

OLIVER CROMWELL

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Today the divisions between denominations are mostly irrelevant today. At the same time we do come out of a history and there is richness in our past that I do not totally want to lose. By background I am a dissenter. My ancestors were Huguenots - some of whom paid with their lives for their reformed faith. My mother was a Congregationalist. My grandmother was a Congregationalist. My great grandmother was a Congregationalist. I have deep roots in nonconformity. And there are aspects of its past I want to cherish.

So in this series we're going to be looking at some of my heroes. And where should I start but Oliver Cromwell? It may surprise people who were not Congregationalists to realise the role that Cromwell played in the history of Congregationalism. When I started preaching in Norfolk I remember taking a service at Denton Congregational Church in 1965. It was founded in the Commonwealth. And they said to me "That's the chair that Oliver Cromwell sat on". When I was trained for the ministry at Mansfield College there was a portrait of him on the wall and a stained glass window in the chapel. If you go to Derby Central or Immanuel Cambridge URC you can see stained glass windows of Cromwell.

Part of the reason for this is a historic one. If you're URC or a Baptist part of the reason your church is here is Oliver Cromwell. When the Reformation began in England it centred on the Church of England. But from at least 1567 there were a few little groups who wanted to be free to worship God in their own way. In 1581 Robert Browne formed the first Congregational Church in Norwich. Others followed. To the state church this was a threat they were not willing to tolerate. Queen Elizabeth set out to break those who would not conform to her church. Ministers were arrested and thrown in prison. Some like Barrow, Greenwood, and Penry, were hung.

It was out of this persecution that the Pilgrim Fathers came fleeing to Holland and then to America. Most Congregationalists stayed in England. There persecution continued. The decisive moment came with the arrival on the throne of Charles 1 and the civil war. It was Congregationalists, Presbyterians and Baptists who under Oliver Cromwell formed the backbone of the Parliamentary Army. They were very much a religious army. Dissenting ministers were chaplains to the regiments and before they went into battle they would sing Psalms. For a brief moment nonconformity began the main religious tradition in England. When the monarchy returned so did the persecution. But by then Congregational churches were so firmly rooted that they were able to survive it. Without Cromwell nonconformity might have survived but it would never been able to play the part in English history it did.

Secondly however you look at Cromwell he is one of the most extraordinary figures in English history. Charles 1st was a King with a dream – absolute monarchy of the kind that evolved in France. The King has absolute authority – no one must question or dispute his decisions. He is responsible to no-one but God. By contrast Oliver Cromwell

was a nobody – an obscure country gentleman from the Fens - a farmer. The first time he spoke to Parliament he was observed by Sir Philip Warwick who had no idea who he was and described him as “a very mean figure of a man” in a “plain cloth suit which seemed to have been made by an ill county tailor”. There were specks of blood on his neck-band. Though “His countenance was swollen and reddish, his voice sharp and untenable” he was undeniably full of fervour. Seeing him coming in Parliament untidy dressed Lord Digby asked who he was. And John Hampden, replied “This slovenly fellow which you see before us who hath no ornament in his speech: I say that sloven if we should come to have a breach with the King (which God forbid) in such case will he be one of the greatest men in England”.

When the war he was in his 40s, he’s never drawn a sword. But he turned out to be one of the greatest military geniuses in Britain’s history. Not only did he win every major battle he fought but he created a new kind of army. To him this war was a matter of belief and you needed men who believed in their cause to win it. When in the early days of the war Parliament failed to win the Battle of Edgehill Cromwell commented “Your troopers are most of them old decayed serving men and tapsters and such kind of fellows, and their troopers are gentlemen’s sons, younger sons, persons of quality. Do you think that the spirits of such base and mean fellows will ever be able to encounter gentlemen that have honour, courage and resolution in them.. You must get men of a spirit .. that is likely to go on as far as a gentleman will go, or else I am sure you will be beaten still”.

He drew his troops from the nonconformist churches and from all social classes. One hostile critic said of his officers “Were not such as soldiers or men of estate but common men, poor and of mean parentage, such as have filled dung carts both before they were captains and since”. To which Cromwell replied “I had rather have a plain russet-coated captain that knows what he fights for and loves what he knows than what you call a gentleman and is nothing else... If you choose godly honest men to be captains of horse, honest men will follow them.. A few honest men are better than numbers”.

