

Andrew Cook:

We're marking 500 years since the start of Reformation. We began this series by examining some of the reasons why church history isn't seen as important but then we moved on to see some of its good and positive aspects.

To carry on with this, I'll now hand over to Philip Parsons and Derek French.

Derek French:

Well let's come to the study of church history itself. What does church history teach us? We've hinted at this already of course but what is it, Philip?

Philip Parsons:

Well the first thing I would say it teaches us that God deals with his people in sovereign grace. Sovereign grace is in a way the great theme of church history. God chooses to work at times which humanly speaking would seem to be the most unlikely.

Often when the situation seems to be most against any improvement, then God will act, I'm sure partly to show that the work is his alone. There's a biblical reference which rather highlights this point, perhaps not on the surface but when you probe it a bit you realise it does. Luke chapter 3, verses 1 to 3, if you'd read that please, Derek?

Derek:

Certainly, Philip. This is a very historical section, isn't it, in these three verses.

'In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene.

During the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert. He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: A voice of one calling in the wilderness, "Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him."

Philip:

Yes. I think the point I wanted to bring out from that passage was that list of names of the people in power from the Emperor Tiberius down to the local rulers there, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip and Lysanias. Those who study a bit more of history of that period will realise that these men were a pretty evil lot.

Derek:

Yes, very ungodly men.

Philip:

And you would have thought it's the most unlikely time to begin the ministry of Christ, for John to then go and preach, start preaching and announce '*Prepare the way of the Lord, the Messiah is now come amongst us*'. But it's God's way, I think, to prove that whatever man might try and do, we can't frustrate his work.

Derek:

No, his work is irresistible, isn't it?

Philip:

It is. And I think it shows us not only that, but there is the question that God will often work through the most unlikely people.

Derek:

Can you give us some examples, Philip?

Philip:

Take the apostles: in the main they were uneducated fishermen. If you were going to start [...] a new phase of that work of God and bring it to its full fruition, to the coming of Messiah, we wouldn't have chosen those men.

Derek:

No, we'd look for men of completely different backgrounds, wouldn't we?

Philip:

We might have chosen the Apostle Paul because he was a very well educated man.

Derek:

And possibly Matthew as well.

Philip:

But certainly many of the others, we wouldn't have chosen. I think this is again typical of God, that he chooses people who we wouldn't expect.

Then the time that Christ was born; most unlikely of circumstances, [...] very poor family. They lived in Nazareth, a despised place. [...] You know it just wasn't where you'd expect the Messiah to come from.

Derek:

And even thinking of the prophecy of Micah, that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem. Mary and Joseph lived in Nazareth up the north.

Philip:

That's right, yes.

Derek:

But the Emperor Caesar Augustus back in Rome, sets his decree. Everybody's got to counted at their home town and they had to go down to Bethlehem.

Philip:

Yes.

Derek:

I mean it's wonderful that [...] the hidden hand of God is behind all these things. I'm sure that Caesar had no idea whatsoever that he was fulfilling the word of the Lord, but the Lord was doing it.

Philip:

No he wouldn't have done! And then to borrow an example from the 18th century which was just before the preaching [...] and the reviving began in the church. It was a very dark time. The country had sunk into a great deal of evil and sinfulness and sin was rampant. I remember the phrase, 'Drunk for a penny, dead drunk for tuppence, clean straw free.' You know it was really a pretty awful situation.

Derek:

A grim period, morally and in every way, yes.

Philip:

A lot of people used to go out and see the hangings and take family as an afternoon out, that kind of thing. It was really sunk into very bad ways.

It was the unlikely people, two unconverted ministers in the Church of England, John Wesley and George Whitfield who God began with.

It really is [...] that George Whitfield was brought up in an inn and he had to work in the inn. Maybe it's stretching the point a little bit but I think, in the humour of Almighty God, he chose the son of a barman to turn the tide. In a sense you just wouldn't have thought of looking there for the person who would be one of the leaders.

Derek:

Because those inns themselves were often dens of iniquity weren't they?

Philip:

Yes. I don't think necessarily that was the case but certainly Whitfield would have seen the rough end of life. He would have been aware of it.

Derek:

And yet God chose him.