

JOHN BENT

The Devizes Martyr

David N. Samuel

of Iohn Bent, Martyr.

AT the writing hereof, came to our handes a certeyne notice of one Iohn Bent, who about this present tyme or not long before, beyng a Taylor and dwelling in a Village called Archevaunt, was burnt

*Ioh. Bent,
Martyr.*



*Ioh. Bent,
burnt as
Deuise.*

in the towne of the Deuises within the countie of Wilkeshyre, for denyng of the Sacrament of the Altare, as they terme it.

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The Devizes Martyr:

OUR DEBT TO THE
REFORMATION

David N. Samuel

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Maryport Street Baptist Chapel, Devizes,
on July 6th., 2013*

Frontispiece:

John Bent, Martyr

from

John Foxe, *Actes and Monumentes* (1570), page 1172

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JOHN BENT:

Our Debt to the Reformation

Today, I am going to speak about the death of a Protestant martyr who was put to death here in Devizes, in the Market Place in 1532, nearly five hundred years ago. It might be helpful by way of introduction to remind ourselves what life was like in those days. All the things we take for granted today, and which make life comfortable, safe, and agreeable, would have been absent then. For example, there would have been no street lighting, so that it would have been daunting and dangerous to venture out after dark. There would have been no police force to keep order and prevent crime. The stench of the streets would at times of high summer been overpowering. Disease and infection were little understood, and the population would have been subject to all kinds of fevers and ailments. Those who were poor and indigent would have had no means of support but to beg in the streets. In the words of Thomas Hobbes, life would have been “nasty, brutish and short” for the great majority.

RELIGION OF FEAR

But to add to this and to compound the woes of all, there would have been no relief or comfort to be found in religion, for the Christian faith, as it purported to be, was in the hands of the pope and the priesthood, who had turned it into a religion of fear, and also into a powerful means of extorting wealth from the people for the maintenance and luxury of the papacy and the priesthood. Merit and deliverance from the pains of purgatory (“purgatory pick-purse” as it was called) might be bought for a sum of money from the pope’s agents, and, indeed, came to such a head with the sale of indulgences

by the monk Tetzel in Germany that it became the immediate cause of the Reformation, when Luther published his Ninety-Five Theses and challenged the church to debate the matter.

Daily survival was a constant struggle, and there was no relief from grinding poverty for the mass of the people. There was no education except for the wealthy, who could employ private tutors for their children. The ordinary man was illiterate and a stranger to culture of any kind. His mind was darkened by ignorance and superstition, which accounts for the hold that the medieval church had upon him. Food was scarce and famine was common. There were no doubt simple pleasures and pastimes, particularly in spring and summer, when relief came after the long dark winter and there was some respite from cold and misery. But life must have been very harsh, and joys and pleasures fleeting. Life itself was very short for the majority, and religion offered little relief, for the prevailing teaching was a legalistic framework of penance to pay for those sins, which if not answered for in this life, had to be paid for in purgatory, in the world to come. The only difference between hell and purgatory was that the pains of purgatory were of temporal duration, whereas those of hell were eternal.

D'Aubigné says, "Ecclesiastical penance was confounded with Christian repentance, without which there could be neither justification nor sanctification. Instead of looking to Christ for pardon through faith alone, it was sought principally in the Church through penitential works. Great importance was attached to external works of repentance, to tears, fasting and mortification of the flesh; and the inward regeneration of the heart which alone constitutes real conversion was forgotten." No wonder the hawkers of the pope's indulgences did a fine trade with the jingle, "As soon as the coin in the box rings, the soul from purgatory springs." The brevity of life and the futility of it are summed up very well in some lines by the poet Thomas Nashe who lived at about that time:

Adieu, farewell earth's blisse,
This world uncertaine is.

Fond are life's lustfull joyes,
Death proves them all but toyes,
None from his darts can flye,
I am sick, I must dye.
Lord, have mercy on us!

