

Bishop John Hooper



(1495-1555)

John Hooper, the second bishop of Gloucester, set an example in honour as a man, and a priest. Unaffected by fear and secular power, he died a 'heretic' outside a Church in Gloucester.

Born in Somerset in 1495 John Hooper, the son of well-to-do parents, studied at Merton College, Oxford in 1515, and was tutored there by his uncle, also John Hooper. He gained his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1518. On completion of his education at Oxford, he is believed to have become a monk at the Cistercian monastery at Cleeve, and later a friar at Blackfriars in Gloucester, but eventually returned to Oxford where he became enthused with Lutheranism through books bought from Germany. His enthusiasm for Protestantism led Hooper into a wandering lifestyle that saw him travelling on the continent, residing in several English jails, and disputing with the papists through the reigns of Henry VIII, Edward VI, until his death in the reign of 'Bloody Mary' Tudor.

He was probably one of the busiest clerics of his day and also one of the most stubborn in the defence of his beliefs, even unto burning at the stake and martyrdom.

In 1539 the Six Articles were introduced, fundamentally reaffirming the Catholicism of the King. They were a useful means of testing the orthodoxy or otherwise of men and women suspected of following Wickliffe and Luther in their heresies. Hooper left Oxford and for a while was chaplain to Sir Thomas Arundel, a catholic. They soon parted company and he went to France. Returning to Somerset he stayed with a gentleman by the name of Seintlow, but pursued by the papists he again fled. This time he disguised himself as a sailor, hired a boat and sailed to Ireland, then went to Holland and Switzerland. In Zurich he was warmly received by Henry Bullinger who had taken over the chair at the university from Zwingli (d 1531). Although his name is not widely recognised, Zwingli's legacy lives on in the basic confessions of the Reformed Churches of today. Hooper's ability in Greek and Hebrew was greatly appreciated in Zurich. Hooper settled there for two or three years following his marriage to Anne de Tserclas of Antwerp in 1546. They had two children, Rachel and Daniel.

The accession of Edward VI brought an end to the tyranny of the Six Articles, and Hooper returned to England. He began to preach daily in London, and Foxe says of him, "In his doctrine he was earnest, in tongue eloquent, in the Scriptures perfect, in pains indefatigable".

He began preaching in London on reformed doctrines, including pluralities. Although reputed to have a sweetness of temper, Hooper also had a stubborn disapproval of certain disciplinary issues (concerning dress) as a result of his stay in Switzerland. In this he fell out with Cranmer, and Ridley, and eventually the King.

Meanwhile he was appointed chaplain to the Duke of Somerset, the Regent and Protector of Edward VI, who was also Hooper's protector for a while. In 1549 Hooper was one of the accusers of Bishop Bonner of London, for which he would suffer retribution in Queen Mary's reign.

In 1550 he preached before the king and was then made Bishop of Gloucester, which brought to a head the differences concerning dress. Hooper stubbornly refused to wear a rochet (a white garment like a surplice, with tight sleeves, worn under the chymer - a black satin robe worn by bishops). The Archbishop of Canterbury Cranmer refused to give ground, even though Hooper had the support of the Earl of Warwick and the King. Hooper then overstepped the mark by publishing a confession of faith that criticised the Privy Council. For this he was thrown into the Fleet prison. After eight months Hooper was proceeded against and called to explain his objections to conformity. An objectionable line in an oath of allegiance was struck out by the king himself, and a compromise was achieved about wearing the approved dress on certain public occasions. Accepting the compromise, Hooper was then consecrated in his appointment as Bishop of Gloucester, 8 March 1551.



Ulrich Zwingli

Hooper discharged his duties as a bishop in an exemplary manner. Generous to a fault, with a heart for the poor (a number of whom were fed daily in turns at the Bishop's palace), and taking a pastoral interest in clergy of his diocese, he worked very hard to instruct his charges in the biblical doctrines of the Reformation. None of this would count in his favour when Edward died, and Mary ascended the throne.

On arrival at Gloucester he made a thorough visitation of his see and examined the clergy in their knowledge of the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed and the Lord's Prayer. Of 311 clergy examined, 171 could not repeat the Ten Commandments, 10 were unable to recite the Lord's Prayer and 27 did not know its author. The minister of Tewkesbury parish church was found to be "a man of remarkable learning" but the vicar of Frampton-on-Severn was "entirely ignorant". In order to correct this poor state of affairs the bishop drew up a list of fifty articles to be observed by all the incumbents. The severe disciplinary regime he imposed at Gloucester led to him being called a 'tyrant' and a 'beast' by the clergy.

The benefices of Gloucester See were relatively poor and in May 1552, despite his stand on pluralities, Hooper accepted the Bishopric of Worcester in commendam. Inevitably this raised the ire of the papists, which did not prevent Hooper from diligently visiting and preaching in both Sees. Shortly after the two sees were united in one, of Worcester, to which he was formally translated.