The army was a social revolution, people coming to the fore who had never been heard in the history of England before. And this army swept all before it and beat the King. Cromwell was not a republican. His objective was always an agreement between King and Parliament. When the war was won that was what he sought. Charles sought to play them along but regarded commitments given to rebels as of no moral consequence. Secretly he plotted a second war and England was plunged into bloodshed again. When that war ended Charles was put on trial and executed.

Execution is a terrible thing and I not myself a support of capital punishment under any circumstances. But the trial of Charles 1st was an amazing historical event. Kings has been killed often enough. But never before had a ruler been put on trial. The principle established here – and obviously bitterly disputed by Charles, was that no-one, not even the King, is above the laws. This is the principle that was to be used at Nuremburg, today in the international court in the Hague with the trial of Slobodan Milosevic and in Iraq with the trial of Saddam Hussein.

After the war Cromwell sought to hand over power to a Parliament drawn from the leaders of the Churches. It failed and in the end it was only Cromwell himself who as Lord Protector could hold the Commonwealth together. He was offered the crown but refused it “God – hath blasted the title.. I would not seek to set that that providence hath destroy”. But what permanent settlement was there? At the end of his life he had deep moods of depression in which he felt he was a failure. The rule of the saints had not come about. The future was uncertain. He was a deeply disappointed man. His last words were “It is not my design to drink or to sleep, but my design is to make what haste I can to be gone”.

After he died the Commonwealth did fall to pieces and the monarchy returned. Cromwell’s corpse was dug up and first hung and then beheaded. “Where is your good old cause now?” they asked Colonel Thomas Harrison as they took him out to the block. “Here in my bosom” said Harrison “and I shall seal it with my blood”. When John Cooke who had been prosecuting council at the Kings was sentenced to death the Lord Chief Justice declared “You know this undoubted truth – the rule of law is that the King can do no wrong in the estimation of the law”. That was indeed what the whole war had been about. Cooke refused to beg for his life “My rejoicing is in a Good God, a good cause, a good conscience. We are not traitors or murderers or fanatics but true Christians and good Commonwealth men. We fought for the common good and would have enfranchised the people if the nation had not been more delighted in servitude than in freedom”.

But though the monarchy returned England was never the same country – the balance of power had shifted as James 11 was to learn when he tried to reassert the old absolutism. "Never again," notes Samuel Gardiner, did there appear in England a persecuting Church supporting itself on royal absolutism; a monarchy resting its claims solely on divine right; a Parliament defying the constituencies by which it had been elected as well as the Government by which it had been summoned." In fact today its remarkable how much of what we know see as fundamental to our life as a nation – the sovereignty of parliament, the independence of judges, freedom from arbitrary arrest and detention, comparative religious toleration- were ideas forged in that remarkable period of English history.

Now of course Cromwell was a man of his time – all idols have feet of clay and that is certainly true of him. In Ireland his toleration did not extend to Roman Catholics. Puritanism was sometimes negative. Sometimes the Levellers saw further into the future than he did. He was a democrat in any modern sense and there were lapses into arbitrary government. There is a famous story that Lely set out to paint him when he was Protector. “My Lilly” he said “I desire you to use all your skill to paint my picture truly like me and flatter me not at all. But remark all these roughness, pimples, warts and everything as you see me. Otherwise I will never pay a farthing for it”. Our picture of Christ must recognise the warts.

But let me give you 3 things about him which for me still seem an inspiration.

Firstly he is a fascinating figure. His character is full of contradiction. The man of action who enjoyed horse play with the soldiers who was also a man of deep culture. He was a great love of English chamber music and delighted in boys voices singing “Latin Motets”. His government set up “a committee for the advancement of music.” It was under him that opera was introduced into England for the first time. He favoured poetry giving jobs to Milton and Marvell. He was Chancellor of Oxford University and told them “no commonwealth could flourish without learning”.

He had great mood swings. I think today we would say he had what we now call a bi-polar personality. He had considerable periods of illness – some of which may have been psychological. He would have periods of depression and then great bursts of energy. Sometimes he would break out fits of laughter. He liked practical jokes. He was never an intellectual -he never planned far ahead. ”I can tell you sirs what I would not have, though I cannot what I would”. He would see an opportunity and rush for it. Or as he would call it waiting for the providence of God.

