Girolamo Savonarola

1452 - 1498

- Italian Dominican friar and preacher active in Florence.
- Known for his prophecies of civic glory, destruction of secular art and culture.
- He called for Christian renewal.
- He denounced clerical corruption, despotic rule and the exploitation of the poor.

Savonarola prophesied the coming of a biblical flood and a new Cyrus (King Cyrus the Great of Persia 559 - 530 BC - recognised for his achievements in human rights, politics and military strategy) from the north who would reform the Church.

This seemed confirmed when Charles VIII of France invaded Italy and threatened Florence in about 1494. While Savonarola intervened with the king, the Florentines expelled the Medici family. Urged on by Savonarola a "popular" republic was established declaring that Florence would be the New Jerusalem and the world centre of Christianity. He instituted an extreme puritanical campaign, enlisting the help of Florentine youth.

In 1495 Savonarola was summoned to Rome as Florence had refused to join Pope Alexander VI's Holy League against the French. He refused and was banned by the Pope.

He, nevertheless, continued preaching highlighting the campaign for reform with processions, bonfires of the vanities and pious theatricals.

Pope Alexander excommunicated him and threatened to place the city under an interdict (an ecclesiastical censure where certain rights cannot be performed).

A trial by fire proposed by a rival Florentine teacher to test Savonarola's divine mandate was a fiasco and popular opinion turned against him.

Savonarola and two lieutenants were imprisoned and under torture he confessed that he had invented the visions and prophecies.

On May 23, 1498, the three friars were condemned, hanged and burned in the main square of Florence.

The Medici were eventually restored to power in the next century and eventually broke the cause of republican freedom and religious reforms.