

Hook Norton Baptist Church's beginnings: The story is set in 1664.

MINISTER:

We are now going to tell the story of how the Baptist Church here in Hook Norton began, some 360 years ago.

I want you all to imagine that the year is 1664. In just one year's time the Great Plague would break out, and the second war with Holland would start. And it would be 2 years before the Great Fire of London.

So imagine that I am the pastor in 1664; and my name is James Wilmot. The congregation of the faithful, those who follow the baptism of believers, have been meeting here in this village for 20 or more years.

The English Civil War has been over and the Commonwealth has come and gone. There was all that bitter hatred and division of the Civil war, often between members of the same families.

Now the monarchy has been restored! What was the fighting all about? Four years ago King Charles II was invited to return to England and be crowned. Was all that bloodshed for nothing?

It is a time of enormous change in religious belief. It's nearly 150 years since Martin Luther published his "Ninety Five Theses" in Germany. That publication started a series of bloody and bitter religious wars in Europe that lasted all of 131 years until 1648, just 16 years ago, as the Protestants broke away from the Catholic Church and all that 'Popery'.

The Puritans were at the heart of the Parliamentarians in the Civil War, but they were sidelined 4 years ago with the restoration of the King. Don't we still use the term "Puritanical" to describe their fanaticism! These are not times of religious tolerance. The Catholics are still feared as 'traitors' trying to bring down the country, and 3 years ago parliament started to legislate to make the 'Anglican' protestant faith the only legal faith.

They say that all officers of the crown have to take Anglican Communion. And the Book of Common Prayer has to be used for all our services! And no more than 4 people can gather together to worship God who aren't Anglicans!

Look what it says in The Great Commission that Jesus gave us. It is in Matthew 28, verses 18-20:

"And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing, yes baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and 10, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. "

The Law Officer knocks on the door and enters with some militia men.

LAW OFFICER:

Are you James Wilmot of Hook Norton? *pause.*
Yes or no? Are you James Wilmot?

MINISTER: I am

LAW OFFICER:

I arrest you, James Wilmot in the name of King Charles the Second, rightful Monarch of England, for contravention of the "Act of Uniformity" 1662, and the "Conventicle Act", 1664.

I have been informed by a reliable witness that you and those assembled here meet unlawfully to perform an illegal act of religious worship that does not use the Book of Common Prayer. Is that so?

MINISTER: Yes it is

LAW OFFICER:

The rightful government of this Country has passed laws and regulations that make an act of worship based on The English Book of Common Prayer the only acceptable and legal form of worship. Can you show me the Book of Common Prayer, and show me that you use it as the sole basis of your religious ceremonies?

MINISTER: I cannot.

LAW OFFICER:

That means that you are contravening the Conventicle Act. Under the terms of the Conventicle Act you are breaking the law of the land by carrying out an illegal act of religious worship that is not based on the Book of Common Prayer, and I have witnessed it myself. Nowhere can I see a single Book of Common Prayer.

James Wilmot, the penalty for breaking the law is arrest, and if and when you are found guilty you will be imprisoned at Oxford Castle or Witney Gaol.

The militia men arrest James Wilmot and begin to walk him out of the Church. Other members of the congregation object, and are arrested too. All are marched out of the Church.

SECOND MINISTER (Old James Wilmot):

Let's now move on some 10 years to 1673. We'll imagine now that we are hearing James Wilmot in the flesh in this Church, the one he helped to found. He is now 50 years old, and we'll let him tell you something about his eventful life: here he is.

My name is James Wilmot of HokeNorton in Oxfordshire, and I'd like to tell you something of my life. It has been rich life, rich in the Lord's blessings. Yes, a

lifetime where I've seen so many great changes, but such singular blessing: from the day I gave my all to the Lord in '43, when I was just 20. Yes, the Lord has blessed me.

We should start at the beginning I suppose. I was born in 1623. My father, Robert was a yeoman farmer of this village and a very practical man. I was brought up on the farm here on the North side of the village with my brothers and sisters, and the world passed us, and HokeNorton by until I was 18 when the Civil War broke out. Some of my cousins went to fight for the Parliamentarians against the Royalists.

In '42, Joe Hyron the village Constable made us take the "Protestation Vow". My parents and older brother made their marks, but he said I was too young. They had to swear that we would fight to defend England and the Protestant Faith against Popery and the Catholics. The Catholic Guy Fawkes had been put to death just 36 years before that.

The year after that the Parliamentary Army under the Earl of Essex camped in the village on their way to relieve Gloucester and I remember meeting some brave and enthusiastic young men who opened my eyes to the changes that they were going to make: to a better government by the people, to better religion unfettered by proscribed practices. Yes, I saw that the world is so, so much bigger than HokeNorton. We can change things, we can make a difference!

Then in '44, when I was 21, I met Abiezer Coppe. What a man, what a preacher! He was an Evangelist who came here with the Parliamentary Army under Purefoy. I walked over to Chippy to hear him with all the young men from the village. We persuaded him to come to Hooky, and he showed all of us, yes, he showed me, he that the Kingdom of God can come right into my heart if I were clean: and we can be clean if we repent and get baptised. So baptised I was, right here, in Hooky pond. There were 3 dozen of us baptised in those 2 days!

After that we used to meet in Mathew Wyton's house to encourage each other, pray and those of us who could would read aloud out of his bible. It changed my life: that was when I became James Wilmot, a man after God.

The year after that, in '45 the Prayer Book and all the Bishops were abolished, but we were supposed to use the Presbyterian prayer book. The Puritans seemed to think they had a monopoly on God. Parliament was telling us how we had to worship, but God himself was telling us that there was a much better way - by listening and talking to him in our own words. I wish parliament would stick to the things of parliament.

At the end of the Civil War in '50 and '51, with Cromwell as 'Protector' it became a lot easier to worship as Baptists and we had such a successful evangelism campaign we had to start building our own small meeting house.

We had such a large congregation by the middle of the 1650's that my brothers in Christ; Mathew Wyton and later Charles Archer joined me in oversight of our fellow believers, and we sent delegates to the new local Baptists Association meeting at Moreton-in-the-Marsh.

Then in ' 60 the monarchy was restored: King Charles the Second was put back onto the throne of England, just as if the Civil war had never happened! We were told that we now had to use the Book of Common Prayer - the very same one we had been banned from using 10 years before! We were torn between obeying Parliament or what we firmly believed our God was saying, and we chose God's way.

It came to a head in '64 when an arresting Officer came into our church while we were worshipping, and several of us were arrested and taken to Oxford Castle. We were put in prison. I was fined £20, but because I didn't have that kind of money, all of my household goods, everything I had was taken and put up for sale.

We had so much grace from God, and love and support from people in the village - indeed from the villages all around. No one would buy my household goods: even in Chippy! In the end a good friend of mine gave 20 shillings for them and I got them all back!

Several of us were arrested and gaoled 3 times in all for being Nonconformist, but as far as we were concerned, we are just believers in the true and loving God!

The Baptist church has flourished in spite of the laws of England, and we can now show a congregation that holds true and firm to the love and word of God.

I will leave you with the words of St Paul from Romans chapter 8 verses 38 & 39

"For I am certain that nothing can separate us from his love; neither death nor life, neither angels nor other heavenly rulers or powers, neither the present nor the future, neither the world above nor the world below - there is nothing in all creation that will ever be able to separate us from the love of God which is ours through Christ Jesus our Lord."

May God richly bless you all.