PREVALENCE OF SUPERSTITION

Witchcraft, superstition and magic played a very real part in medieval life. This is not surprising since even the teaching of the Church of Rome participated in similar beliefs and practices. There is very little distinction between the belief in the transubstantiation of the elements of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, and magic. The priest had the 'magic hands', and the magic spell to pronounce, to effect the change; and the prevailing superstitious imagination of the people would supply the rest. In the popular mind, the association between witchcraft and what passed for religion in the medieval church was evidently close, and ignorance of the Bible and its teaching simply affirmed this.

So, overall, the Middle Ages was a dark, oppressive period dominated by a religion that was instinct with superstition, the religion of the Roman Catholic Church. The teaching of the mass and transubstantiation epitomised this, and that is why the battle for religious and spiritual freedom centred in the nature and teaching of the Lord's Supper. That was why the Church of Rome was determined, if possible, to stamp out any other view than its own as heretical, and to destroy those who challenged it with a most frightful and cruel death by burning at the stake. It is a remarkable testimony to the grace and power of God that ordinary men and women were given the courage and strength to face and endure this ordeal, and to testify to the truth by their suffering and death. It was 'Latimer's Candle'. Hugh Latimer, you will recall, who was bishop of Worcester, said to his companion, Bishop Nicholas Ridley, when they were tied to the stake at Oxford to be burned, "Be of good

comfort, master Ridley, and play the man. We shall this day light such a candle, by God's grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out."¹ And so also, in a sense, did all the other men and women who nobly suffered in the same manner at the hands of the Church of Rome, including our martyr in Devizes, John Bent, whose faithful witness we remember today.

The word 'martyr' means 'witness'; he was a witness to a movement of the Spirit of God in the church in the sixteenth century, which began in Germany but had repercussions for the whole of Europe, and led to significant changes in the church and the nation here in England. The Reformation began with Martin Luther, a monk in the monastery at Erfurt in Germany. In 1517 he nailed a document containing ninety-five theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg, where he was the parish priest. He did not imagine for a moment that he was starting a revolution in the church, and in the state, but that was the result of his action.

INDULGENCES

His theses were intended for debate. He was a learned man, an academic, and the usual way of dealing with contentious issues was to state your case for public debate, and engage with others in order to resolve the matter. Luther sought to do that. He took this step because of the activities of a papal emissary, who had come into his parish where he was the priest, hawking pardons from the pope called 'indulgences', which could be bought for a sum of money which then went into the papal coffers.

Luther took his duties as a parish priest seriously. He was concerned for the spiritual health of his flock. He believed that indulgences were wrong and contrary to the teaching of Scripture, and he set out in his theses his opposition to them. He hoped to debate the matter publicly. However, the repercussions of his action went far beyond

¹ John Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, VII, 550

anything he had imagined. When the grass is dry it takes only a small spark to set the fields ablaze. Luther's action had repercussions far beyond his small parish and the University of Erfurt. His challenge shook the papacy and the whole received system of medieval religion to its foundations, and nothing was the same again in Europe.

LUTHER'S CONVERSION

How was this possible? It all began with Luther's own spiritual experience and pilgrimage. He took very seriously the teaching of the Church. He sought as a monk meticulously to follow it, but he found no relief for his troubled conscience by so doing. Indeed, it only made his problems greater. He followed his monastic rule of life, he made confession to a priest of his sins regularly, but found no peace of mind or heart. However, deliverance was at hand for Luther, but not through the customary channels of the Church.

Part of his duties was to teach at the University of Erfurt, and it was while he was engaged in reading and teaching the Epistle of Paul to the Romans, that the truth that was to liberate him spiritually came home to him with power. He tells us in his own words how this came about. He said, "However irreproachably I lived as a monk, I felt myself in the presence of God to be a sinner with a most unquiet conscience, nor could I trust that I had pleased him with any satisfaction." He began to despair of ever being right with God. Then the great change came about in his life in this way.

