William Laud - Bishop 1626-28,

William Laud was a controversial figure, characterised by burning ambition, clarity of vision, bad temper, small stature (about which he was very sensitive), lack of personal charm and total lack of tact. He was also a closet homosexual. Evidence for this is limited to his own journal where he admits to erotic dreams about men. Significantly nobody seems to have claimed a homosexual relationship with him, so he was probably celibate. This amalgam of personal characteristics turned out to be a toxic mixture at a time when the monarch got into a power struggle with parliament.

His clarity of vision stemmed from a belief in the doctrine of Arminianism. Arminius was a Dutch theologian who thought that the Reformation had gone too far. His belief system, which Laud acquired when still a young man, emphasised Divine Grace over Predestination. More importantly it emphasised ritual in worship, which to the Puritans reeked of "Popery". Today Arminianism would probably be described as "moderately High Church.". But Laud's loyalty to this cause was unswerving. And it coincided with the personal beliefs of Charles I. This resulted in Laud becoming religious adviser to the King in 1626 and a Privy Counsellor a year later. In this position he became politically very influential. But he was no politician and antagonised both parliamentarians and Puritans. But because of his lack of sensitivity, he did not see where this was leading, so he pushed on with his reforms, particularly in the area of public worship. Subsequently, he became Bishop (in fairly quick succession) of St. Davids, Bath and Wells, London and Archbishop of Canterbury. From such a position he could really stir things up - and he did so with gusto.

His activities made him as many enemies as supporters, and even his supporters didn't like him much on a personal level. Thus he was instrumental in polarising opinion between Puritans and "Laudians" (= Arminians) on a religious level, and between parliamentarians and Royalists on a political level. These two factors are regarded by some as the root cause of the English Civil War.

A particular disaster was Laud's attempt to impose his reformed style of worship on the Scottish Presbyterians. Predictably the Scots opposed this. Laud persuaded the King to wage war (the Bishops Wars) on the Scots, and the Scots won, thus infuriating not only the King (who had to pay), but also all sections of public opinion in England. As a result, in 1641, shortly before the Civil War began Laud was imprisoned in the Tower of London, where he was held for three years before being put on trial for Treason. Convicted he was executed in 1645.

The Church of England honours Laud as a Martyr, but historians over the centuries have tended to be less sympathetic, variously describing him as a "ridiculous old bigot" and "the greatest calamity ever visited upon the English Church". Modern historians have tended to steer a course between sainthood and disaster by pointing out that his views and convictions were basically sound but his way of pursuing them was extraordinarily insensitive.

The chronology of his life was as follows:

1573.  Born in Reading, son of an influential cloth merchant
1579-1592  Educated Reading GS and St. Johns College Oxford
1593 - 1616  Fellow of St. Johns College
1601  Ordained. Remained as Oxford Academic
1611-1616  President of St. Johns College
1616       Dean of Gloucester
1621       Bishop of St. Davids
1626       Bishop of Bath and Wells (probably absentee on account of political activities)
1627       Appointed to Privy Council
1628       Bishop of London
1629       (Charles I dissolves Parliament and adopts personal rule)
1633       Archbishop of Canterbury
1639       Bishops Wars with Scots. Fell out with Charles I
1641       Imprisoned in the Tower of London
1642       Start of English Civil War
1644       Put on trial for Treason
1645       Executed
1649       (Execution of Charles I) (Republic proclaimed. Oliver Cromwell, Lord Protector)

Several of our bishops spent time in prison (principally as Political Prisoners, not because of criminality). But as far as I can ascertain, William Laud is the only one to have had his head cut off!

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