

Andrew Cook:

Previously in our series marking 500 years since the start of the Reformation, we heard about the 14th Century English evangelical reformer, John Wycliffe, who was often called the Morning Star of the Reformation.

Wycliffe is best remembered for translating the scriptures into English in the 14th Century, and the person we're actually going to hear about today is called John Huss because he is the connection between Wycliffe and Luther.

So, to tell us more about John Huss, this European champion of the faith, here are Derek French and Philip Parsons.

Philip Parsons:

Before looking in detail at the life of John Huss, I think a little background information is helpful.

He came from the central European country of Bohemia, whose capital is Prague. Now Prague today is in that part of Europe, it's the same city. The countries around it have been renamed a number of times so I won't try and say where it is, but if you know where Prague is, that's where he came from.

Christianity did not come to Bohemia, as that part of Europe was called, until about the 8th Century, and even then the early converts seemed to be very nominal. So much so that in the 9th Century the King of Moravia, which was a neighbouring country, requested that the scriptures be translated into the Slavonic language.

Derek French:

And what was the result of that?

Philip:

Well, the result of this was that a large number of people were converted and for some 200 years the Bohemians were able to enjoy worship and read the Scriptures in their own tongue. But by the late 11th Century, by order of the Pope, the Latin service was reintroduced into the churches and Slavonic Bibles were banned.

Derek:

That's astonishing really, isn't it, to take the Word of God away from people?

Philip:

Yes, but evangelical influences were not altogether lost, for around that time, there were a number of refugees who were called Waldensians who came into the country, fleeing from persecution in their homeland in the mountains of northern Italy.

These people were zealous evangelisers, not in public but teaching in private houses. As a result, they kept alive a purer faith than was taught and practised by the churches in general.

Another factor which helped to prevent Bohemia from falling into total spiritual darkness was that in some churches, protected by local nobility, worship was still continued in the Slavonic language.

In the mid-14th Century, Charles, who was king of Bohemia was also elected as the Emperor of what was then called the 'Holy Roman Empire'. One of his achievements was to set up the University of Prague, with the aim of making it equal in learning with Paris and Oxford, Paris in France and Oxford, England.

Charles' son and successor was the famous King Wenceslaus, who features in a carol, a Christmas carol, and who forged a link with England by arranging the marriage of his sister Anne with King Richard II. Anne was a godly woman who loved the word of God and encouraged the writings of John Wycliffe to be brought into Bohemia.

So the stage then has been set for the appearance of God's man for the hour, John Huss.

Derek:

So what do we actually know about him?

Philip:

Well, while all these things were happening, John Huss was growing up as a young peasant lad in the village of Husinetz, from which he seems to have taken his name. John Huss' father died when he was quite young and his mother was assisted in the cost of his education by a rich nobleman. Huss did not disappoint his mother or their rich patron. By the time he was 34 he had been appointed rector of the University of Prague, one of the highest academic attainments possible.

Around this time an event occurred which was to be a turning point in his life. In Prague some 10 years earlier a chapel had been opened called Bethlehem Chapel specifically for the preaching of God's word in the Slavonic language.

In 1402 Huss was appointed its preacher. He began to speak out against the many sins and vices of his day, so much so that he seemed to be a kind of conscience for the nation. He not only studied the scriptures but also at this time the writings of John Wycliffe. It seemed as though it was in the course of preparation and delivery of these sermons that the preacher himself became awakened.

Derek:

That's really quite remarkable isn't it, to be converted by your own sermon?

Philip:

Yes, and it's not the first time it's happened in history.

Derek:

Yes there was a case and the name of the man escapes me but converted, a person in the congregation suddenly shouted out, 'the pastor has been converted'.

Philip:

Yes, yes. Another event occurred at that time which helped to open Huss' eyes.

In the church at Wilsnack, which was nearby, there was a pretended relic of the blood of Christ which was said to possess miraculous powers. People flocked from all over Bohemia and also far beyond in the hope of obtaining a cure. Many doubts were raised about the genuineness of these miracles and the Archbishop of Prague appointed a commission, including Huss, to investigate.

Of the many cases which were examined, two women who were said to have been blind were questioned. It turned out that they had only had sore eyes and had never been blind. In 1405 the Archbishop prohibited pilgrimages to the blood of Wilsnack.

Andrew:

Thanks again to Philip Parsons for bring us that fascinating story.