words: “Before he came to be taken notice of in the Church, he made a figure in the University, as one of the ripest wits and learnedest men in Cambridge.” This was reflected by his selection as a participant in disputations on theological subjects. He was appointed with four others to argue against the doctrine of transubstantiation before a commission of visitors headed by the reformer Nicholas Ridley, then Bishop of Rochester.

In 1550 Ridley (Master of Pembroke Hall from 1540) appointed Grindal his chaplain. Ridley described Grindal as a man “of virtue, honesty, wisdom and learning” reminding us of the need to pray that all called to the ministry of the gospel might be such and that those who select others to bear office in the Church might have the qualifications given to us by the Apostle Paul (1 Timothy 3:1-12, Titus 1:6-9) uppermost in their minds.

In August 1551 Grindal was also appointed precentor of St Paul’s Cathedral. His ministry was not, however, confined to the Cathedral but included preaching throughout the province of Canterbury. His widely expected appointment as bishop was prevented by the death of Edward VI.

Exile and Return

On the accession of Mary in 1553 Grindal with many others who held the reformed faith went into exile on the continent. He initially took up residence in Strasbourg where he attended the lectures of Peter Martyr. In order to enable him to exercise his ministry there Grindal learned the German language.

He maintained correspondence with those who adhered to the reformed faith in England. In one letter received by Grindal, Ridley described the wife of his gaoler as “a morose superstitious old woman, who thinks she shall merit by having me closely confined.” Much of the information thus obtained he communicated to John Foxe, the martyrologist.

In the month following the accession of Elizabeth I, Grindal began his journey back to England. He became one of the commissioners appointed to revise the liturgy. He was appointed bishop of London on 26th July 1559 in succession to Bonner and was a preacher both before the Queen and at St Paul’s Cross. It was recorded that at St Paul’s Cross on 3rd March 1560 “there was a mighty audience, for the people were greedy to hear the gospel.”

In 1562 he took a prominent part in the proceedings of convocation which revised the Articles of Religion. During his tenure of the see of London he wrote to Bullinger on the occasion of the adoption of the Helvetic Confession in 1566 to give expression to the doctrinal agreement which prevailed among the reformed churches: “down to this very day, we do perfectly agree with your churches, and with your confession of faith lately set forth.”

Archbishop

On 11th April 1570 he was translated to the archbishopric of York, Edwin Sandys becoming bishop of London. The next month he began to undertake a visitation of the province and effect was given to instructions (called “advertisements”) in order to ensure that the furnishings of churches would be appropriate to the faith proclaimed in them. Crosses, candlesticks and altar stones were to be removed and destroyed, the latter being replaced by “a decent table standing on a frame for the Communion Table.”

In 1575 the Queen on Cecil’s advice appointed Grindal to the see of Canterbury following Parker’s death. Trouble soon followed his appointment over what were called prophesyings, the term being taken from 1 Corinthians 14:31. These were meetings, often held weekly or fortnightly, in which clergy expounded and discussed the Scriptures and prayed. Laymen were usually in attendance but did not take part in the discussions. At such meetings in one diocese (Peterborough) offenders against morality were censured, although the assemblies did not of course have any official standing.

Elizabeth was adamant that these meetings should be suppressed and rejected a compromise whereby only officially approved speakers would be permitted to address the meetings. On 7th May 1577 she issued an order prohibiting the meetings. Grindal was directed to report those who refused to desist to the Privy Council for punishment. Grindal was too aware of the usefulness of the exposition of the Scriptures to comply and his remonstrance to the Queen (in which he pointed out that scriptural teaching and preaching made men and women better subjects) was unheeded. He was led to describe the Queen’s intervention as no better than the anti-Christian voice of the Pope.”

Suspended

For his refusal to comply he was suspended from his office and confined to his house. He had himself intervened in 1567 to save separatists from punishment, but also encouraged such to conform. A petition by convocation in 1581 for Grindal’s reinstatement was rejected by the Queen. His removal from office was, however, deemed impolitic.

He was reinstated in 1582 but by this time his health and particularly his eyesight were declining. He resigned his bishopric, and he returned to his house in Croydon where he died on 6th July 1583. He was commemorated by an effigy in the church in Croydon where he was buried, by his bequests, and in Spenser’s “Shepherd’s Calendar” where he is thinly disguised as “the shepherd Algrind”. May God raise up many such faithful undershepherds for the reformation and revival of His Church.

The late David Dethridge was a member of Church Society Council in the 1980s.