

Andrew Cook:

At the moment, as part of our series about the Reformation, we're going through the life of Hugh Latimer who was a key figure in the English Reformation.

Last time we heard that Hugh Latimer had been in trouble with the church authorities. They were looking for a way to stop him preaching what they saw as heresy. Hugh Latimer then found himself preaching before none other than King Henry the Eighth of England. How would the Royal court react?

Here's Trevor Low to continue with the story.

Trevor Low:

King Henry the Eighth was delighted with Latimer and his preaching. Latimer was made one of the King's chaplains and along with several others was appointed to draw up a list of the best religious books available in the land.

Much as this was a great compliment, Latimer found that court life was not for him. He had more in common with the ordinary people than with court officials. Through some influential friends, he was given a little country parish in the county of Wiltshire in England. So by January 1531, he found himself rector of a small parish, no longer any rich people of influence in his congregation, just simple, relatively uneducated people, yet they found his preaching very profitable.

But even here his preaching could not go unnoticed. He was England's finest preacher. The priests considered him a heretic and feared the influence he was having on so many. One reformer wrote of him: "None except the stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart went away without being affected with great hatred of sin and moved to godliness and virtue."

At this time, other reformers were being persecuted, mostly at the hands of two men: Bishop Stokeley of London and Sir Thomas More, the Chancellor. Such persecution was unconstitutional but Henry, being the ambivalent man he was, turned a blind eye to it. Being in Wiltshire, Latimer was outside Stokeley's jurisdiction but in 1531 on a visit to London he was persuaded to preach. Much of the sermon was directed against the clergy in general and Stokeley in particular, but again Latimer escaped the Bishop's clutches on account of King Henry's high opinion of him.

But Stokeley was not to be beaten. Through stealth he was able to summon Latimer to appear before him and in January 1532 Latimer stood accused of heresy. After several days, Latimer noticed that the furniture in the room had been moved around and the fire was out and a cloth had been draped over the fireplace. As he listened he could hear the squeak of a pen recording every word he said. One of the bishops asked him to speak up as he was rather deaf. Latimer realised that they were trying to trap him.

At first he answered all questions competently, then new issues were raised. As the case dragged on, he was ordered to recant or be excommunicated. At first he refused. He was excommunicated and awaited his fate. His life hung in the balance as some sort of compromise was being discussed behind the scenes.

What actually happened is unclear but it is widely thought that the King himself stepped in and asked Latimer to obey the bishops and so Latimer recanted. He had to apologise publicly to Stokeley and plead humbly for release from excommunication. This he did and was received back into the church. But this has been described as the darkest page in Latimer's history.

In August of 1532, the Archbishop of Canterbury William Wareham died. Henry at this point was wanting to divorce Catherine of Aragon in order to marry Anne Boleyn. He wanted to appoint a successor to Wareham who would support Henry himself. He appointed Thomas Cranmer and that appointment brought a new spiritual climate to the country, a ray of light after much darkness.

Cranmer set about looking for what we might term 'evangelical support' among the bishops. There were several bishoprics vacant at the time, so in August 1535 Latimer was given the royal assent to become Bishop of Worcester. The whole cause of the Reformation was being strengthened. But Latimer never saw himself as an administrator, he was first and foremost a preacher. He was often asked to preach at court where the new Queen Anne loved to hear him and even, it is said, accepted his private rebukes. But before long, Henry tired of Anne in favour of Jane Seymour and for this Latimer even dared to rebuke the King.

As bishop he found some of his duties burdensome. When the monasteries came under review he was appalled to find how far they had deviated from their vows of celibacy and poverty. Corruption and deception were everywhere. Many monasteries were closed down in 1536. Latimer took the opportunity to say the following in one of his sermons: "Look at that man and woman living together piously in the fear of

God, keeping his word and active in the duties of their calling. They form a religious house, one that is truly acceptable to God. Pure religion consists not in wearing a hood but in visiting the fatherless and the widows and in keeping oneself unspotted from the world. What has hitherto been called a religious life was an irreligious life. It was hypocrisy.”

And so the Reformation cause was being strengthened. But Satan is ever active and in 1539 what was known as ‘the whip of six strings’ was given royal assent. This set the Reformation cause back. It consisted of six main articles.

Number 1: the real presence of Christ in the sacrament. Number 2: the denial of the communion cup to ordinary people. Number 3: the celibacy of the clergy. Number 4: the obligation of monastic vows. Number 5: the benefit of private masses. And number 6: private confession to a priest.

These were in effect a re-establishment of the old church teaching within the Church of England. Needless to say, Cranmer and Latimer refused to accept them. The King gave his assent on the 28th June 1539 and three days later Latimer resigned the bishopric.

Henry was incensed and ordered Latimer to be put in custody in London but for political and personal reasons Henry allowed Cranmer to remain as Archbishop of Canterbury. Latimer was kept in seclusion and forbidden to preach for eight years. In Henry’s last year, Latimer found himself in the Tower of London.