At the heart of his life was an evangelical conversion. 3 years before the Civil war began Oliver Cromwell’s eldest son, Robert, died. It was a loss that moved Cromwell deeply. Some years later, after the Battle of Marston Moor, it was Cromwell’s duty to write a letter to one of his officers, Colonel Valentine Walton, telling him of the death of his son. In it he mentioned his own loss. “Sir, God hath taken away your eldest son by a cannon shot. It broke his leg. We were necessitated to have it cut off, whereof he died. Sir, you know my trials this way, but the Lord supported me with this... There is your precious son full of glory. He was a gallant young man, exceeding gracious. God give you his comfort. Let this drink up your sorrow, seeing these are not feigned words to comfort you, but the thing is so real and undoubted a truth. You may do all things through the strength of Christ. The Lord be your strength, so prays your truly faithful and loving brother, Oliver Cromwell”. Later while he was on his own deathbed Cromwell’s daughter Elizabeth died of cancer. He called for his Bible. He read Philippians 4.13 “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheth me”. He repeated it over and over again. And he said “This Scripture did once save my life when my eldest son died, which went as a dagger to my heart, indeed it did”. Then he repeated the text to himself, “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheth me” and said “tis true, tis true”. Without his religious faith the tensions in his personality might have broken him.

Secondly Cromwell is an example of a religious tradition involved in politics. Cromwell’s religious faith is the driving force of his life. And it leads without hesitation into the life of the nation. At the heart here is the central Reformed principle of the sovereignty of God – that God is sovereign over all. In Puritan religion there was a word of God to the nation – and from Civil rights in the US to apartheid in South Africa to world hunger that word of God continues to be spoken.

Thirdly Cromwell is one of the great figures in the rise of freedom of thought and religious toleration. The commonwealth was something new in English history. Censorship was lifted and there was freedom of the press in a way never known before. This led to a great outburst of new ideas and debate. Newspapers flourished, Milton

advocated liberty of conscience, the Levellers advocated universal male franchise. Nothing like this had been seen before.

Cromwell himself had considerable sympathy for liberty in conscience in religion. He looked for an-inclusive national state church, The Instrument of Government insisted that though "The Christian religion as contained in the Scriptures shall be held forth and recommended as the public profession of these nations" yet "none shall be compelled by penalties or otherwise" provided they did no harm to others. One sign of this was that under Cromwell the Jews who had been expelled from England in the Middle ages were allowed to return to England. He said "I had rather that Mahometanism were permitted amongst us than that one of God's children should be persecuted".

This spirit affected public policy. In January 1644 Cromwell was involved in a quarrel with the Scottish General Crawford who had cashiered a soldier for refusing a test of Presbyterian orthodoxy and accusing him of being an extreme Baptist. "Are you sure of that" Cromwell retorted. "Admit he be, shall that render him incapable to serve the public? Sir, the state in choosing men to serve them takes no notice of their opinions; if they be willing faithfully to serve them, that satisfies". That is the modern principle but it was quite revolutionary at the time.

At the centre of Cromwell hope was unity in diversity of the godly. "I had waited" he wrote in 1648 for the day to see union and right understanding between the godly people (Scots, English, Jews, Gentiles, Presbyterians, Independents, Anabaptisms and all". In this spirit he approached others. On religious matters between the founder of the Friends George Fox and Cromwell there was a deep division. But one day they met and talked about the great doctrines of the faith. As they were parting Fox says "He caught me by the arm, and with tears in his eyes, said "Come again to my house, for if thou and I were an hour of a day together we should be nearer one to another" and he added "that he wished him no more ill than he did to his own soul". It is not an unreasonable to see here a beginning of the ecumenical movement. Cromwell pointed beyond his time.

The poet Andrew Marvell compared Cromwell to a vital force of restless energy.

"Tis madness to resist or blame
The force of angry Heaven's flame:
And if wee would speak true,
Much to the man is due,
Who from his private Gardens, where he lived reserved and austere,
As if his highest plot,
To plant the Bergamot,
Could by industrious valour climbe
To ruine the great work of time,
And cast the Kingdom old
Into another mold".

Such he did.

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