He came to see, as he meditated upon the Epistle to the Romans, that 'the justice' or 'righteousness of God' referred to there is not the righteousness of God that condemns the sinner, but the righteousness that saves and justifies those who believe in Jesus Christ; for then that perfect righteousness is imputed or counted to them, and by it they stand justified before God. "The just shall live by faith." He saw then for the first time that the righteousness of God in Christ is that which saves us, not that which condemns us. He goes on, "This straightway made me feel as though reborn, and as though I had

entered through an open gate into paradise itself. From then on the whole face of Scripture appeared different.” He was born again. This was the spark that ignited the fire of the Reformation, which spread rapidly throughout Europe and reached this country. It set men free from the claims and follies of a superstitious religious observance which was universal at the time.

MEDIEVAL RELIGION

The whole system of medieval religion, on the other hand, was fashioned by Thomism, that is, the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas. It was not Scriptural, not based upon the Bible, but upon Aristotle, and this applied particularly to the mass, which was the central service and focus of the Church of the Middle Ages. The Church of Rome taught that every time the mass was celebrated the priest worked a miracle upon the bread and wine. Bread and wine, as is the case with all material things according to this philosophy, is made up of substance and accidents. The accidents are what we would today call the sense data. Bread, for example, has the accidents of whiteness, softness, sweetness to the taste, and so on. But the substance of bread cannot be detected by the senses. Nevertheless, the substance is that which underlies all the accidents or qualities of the bread and by which they cohere or hold together.

TRANSUBSTANTIATION

The dogma of transubstantiation asserted that when the priest pronounced the words of consecration at the celebration of the mass, the accidents remained the same but the substance of the bread became the actual substance of the body of Christ; and so also with the wine, the substance of which became the actual substance of the blood of Christ. They became so not to the senses, but to faith. This, it was asserted, was a miracle, and a miracle which could only be performed by the priest. He had power to bring Christ down from heaven upon the altar. That is still the teaching of the Church of

Rome today.

This was a teaching that bred superstition. The elements of the communion service, the bread and the wine, were regarded as the actual body and blood of Christ, and were worshipped. They were locked away and brought out on special occasions to be carried about in processions, and displayed to a credulous and superstitious people, who knew no better. Article 28 of the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion of the Reformed Church of England speaks explicitly against such superstitious practices. “The Body of Christ is given, taken, and eaten, in the Supper [i.e. the Holy Communion], only after an heavenly and spiritual manner. And the mean whereby the Body of Christ is received and eaten in the Supper is Faith.”

We do not receive the body of Christ or the blood of Christ with our mouths; we receive Christ by faith in our hearts, believing that he has died for us, and shed his blood to save us from our sins. The same article goes on to declare that, “the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper was not by Christ’s ordinance reserved, carried about, lifted up, or worshipped.” All these practices were universal in the church prior to the Reformation. They overthrew the nature of the sacrament and gave rise to many superstitions, so that the religion of the medieval church was as far removed from true Christianity and the teaching of the Bible as it was possible to be.

REFORMATION OF THE CHURCH

The Reformation overthrew and destroyed this whole edifice of lies and deceit, which had given the corrupt medieval church its power and hold over a simple, credulous people. It attacked and destroyed the basis on which it rested. The Scriptural position had been undermined and subverted by making it conform to Aristotelian philosophy. The Reformers went back to the Bible. The teaching of Scripture, they affirmed, is to be judged and understood on its own terms. Its language is figurative. When Jesus said, “I am the vine,” he did not mean that he was literally a vine, and the disciples branches;

nor when he said, “I am the door of the sheepfold,” did he mean that he was, in fact, a door, and that his disciples were literally sheep. This was figurative language. The Bible must be interpreted by its own canons, not those of an alien, heathen philosophy. The Bible is replete with metaphor, with figurative language and parable.