On the death of Edward VI in 1553, Mary Tudor (r 1553 - 1558) succeeded to the throne and the Bishop of Gloucester was one of the first to be summoned to London to give account of himself, to explain his accusations against Bonner and for taking the see of Worcester that had been that of Bishop Heath (imprisoned under Edward VI). Hooper was in no doubt of the danger he was in, but he refused to flee and declared somewhat prophetically that he "would continue to live and die with my sheep."

He was imprisoned in the Fleet on 1st September 1553. He would remain there until 22nd January 1555, when his trial proper commenced. In the meantime he was expected to pay exorbitantly for his board and keep, and yet was deprived of all the privileges for which he had paid. His conditions were terrible, but he bore the injustice with great patience.

He was one of seven bishops to fall foul of the bigoted queen who never bore a child and herself died prematurely in 1558. Others imprisoned at this time included Cranmer, Ridley, Latimer, Ferrars, and Coverdale. The usual panoply of declamations, public condemnations and demands to recant followed. Hooper and the other reformers stood firm, while he corresponded with Bullinger and sent his wife and family abroad for their safety. During her reign Mary had more than 300 persons burned at the stake for heresy.

The hatred of Bonner, Heath and Gardiner was soon revealed in the proceedings against all the clerics held, and they were variously disposed of - Cranmer, Latimer and Ridley to Oxford. Hooper was a shuttlecock for a while with many appearances and re appearances before the prelates demanding he recant, before they decided to degrade him from his bishopric.

He had been deprived of his bishoprics in May 1554. The trial of January 1555 took place over several days, and Hooper was accused of many things, including denying the Pope's supremacy, believing evil and corrupt doctrine, and insulting the Queen's majesty. He was found guilty of refusing to put away his wife, and of denying the corporeal presence in the Mass. The conduct of the trial was shameful, with the Bishops and others shouting insults at Hooper to drown out his answers.

There followed a change of scenery as he was thrown into the Newgate prison for six days where Bonner was a frequent visitor. During this time they declared that Hooper had recanted, which he vehemently denied, and he managed to write to friends to deny the rumour, knowing that weaker brethren would be led to fall away if they thought it was true. Old friends came to try to convince him to recant and to save his life, but none could move him. Finally the Bishop of London declared him degraded and "*an obstinate and incorrigible heretic*" the sentence of burning at the stake to be carried out in Gloucester.

This was a tactical error in so far as the people of Gloucester turned out in force to see their minister brought under guard to the city. Arriving on the 7th February, as a mark of local respect, he was not thrown into the local jail, but lodged in the private house of Mr Robert Ingram. The following day, at about nine in morning of 9 February he was brought from his lodgings to the stake where a crowd of some seven thousand people had gathered.

A rather 'over the top' attempt to get him to recant publicly followed. While kneeling in prayer a stool was placed before him upon which was laid the Queen's pardon if he recanted. He twice called "If you love my soul, away with it" before returning to his devotions.

Having done, he prepared by undressing to his doublet and hose, but the sheriff insisted he remove them, so he tucked his shirt between his legs where a bladder of gunpowder was fixed, and more gunpowder under each arm, to aid his demise. He was chained to the stake and an iron hoop circled his waist, but he refused to allow them to place hoops round his neck and legs. The fire was, however, poorly laid with green faggots and the wind blew the flames away from

him, such that it took three quarters of an hour to work its deadly deed. Three times the fire had to be re kindled.

It is prophetic that when John Hooper was consecrated second Bishop of Gloucester he had chosen for his coat of arms the lamb in the burning bush.

John Hooper was singled out as the first bishop to suffer because he was, through Bullinger's influence, more extreme in his reformation zeal than some of his contemporaries. He was arrested on false charges, there being no actual law against his marriage, and he was held only until the law for the burning of heretics could be re-enacted, which was done in December 1554.

His martyrdom serves as an illustration of the ways in which the enemies of Truth need to twist and corrupt even the laws of men to give them a veneer of legitimacy. The choice of Hooper as the first bishop-martyr of the Reformation shows how seriously a Reformation doctrine is a challenge to error and prejudice. May he be remembered for what he was, a careful and conscientious preacher of the Gospel, who loved the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity and truth.



With warm thanks to:

http://www.thereformation.info/john_hooper.htm

Acknowledgement to:

<http://protestant-truth.org/magazine/article9.html>

Portrait by Henry Bryan Hall, 1839

John Hooper would be a role model to anyone following the Truth, regardless of time, creed, or denomination.

Following in the footsteps of John Hus of Bohemia, people like Ulrich Zwingli and John Hooper became "Protestants", because they had the spirit to stand up to the hypocrisy of the mainstream Church after the suppression of the Cathars. Today, the Protestant Church is a well-established arm of the mainstream. At various stages of the history were people like Hus, Zwingli, and Hooper labelled differently.

The label is not important, the spirit is.

