

John Hooper - Bishop of Gloucester & Protestant Martyr

By Sylvia Lacoski

It has been truly said that history is an antidote to popery. The decline of the Church began when Constantine made Christianity the religion of the State and when a corrupt Papacy was the spokesman for the Gospel. In pre-Reformation times in England the prevailing feature of religion was gross ignorance. The people had no Bible to guide them, and the prayers of the Church were in Latin.

When Hooper was first appointed Bishop of Gloucester in 1551, out of 331 clergy of his diocese - 168 were unable to repeat the Ten Commandments; 3 could not tell where in Scripture they were to be found; 40 could not tell where the Lord's Prayer was written; and 31 of the 40 were ignorant who was the author of the Lord's Prayer!

"He is a Christian man, that leaveth the word of man and keepeth the Word of God" - Early Writings of John Hooper - Parker Society

John Hooper was born in Somerset in 1495. Little is known of his early life, but he entered Merton College, Oxford, under the tuition of his uncle William who was a Fellow of the College. Having taken his degree as Bachelor of Arts in 1518 he commenced life by retiring from it as a monk in the Cistercian monastery. However, wearied with monastic life with its wretched superstitions he returned to Oxford, where some of the writings of the Swiss Reformers fell into his hands, and in a letter to Bullinger, who later became one of his dearest friends, he recounts his conversion, through the study of Bullinger's commentaries on the Epistles of Paul where he says "I became rightly acquainted with the Lord"

IN 1539, in the reign of Henry VIII, the statute of the Six Articles was put in operation, the semi-popish statute, better known as the "Bloody Statute" - which filled the jails and sent fresh victims to Smithfield and was a serious discouragement to the Protestant Party (Latimer - Rev R Denus.)

Hooper was compelled to leave Oxford on account of his opinions and his Reformed faith, and entered into the service of Sir Thomas Arundel, as steward and chaplain. Sir Thomas had a high esteem for Hooper, but did not like his opinions. He sent him on business to Bishop Gardiner, with a letter requesting the Bishop to "Do his chaplain some good", who failing to shake Hooper of his opinions, sent him back to Sir Thomas commending his learning and ability, but bearing a secret grudge against Hooper which was not forgotten.

Fearing his life was in danger, he escaped to the Continent where he lived for some years among many of the Reformed faith at Basle and Zurich, who

regarded him with affection, and he married Anna de Tzerclas, a Burgundian lady, to whom he was truly attached.

On the accession of the young Edward VI to the Throne, Hooper with many other exiles returned to England, determined to forward the Lord's work. He was appointed Chaplain to the Protector, the Duke of Somerset. He preached twice every Sunday which drew crowds to hear him, and the church so filled that many could not reach further than the doors. After preaching a course of sermons before the King, he was nominated as Bishop of Gloucester, his consecration being delayed owing to his objection to the vestments worn and for the oath required. If Hooper's views had been allowed to prevail, said J.C Ryle, one half of the Ritualistic controversy of our day would never have existed at all!

He was consecrated as Bishop of Gloucester on 8th March 1551, and it was said of him "NO father in his household, no gardener in his garden, no husbandman in his vineyard, was more or better occupied than he in his diocese among his flock, teaching and preaching to the people and attending the public duties of his calling, neither failing to bring up his own children in learning and good manners,"

The diocese of Worcester was afterwards united with that of Gloucester, and says Foxe, "I was twice in his house in Worcester, where in the common hall, I saw a table spread with a good store of mean, and set full of beggars and poor folk" His wife, concerned for her husband's health, wrote to Bullinger, asking if he might persuade him to be more moderate in his labours.

But his useful labours in the Lord's work came to a halt when Queen Mary (Bloody Mary) came to the Throne in 1553 who set out to reverse the changes made during the reigns of Henry VIII and Edward VI. "The married priests were driven from their churches, the images replaced and the Mass restored, London retained much of its Protestant sympathy and their sullen discontent compelled Bonner to withdraw the inquisitorial articles by which he hoped to purge his diocese of heresy". (J.R Green - short History of English People).

But the threatening storm broke and Hooper was one of the first to answer for his beliefs before the Council and was sent as a prisoner to the Fleet prison on 1st September 1553 where he remained for more than seventeen months. The Fleet was a debtors prison, near the river Fleet in London, dating back to the 12th century. A dreadful place, having on one side the common sink and filth of the house, and on the other the town ditch. Hooper gives a touching account of his sufferings with nothing for his bed but a little pad of straw with a tick and few feathers and he writes "I have been sick and the doors, bars and chains, being closed and made fast upon me."

He was three times examined before such judges as Bishops Gardiner and Bonner and finally condemned for denying the Romish doctrine of transubstantiation in the Mass (which was only proclaimed in 1215 by Pope Innocent III) and for maintaining the lawfulness of the marriage of the clergy

and was railed at by his judges, one of them calling him a “beast” for refusing to give up his lawful wife.