When Jesus took the bread at the Last Supper and blessed it (that is, gave thanks for it), and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, “This is my body,” it would not have crossed their minds that this bread that he gave them was literally his body. He addressed them frequently, and those whom he taught, in figurative, parabolic language. The word parable is itself expressive of this. It means something which is placed alongside something else for the purpose of comparison or explanation. The figurative nature and meaning of the language used by our Lord in the Last Supper is surely self-evident to anyone who is familiar with the language of the Bible. The trouble with medieval thought and teaching was that the words of the Bible had been detached from their own milieu and culture and recast, as I have said, in the thought of Aristotelian philosophy and the teaching of Thomas Aquinas. The consequence was a profound misunderstanding and distortion of Scriptural thought and teaching, which still persists in the Church of Rome to the present day.

RETURN TO THE BIBLE

It is not difficult to see how the return to the simple, Biblical understanding of the Lord’s Supper, which the Reformers brought about, struck at, and overthrew, the Roman Catholic system at a stroke. The power and position of the priesthood rested upon their alleged power to make the bread and wine the actual body and blood of Christ. The whole papal system rested upon an ignorant and credulous laity who acquiesced in this magical view of religion. The teaching of the Reformers, however, was opening their minds, and giving them a new understanding of Christian teaching, one which delivered them from bondage and submission to the priesthood, who claimed extraordinary power and magic hands.

The main thing which effected this change was the translation of the Bible into English. For the first time the text of Scripture was available in the language of the people. They heard and read what the Bible said, and it did not tie up with the dogma and tradition of the Church of Rome. “We have not followed cunningly devised fables, when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ,” wrote Peter (2 Peter 1: 16). But that was precisely what the Church of Rome had been doing for centuries, and chief amongst them was the fable that the bread and wine of the Holy Communion Service, at the command of the priest, became the actual body and blood of Christ. I use the word ‘command’, because that is how the Church of Rome itself conceived it. The priest had power to command God to come down and be present in the bread and wine on the altar, so that they became literally the body and blood of Christ.

ERRORS OF ROME

Bishop Joseph Hall, writing of this in his book *No Peace with Rome*, declares that this notion of transubstantiation rides upon the back of that other fable of the multi-presence of Christ’s body. I do not know, he says, which

I should prefer for madness and sophistical cozenage. That the same body of Christ should be in a thousand places at once ..., while yet it is in the mean time entire in heaven; that the whole body of Christ should lie hid in a little thin wafer ...; it doth not only exceed reason, but faith. Neither do they say now, as of old, *Behold, here is Christ, or there, ...* but, which is much worse, “Behold, Christ is both here and there.”

.....

For us, we do easily grant, that many things are done which we cannot understand; but these things we grant not, because we understand they cannot be done.²

² Joseph Hall, *No Peace with Rome* (Harrison Trust; 1998), 47 and 49

The doctrine of transubstantiation, which means literally the change of the substance of the bread and the wine into the actual body and blood of Christ, subverts the truth of the Christian faith, because it overthrows the true nature of Christ's humanity. That was why it was so important that it should be confronted and exposed. The Protestant martyrs were witnesses to this, they testified to the truth with their lives. The fires in which they died cast a spiritual light upon the nation. The fallacies and errors of Rome were exposed and the spiritual darkness that lay upon the nation dispelled. The teaching of transubstantiation was revealed for what it is – a subversion of the truth of Christ's incarnation. To quote Bishop Hall once more:

Is it possible ... that any reasonable man can believe that Christ carried his own body in one of his hands? [that he gave it] to be eaten by those holy guests of his which saw him present with them, ... both while they were eating him, and when they had eaten the sacred morsel? that the self-same Son of man should at once both devour his whole self, and yet should sit whole and entire at the table with them? How impious is this obstinacy of foolish men, that they will overturn ... the order of things, the humanity of their Saviour³

The teaching of the Church of Rome does violence to the humanity of Christ and cannot be reconciled with Scripture or with reason. It is often said that we have in common with the Church of Rome the Catholic Creeds (the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed), but this shows that Rome, in fact, does not hold to the Creeds and to the true doctrine of the Incarnation. Rome's teaching is really docetic, that is, that Christ had only the appearance of a body, not a real one. Docetism was one of the heresies of the early church which denied the true humanity of Christ because it viewed matter as inherently evil.

