

Andrew Cook:

We're marking the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, here on *Serving Today*.

We've started this series by looking at what church history teaches us. Even apparent setbacks, says Philip Parsons, are part of God's long-term plan.

Philip Parsons:

There are periods of Church History when there was intense persecution. This happened particularly in the times of the early church, there were persecutions on and off a lot of the time.

But there were these periods of very intense persecution and one of the early church leaders, Tertullian, said that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. So in other words, even when people were being put to death for the faith, it isn't a disaster. It often produces more results, as it were, in the longer term.

Derek French:

Yes.

Philip:

When the reformers (thinking of the English reformers) were arrested with a change of monarch who was not favourable, they were arrested and put in prison and burnt at the stake in the 1550's. Many would have felt: well that's a disaster and all the good work is going to be lost. People like Cranmer and Latimer and Ridley and others.

They all came under this royal edict and were put to death. And yet, within a very short while there had arisen a new race of men who, in many ways, excelled above the Reformers, and that was the Puritans. [...] There were more of them and they had a better grasp of Scripture and they were, many of them, more powerful preachers. So in God's good providence with these first men being put to death there followed on this period of greater blessing.

And again, I can think of another example. In 1662 in England 2,000 puritan pastors were really removed from the Church of England. They couldn't in all conscience sign up to what they were being asked to do. They lost their churches, their livings, thrown out of where they lived which was owned by the Church, and it must have seemed the deathblow to the true church of God. And yet, because of that we have their writings.

So when they were in prison, many of them decided to put into writing or publish their sermons. And one of the most notable ones that's so well-known around the world is the 'Pilgrim's Progress' written in Bedford jail by John Bunyan at that time.

So even these set backs are used by God. And we can think of other occasions. We can think of just before the Second World War. Apparently there was a lot of evangelistic work going on in Eastern Europe and particularly in Russia, Ukraine and so on. Churches were growing and it was really quite a wonderful time. And then suddenly the Second World War comes and after the Second World War the whole of that area comes under communist rule, and you might think, well that's awful because it's a real clampdown on anything Christian. And yet there were all those Christians.

Many of them were put in prison, some were exiled to Siberia but it was spreading the gospel around other parts of the Soviet Union and the end result was actually to the glory of God. And one can think also of the church in China under Chairman Mao as thirty years of repression and suppression of the church. Many, in fact almost all, churches were closed. Visible Christianity just almost became non-existent and yet when things became easier in the 80's, the late 80's early 90's, people who visited China said that the churches had grown more in that period than the whole 150 years of missionary activity.

Derek:

Yes, amazing isn't it?

Philip:

It's an amazing thing.

Derek:

I was thinking too, it's a bit like Albania, wasn't it, where their ruler, Enver Hoxha claimed that this was the first atheistic country in the world? And when his regime collapsed, they discovered there were thousands

of genuine Christians there. [...] Alright they'd struggled and they needed help but they were there! The Lord had been at work there in spite of the difficult circumstances.

So yes, but this is wonderful, isn't it! You see the Lord in history?

Philip:

It is, yes.

Derek:

Yes. What's your fourth lesson that we can learn from church history?

Philip:

Well, I think one of the things we can do is to observe the errors of past times and seek to avoid them. It's true to say that most modern errors have appeared in some form or other in previous times. For instance, the Jehovah's Witness teaching denying the deity of Christ had its counterpart in the Arian heresy of the fourth century.

If you actually read the history of those times you will see a very strong parallel, and I think wide spread ignorance of church history is one reason why the church often falls into errors which it has fallen into before. So church history, rightly understood, can act as a corrective to tendencies towards erroneous thinking.

Derek:

And what's your final lesson that we can learn from church history?

Philip:

Well, that God has preserved his church even through the darkest times. One of the best interpretations, I suggest, of the two witnesses of Revelation 11 is that it refers to those times when the true church of God seems to have almost expired. Yet even in such dark times, such as the Middle Ages in Europe, [...] there were true believers still and God raised his church to life again.

John Calvin speaks of the many resurrections of the church, of which the Reformation was probably the greatest ever seen. Perhaps I can just quote the words of Martyn Lloyd-Jones. He says, *'I know of nothing more instructive, next to the Bible, than church history.'*

And there's a quotation from Psalm 48, verses 12 to 14, if you'd read that for us please, Derek?

Derek:

'Walk about Zion, go round her, count her towers, consider well her ramparts, view her citadels, that you may tell of them to the next generation. For this God is our God for ever and ever. He will be our guide even to the end.'

Philip:

Yes, I think that's a very powerful argument from the Old Testament of saying, you know we shouldn't just ignore what God has done because it's an ongoing work and we are part of that work. But they were too and we are all part of the one thing.

Derek:

Philip, thanks very much indeed.