

Andrew Cook:

In our series about the Reformation, we continue the story of the early reformer John Huss. It was because of his views on indulgences that he came to the attention of the pope.

Philip Parsons explains what these were.

Philip Parsons:

You could pay money so that masses could be said so that people who had died could have some of the years off their time in purgatory reduced. And if you paid enough money, it was said that you would release them completely from purgatory so they would go to heaven.

Derek French:

And of course purgatory isn't mentioned in the Bible at all, is it?

Philip:

No it isn't. So it was obviously something which concerned people like Huss.

Firstly the books of John Wycliffe were collected and burned publically in Prague, then Huss himself was summoned to Rome. He was advised not to go, so the Pope condemned him in his absence and laid the city of Prague under an interdict. This meant that the churches were closed, the altar lights were put out and the images covered over with sackcloth.

Huss was forced to withdraw from Prague to his native town of Husinetz. He was unable to preach in Prague but he spent much of his time travelling around the country, preaching in other towns and villages. Great crowds heard him gladly and during this period Huss came to a clearer understanding of the doctrine of the Church and wrote a treatise on the subject called, 'On the Church'. This book proved to be a great help to Luther, a hundred years later.

Derek:

Yes, so there's a bit of a link between Wycliffe and Luther.

Philip:

With John Huss, yes. Clearly the Church of Rome could not tolerate this state of affairs much longer. But there was a fundamental problem which prevented decisive and united action.

There were, at that time, three Popes, one in Italy, one in Spain and one in France, and before any effective move could be made against the reform movement, this division had to be healed. So the new emperor, Sigismund, also king of Bohemia, had the bright idea of calling a church council. And so it was in 1414 that the Council of Constance was convened.

Now this Council was a very splendid affair. It included the Emperor, kings and other nobles from all over Europe, to say nothing of cardinals and archbishops and bishops and priests, all with an entourage corresponding to their rank. And the first business of the Council was to settle the question of the Pope. In the event, all three Popes were deposed and a new one was elected.

They then turned their attention to the reformer. John Huss had only agreed to come to the Council on the basis of what was called a 'safe-conduct' granted to him by the Emperor, Sigismund. But he had not been in the city for more than a few weeks when he was arrested and thrown into prison. He was confined for six months in a damp, unhealthy dungeon situated on the banks of the River Rhine next to where the main town sewer emptied into the river.

At his first appearance, Huss was unable to speak in his own defence because he was shouted down by many of the clerics who were opposed to him.

Derek:

It's very similar to Jesus, wasn't it, how the crowds shouted out, 'Crucify him'?

Philip:

It soon became clear that his condemnation had been predetermined. Only a full recantation of all those beliefs which in any way conflicted with the teaching and tradition of the Church would save him.

He was unwilling to recant so eventually in July 1415 he was sentenced to death by burning.

Derek:

Quite courageous really, wasn't it, to stand up for Scripture against tradition?

Philip:

Yes, and especially when he knew what the end would be.

Derek:

Yes. We should stand on that same ground, shouldn't we?

Philip:

Yes, we should be prepared to.

So ended the life of John Huss. When he was finally fastened to the stake he said these memorable and prophetic words, *'It is thus that you silence the goose'*. And goose is a sort of play on words on his own name.

Derek:

Right.

Philip:

*'But a hundred years hence there will arise a swan whose singing you will not be able to silence.'* And that was July 1415. [...] In October 1517, a hundred and two years later, Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the church door in Wittenberg. So it was a remarkable statement.

Derek:

Yes.

Philip:

Huss's ideas were in some ways less advanced than those of Wycliffe. For instance, he never came to a clear understanding of the doctrine of the Lord's Supper. His view was probably similar to Luther's, whereas Wycliffe had come to see that transubstantiation was not according to Scripture.

Derek:

Philip, that's a word that may not be familiar to some, 'transubstantiation'. What does it mean?

Philip:

It means that in the Lord's Supper the elements are actually changed into the body and blood of Christ.

Derek:

Which actually means they are re-sacrificing Christ again, which is absurd, isn't it?

Philip:

Yes, that's right. That was one of the objections of the Reformers, and the fact that it doesn't actually change and you can analyse it and show that is still bread and wine.

Derek:

Well I mean, if it was literally the case then in the upper room when the Lord gave them the bread and the wine in the first place he would have had two bodies in that upper room.

Philip:

That's right, it's clearly meant to be a metaphor.

On the other hand, we can say that Huss did begin a reform movement among the population of Bohemia, which continued for a few decades after his death and which for a while successfully challenged the power of the Roman Catholic church there.

As with Wycliffe and Luther, the touchstone of his understanding was the Scriptures. He asserted the right of every man to make his own decisions on the basis of the Bible and to find salvation in Christ alone.