³ Joseph Hall, *op.cit.*, 45-46

MASS SACRIFICE

But there is more. The daily offering of the mass as a sacrifice for sins in the Church of Rome impeaches the priestly office of Christ. In the Lord's Supper there is a remembrance of the propitiatory sacrifice of Christ once made upon the cross, but no further sacrifice is made, nor is necessary. Does, then, the priest in performing the Roman Catholic mass offer the same sacrifice that Christ offered or another? If another then it is not propitiatory, that is, it does not take away sins. If the same, then it cannot be an unbloody sacrifice, as Rome maintains, for, as the Bible teaches, without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sins.

The Roman Catholic doctrine of the mass is full of errors and inconsistencies for it rests ultimately upon the erroneous doctrine of transubstantiation, the miraculous changing of the substance of the bread and wine into the actual body and blood of Christ. It was this doctrine which subverted Christianity in the Middle Ages, and still does today, wherever it is taught and practised. Against it the Protestant martyrs testified with their lives, which was the most powerful and telling witness, and without it the Protestant Reformation of the Church could not have been effected. We owe our freedom to worship God according to his holy Word the Bible, to the martyrs, the witnesses to the truth, who gave their lives, and sealed their testimony with their blood.

PROTESTANT MARTYRS

There were hundreds of martyrs who died in the fire in our island, to bear witness to the truth as it is in Jesus and as it is set forth in God's holy Word. They need to be remembered by us, even in this secular age, or I should say, particularly in this secular age, for if we neglect their faithful witness, then the church cannot expect to flourish. Indeed, we can trace its decline as an active force in society to the decline in the attention that we pay to the testimony of the martyrs of the Reformation of the Church in the sixteenth century in this

country. “The blood of the martyrs”, said Tertullian, one of the Fathers of the early church, “is the seed of the church.” A church which neglects the lives, and deaths, and the testimony of its martyrs, cannot expect to be blessed and to grow.

It is significant that before John Bent’s martyrdom here in Devizes, there had been another Devizes man who had suffered for his faith, and to whom I shall refer later. His name was William Prior, a native of the town, who in the reign of Henry VII fell under ecclesiastical censure for promulgating Lollardy. The Lollards were followers of John Wycliffe. John Wycliffe’s preaching and teaching anticipated the Protestant Reformation by some two hundred years. Wycliffe died in 1384. His disciples were itinerant preachers whom he sent out in pairs after the example of Christ himself, and whom Wycliffe named his ‘poor priests’. ‘Lollard’ was a nickname for them and their sympathisers. The origin of the name is not clear. In 1382 Wycliffe’s teachings were pronounced heretical by the then papist Archbishop of Canterbury before a convocation at London.⁴ This was an act of war against Lollardy on the part of the Church.

TEACHING OF LOLLARDS

The charges against Wycliffe and his followers were doctrinal, namely, first, that they taught that in the sacrament of the altar the substance of the bread and wine remain after consecration of the elements. This was a denial of the Church of Rome’s teaching that the substance of the bread and of the wine became the actual body and blood of Christ. The denial of this supposed miracle struck at the heart of the medieval church’s teaching, and its hold upon the superstitious imagination of the people. Secondly, the Wycliffites taught that if a man is properly repentant all outward confession to a priest is superfluous and useless to him. Thirdly, that it is lawful for any deacon or priest to preach the Word of God without the authority of the apostolic see (that is, the papacy) or a Catholic Bishop or some

⁴ John Foxe, *op.cit.*, III, 19-24

other authority. And that Friars are to get their living by the labour of their hands, not by mendicancy or begging.

Lollardy attracted a considerable following, particularly in the West of England, and evidently made an appearance here in Devizes. Among the things condemned were particularly the pretended miracle of the mass, which I have referred to, together with image worship, pilgrimages which are supposed to reduce the days spent in purgatory, auricular confession, that is, confession made secretly to a priest, exorcisms, and vows of celibacy.

