

Trevor Low:

Having given his lecture, Hugh Latimer returned to his room, proud to be called ‘the Champion of the Established Church’. Thomas Bilney followed him, knocked on his door and immediately took the initiative by saying, “Be pleased to hear my confession”.

Latimer invited him, in thinking that he had regained his erring brother by his lecture, but Bilney had not come for absolution but for confrontation. He told Latimer of the anguish of heart that he had once felt, of his own efforts to find peace in his heart and of how he had found forgiveness of sin, only through trusting in Christ and his death. Latimer found himself confronted with the true gospel. He was convicted and he was converted. In a sermon years later he said, “I learned more through Bilney’s confession than I had done in many years. From that time forward, I began to love the Word of God.”

From being the university’s cross bearer, he now took up the cross of Christ and became a sufferer for righteousness sake. Instead of preaching tradition and ritual, he preached the gospel. Needless to say, he and Bilney became firm friends and he joined the group who met in the White Horse Inn in Cambridge to discuss theology.

But years of indoctrination take a long time to shake off and for some years Latimer was unclear about some aspects of church teaching. For example, he continued to believe in transubstantiation – that is the belief that the bread and the wine turns into the very substance of the body and blood of Christ.

But, although he was not the greatest theologian of his day, he was certainly the best preacher. He preached to the scholars of Cambridge in Latin and then would, with equal effect preach, to the peasants in English. He realised that England had been starved of the true gospel and his calling was to feed the masses with the Bread of Life. As a farmer’s son, he could get down to the level of the working people.

Of course it goes without saying that Latimer’s new stance brought opposition and enmity. The church wanted to trap him, to catch him preaching heresy. On one occasion, the Bishop of Ely entered the church while Latimer was preaching. Latimer stopped, waited for the bishop to be seated and then proceeded to change his theme and his text. He spoke on the verse from Hebrews 9, ‘But Christ came as high priest of the good things to come’. He preached on the spiritual responsibilities of priests and especially bishops. At the end the bishop came to him, thanked him for his sermon, though Latimer realised that that was all a sham, and then asked Latimer if he could help the bishop by writing an article denouncing this vile German reformer, Martin Luther.

Latimer saw through the ploy and said, “I’m afraid I would be unable to do that since to do it, I would need to read Luther’s works, and the church forbids us to read those works”. He took his leave with the words “I’m sure that I have preached before you today no man’s teaching, but only the teaching of God out of the scriptures.”

The Bishop of Ely was determined to get his revenge and so he suspended Latimer’s preaching licence. This meant that he could not preach anywhere within the bishop’s diocese and that included Cambridge. But let’s not forget that Jesus said, “I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it”. God is in control and he provided a wonderful outlet for Latimer’s preaching. It came from an area that was outside of the bishop’s control, the Augustinian priory in Cambridge. There, the prior was one Robert Barns and on hearing of the bishop’s ban on Latimer, Barns invited him to preach in his pulpit on Christmas Eve.

But very soon afterwards, Latimer’s enemies brought his name before Cardinal Wolsey, a man who hated all reformers and was merciless in dealing with heretics. Latimer was summoned to appear before him. He was questioned on his views of Martin Luther and again Latimer replied that he had not read him. He had read only the ancient Church fathers and medieval writers.

Latimer raised the incident of the Bishop of Ely’s attendance at the service and what had subsequently occurred. Cardinal Wolsey was so impressed by Latimer that he granted to him his own personal licence, which permitted Latimer to preach anywhere in England.

He returned to Cambridge and launched himself into the preaching of the gospel. His influence was steadily growing. Students flocked to hear him, many were converted. His practical sermons explained how the true and genuine Christian life should be lived.

An event then took place which made a deep impression on him and which he never forgot. His good friend Thomas Bilney was brought before Cardinal Wolsey and forced to recant. He was made to wander through the streets of London, bareheaded with a bundle of sticks on his back, signifying that if he were to wander

from the fold again, he would be burned at the stake. Bilney returned to Cambridge a broken man, his sense of guilt for having denied the true faith rendered him inconsolable.

Cardinal Wolsey died in 1530 and Latimer's opponents seized on the opportunity to attack his right to preach but he remained adamant and he continued to preach. He came to the attention of none other than the King, King Henry the Eighth. He was invited to preach before the court in March 1530. How would the King react to his preaching?