The end came at last. Hurried along to Newgate prison, the sergeants being sent before him to put out the costermongers’ candles that he might pass along in darkness for fear of the tumult of the people. He was degraded in the Chapel of Newgate by Bishop Bonner, and handed over to the secular powers for his execution at Gloucester. In the morning in the company of six of the Queen’s guard he started out on horseback, and on his arrival a crowd of people came to meet him with tears and blessing.

He was lodged at one Ingram’s house, where the day between his arrival and his execution was spent in prayer, and speaking with some who come to see him, some noblemen of the country and a blind boy, Thomas Drowry, who was in prison for denying transubstantiation. “Ah poor boy, God has taken thy outward sight and given another sight more precious – the eye of knowledge and faith,” said Hooper.

On market-day, 9th February 1555 at about eight o’clock, he was led to the place of his execution near the great elm tree in the Cathedral close, over against the college of priests where he used to preach, leaning on a staff being lame with sciatica, from his time in his cold dark prison. A box was brought with a pardon from the Queen. “Away with it if you love my soul” said Hooper. The place was crowded with spectators; even boughs of the tree were filled.

The agonies he suffered were excruciating, the faggots being green. Three times the fire was lit, “For God’s love, good people, let me have more fire”. For three quarters of an hour he endured the flames – “enduring the fire with the meekness of a lamb, dying as quietly as a child in his bed”, writes Foxe.

About fifteen months later the blind boy, Thomas Drowry, was burned, 5th May 1556 at Gloucester. Who can look upon these things and forget what Popery was and is?

“Every death at the stake won hundreds to the cause of its victims. You have lost the hearts of twenty thousand that were rank Papists within these past twelve months”, wrote one to Bishop Bonner (History of the English People – J R Green M.A) and Henry Hallam in the Constitutional History of England writes,

“A sort of instinctive reasoning told the people that the truth of a religion begins to be very suspicious when it stands in need of prison and scaffolds to eke out its evidences.

Many are said to become Protestants under Mary and the strongest proof may be drawn from the acquiescence of the great body of the Kingdom in the re-establishment of Protestantism by Elizabeth.....”

John Hooper was, says Fuller in his Worthies of England, "A great scholar and linguist who had double dignity and treble diligence, painfully preaching God's Word, piously living as he preached, patiently dying as he lived."

An Account of the Severe Treatment of Bishop Hooper

During Nearly 18 Months Confinement in the Fleet Written by Himself

An account of the severe treatment of Bishop Hooper during nearly 18 months confinement in the fleet written by himself: The 1st September 1553 I was committed unto the Fleet, from Richmond, to have the liberty of the prison; and within six days after, I paid five pounds sterling to the warden for fees, for my liberty; who, immediately upon payment thereof, complained unto the Bishop of Winchester, upon which I was committed to close prison one quarter of a year in the tower-chamber of the Fleet, and used extremely ill. Then, by the means of a good gentlewoman, I had liberty to come down to dinner and supper, not suffered to speak with any of my friends, but as soon as dinner and supper was done, to repair to my chamber again. Notwithstanding, whilst I came down thus to dinner and supper, the warden and his wife picked quarrels with me, and complained untruly of me to their great friend, the Bishop of Winchester.

After one quarter of a year, Babington, the warden, and his wife fell out with me, respecting the wicked mass; and thereupon the warden resorted to the Bishop of Winchester, and obtained to put me in the wards, where I have continued a long time, having rotten covering, with a tick and a few feathers therein, the chamber bedding to lie on. On one side of the prison is the sink and filth of the house, and on the other the town ditch, so that the stench of the house hath infected me with sundry diseases.

During which time I have been sick, and the doors, bars, hasps, and chains being all closed upon me, I have mourned, called and cried for help; but the warden, when he hath known me many times ready to die, and when the poor men of the wards have called to help me, hath commanded the doors to be kept fast, and charged that none of his men should come at me, saying, "Let him alone; it were a good riddance of him." I paid always like a baron to the said warden, as well in fees for my board, which was twenty shillings a week, besides my man's table, until I was wrongfully deprived of my bishoprics, and since that time I have paid him as the best gentleman doth in his house; yet hath he used me worse, and more vilely, than the veriest slave that ever came to the common side of the prison.

The warden hath also imprisoned my man, William Downton, and stripped him out of his clothes to search for letters, and could find none, but a little remembrance of good people's names who had given me their alms to relieve me in prison; and to undo them also, the warden delivered the same bill unto the said Stephen Gardiner.

I have suffered imprisonment almost eighteen months; my goods, livings, friends, and comfort taken from me; the queen owing me, by just account, fourscore pounds or more. She hath put me in prison, and giveth nothing to keep me, neither is there suffered any one to come at me, whereby I might have relief. I am with a wicked man and woman, so that I see no remedy, saving God's help, but I shall be cast away in prison before I come to judgment. But I commit my just cause to God, whose will be done, whether it be by life or death. — *From The Reformer - May/June 2004*