THE MORNING STAR

Wycliffe was the morning star of the Reformation, which was to come in its fullness two hundred years later and be ushered in by Martin Luther in Germany with the doctrine of justification by grace alone, through faith alone. The Wycliffian awakening centred upon the challenge to the power of the priesthood, but it lacked the fullness of the spiritually liberating experience that was to come later with the teaching of justification by grace through faith alone. That established the believer's relationship with God not upon works or merits of his own, but solely upon the perfect righteousness of Christ, which is counted or imputed to those who believe in Him. This not only delivered believers from the false claims of priestly power, but also put the believer upon the solid ground of a right relationship with God through the mediation of Christ alone. However, the challenge of Wycliffe and his preachers to the power of popery and priesthood struck a blow that shattered the manacles that chained the laity to a priestly caste.

BURNING OF 'HERETICS'

There was in Wycliffe's time no statutory power to arrest and try, far less to punish with death, those who denied or opposed the teaching of the Church. But the change came about with Henry IV. The new king was dependent upon the clergy. When, therefore, Convocation

demanded something that would strike terror into the heart of Lollardy, the king agreed. Thus came about the Act *De heretico comburendo* (1401), the law to burn heretics, which continued on the Statute Book until the reign of Charles II.

The influence and teaching of Lollardy, however, continued as a leaven of Protestant thought right up to the Reformation. Tunstall, Bishop of London, wrote to Erasmus in 1523 of the new Lutheranism, that “it is no question of the same pernicious novelty, it is only that new arms are being added to the great band of Wycliffite heretics”.⁵

As early as the reign of Henry VII, which was the late fifteenth century, a native of Devizes, William Prior, whom I have already mentioned, fell under ecclesiastical censure for promulgating Lollardy. On being cited at Salisbury, the terrors of the cruel death accorded heretics induced him to sign a recantation of his principles, but he heartily repented of this step and resumed his former profession of Wycliffite opinions. As a consequence he was delivered to the flames in the city of Salisbury as an incorrigible heretic.⁶ So Devizes can boast one of the very early martyrs of Protestantism. The year was 1507.

VOICE OF CONSCIENCE

It is hard for people today fully to estimate the difficulty good men then had to think and judge for themselves, at a time when the universal voice of the church was against them. We have extant, in the records at Salisbury, the form of recantation to which Henry Shercot, another Wycliffite of Devizes, was subject before Bishop Audley in 1517. It was printed in the *Devizes Gazette* in 1841 and takes the following form: “I HS of the parish of St. John the Baptist

⁵ C.H.H. Wright & C. Neil, *The Protestant Dictionary* (1933), 384

⁶ From the Bishop of Salisbury’s Register. See: James Waylen, *Chronicles of The Devizes* (1839), 228-229; and *A History of Wiltshire* [Victoria County History], X (1975), 294

in Devizes in the diocese of Salisbury, being noted and defamed of heresy, and to you Reverend Father Edmund, Bishop of Salisbury, my judge and ordinary, being of heresy greatly and vehemently suspect.”

It may seem strange to us now, but the notion of the individual obeying his conscience was a novelty, and a quite alien understanding of things. The dominant voice of the Middle Ages was the voice of the Church, and it was the duty of the individual to yield implicit faith and obedience to the Church in all the things she taught. This was really not very surprising when we consider the circumstances. People generally were illiterate and uninformed. They had no standard or norm by which to judge the pronouncements of the pope or the clergy. The pope, they were told, was the final authority on all matters of faith, and when he spoke *ex cathedra* he spoke as God. The Church was infallible, incapable of error. There was no authority from which to appeal against that. That was why Martin Luther’s words at the Diet of Worms were so revolutionary. “My conscience”, he said, “is taken captive by the words of God [i.e. by the teaching of the Bible]. It is neither right nor safe to disobey conscience. Here I stand, I can do no other; so help me God.” Those revolutionary words challenged the *status quo* that had held sway for a thousand years. They broke the spell of popery and exposed its enormities; and they set men free throughout Europe to obey their consciences – consciences that were informed and taught by the Word of God. For conscience, as such, is not a reliable guide. Man’s nature is fallen, and that includes his conscience. But the conscience can be informed and enlightened by the revelation of truth in God’s Word, and when that is the case it is able to judge aright.

LIGHT OF GOD’S WORD

“The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light. But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in thee be

darkness, how great is that darkness!” (Matthew 6: 22-23). What our Lord is saying is that as the physical eye needs light in order to see properly, so the conscience needs spiritual and moral light to discern and judge aright. In man’s fallen state his mind and conscience are darkened and he cannot judge aright. But enlightened by grace and informed by the Word of God he can make sound judgments and discern the truth. The trouble in the Middle Ages, under the apostasy of the Bishop of Rome, was that men had become strangers to the pure Word of God and its place had been usurped by tradition and the teaching of the papacy. But with the dawning of the Reformation the light of Holy Scripture had broken in upon that spiritual night of darkness. We can understand why Luther put the matter as he did at the Diet of Worms.

LEST WE FORGET

It is very important to remember the martyrs of the Reformation. If we forget them, we are in great peril indeed; the peril of spiritual darkness returning, in which men call evil good, and good evil; and put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter. We are witnessing that taking place today. All the indicators are pointing to the fact that people cannot distinguish between light and darkness, between truth and error, between right and wrong. We need today a witnessing church. A witnessing church is one that owns the Reformation martyrs and is at one with them; that owns the Scriptures as the Word of God to our generation; which testifies to where the church today has gone wrong; and finally one which points men to Christ the only Saviour.

John Bent, or Dent as he was sometimes known, whom we particularly remember today, and who is the occasion and subject of this lecture, was one of the lesser known martyrs of the Reformation. He did not live in Devizes but at Urchfont, a village just a few miles outside the town. He was a tailor by trade, and we know very little of him beyond these few details. He was burned here in the Market

Place of Devizes in 1532, for denying the “sacrament of the altar”; for this denial of the sacrament of the altar, so-called, he was condemned to be burned to death and suffered that cruel and painful death here in Devizes.⁷

Let us remember this brave and faithful man. He had little of the knowledge and advantages that we enjoy. But he had one thing above all others, which is largely absent from people’s lives today, and that is a true and lively faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, for time and for eternity. He had a faith that triumphs over the world, over adversity and opposition; a faith that lays hold upon the truth of God; a God-given faith that reaches out beyond the contingent to the absolute. It lays hold upon the person of the Lord Jesus Christ “who is the same yesterday, and today, and for ever”. Let us be sure that we also live and walk by the same faith in these dark and uncertain times, so that we can say with the apostle, “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”

OUR PRESENT DANGER

We are living in times when these things of which we have been speaking are little thought of or considered. We have as a nation stepped back into a state of spiritual darkness and ignorance. That is a perilous position in which to be. The danger lies not simply in the absence of belief, but that in that condition people are open to any and every evil and wicked spirit that may come along to take over their minds and hearts. It is the parable of our Lord of the house swept and garnished that applies here. “When the unclean spirit is gone out of a man, he walketh through dry places, seeking rest, and findeth none. Then he saith, I will return into my house from whence I came out; and when he is come, he findeth it empty, swept, and garnished. Then goeth he, and taketh with himself seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter in and dwell there: and the last state of that man is worse than the first” (Matthew 12: 43-45).

⁷ John Foxe, *op.cit.*, IV, 706

The same principle holds true whether it be an individual or a society or a nation. An empty house, speaking metaphorically, is a target for thieves, squatters, and vandals. Our vacuous, agnostic, unbelieving society is in the greatest jeopardy, and it is time that as a people we awake to the danger we are in. May the testimony and witness of the Reformation martyrs remind us of this, and call us back to faith in the Word of God, and in the person of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. There can be no peace or security, no strength or power, apart from that. May we never forget those who laid down their lives to witness to the truth as it is in Jesus.

