

St John Fisher. Address at Great St Mary's, Tuesday 22 June 2021

St John Fisher is the particular patron of the Catholic Chaplaincy in Cambridge because of his lifelong association with the University. Born at Beverley in Yorkshire around 1469, he came to Cambridge as a teenager in the 1480s, graduating BA in 1488 and MA in 1491, the year that saw him elected a fellow of Michaelhouse and ordained a priest. Elected Junior Proctor for 1494-95, in that capacity he came to the attention of Lady Margaret Beaufort, the mother of Henry VII and easily the most powerful woman in England. As she told him later, 'since the first time I saw you admitted' she was determined to obey him 'in all things concerning the weal and profit of my soul'. In short, she made him her spiritual director. He was, it seems, a striking man:

He was tall and comely, exceeding the common or middle sort of men ... six foot in height ... very slender and lean, straight backed, big jointed, and strongly sinewed. His hair by nature black ... his eyes ... neither full black nor full grey, but of a mixed colour...; his forehead smooth and large ... Not only of his equals, but even of his superiors, he was both honoured and feared.

With her patronage, Fisher's rapid rise accelerated still more. He became Vice-Chancellor in 1501 and was the first Lady Margaret Professor of Theology in 1502. Surprisingly named Bishop of Rochester by the king himself in 1504, Fisher was promptly elected Chancellor of the University, an office to which he was re-elected every year until 1514, when the University faced facts and saved trouble by electing him Chancellor for life. Fisher's connections with royalty enabled him to attract enormous patronage to Cambridge, resulting in the foundation and bountiful endowment of two new colleges (Christ's and St John's), the completion of King's College Chapel, and the funding of professorships in Theology, Greek, and Hebrew.

That should have been that. He should have been remembered as a respectably busy bishop, a talented and fashionable preacher, a patron of learning, and a fundraiser and benefactor of distinction. He might have been as little remembered – except by historians – as William Waynflete of Winchester or William Smyth of Lincoln or Thomas Rotherham of York. Late medieval England was full of such bishops.

Two things changed all that. The first was the Protestant Reformation, that great and well-intentioned garbling of the Christian message inspired by Martin Luther. This revealed a new side to John Fisher, that of the major theologian who helped shape the Catholic Church's response to one of the three greatest challenges it has ever faced. Five hundred years ago, in 1521, he preached a major sermon to the perhaps slightly bemused citizens of London, at St Paul's Cathedral, explaining what was basically wrong with Luther's theology – its absurd reduction of Christianity to 'faith alone', its unbalanced attempt to trace all Christian knowledge and practice to 'scripture alone', and its denial of the primacy of the Pope. Over the next few years, he would develop these ideas in a series of major books which had an enormous influence at the Council of Trent. Henry VIII himself had also written against Luther, earning himself the title of Defender of the Faith from a grateful pope. So Fisher's theological labours took him higher than ever in the king's favour. When Henry passed through Rochester on his way back to London in May 1522, 'the King called on my lord as soon as he were come to his lodging and he talked lovingly with my lord all the way between the palace and his chamber in the abbey'. The rise of Martin Luther also brought Fisher back to Cambridge. Exactly 500 years ago, in June 1521 there was a bonfire of Luther's books outside this church, and on the west door, which served as the university noticeboard, they pinned up the papal bull condemning Luther's errors. But overnight some unknown hand scrawled crude antipapal graffiti on that placard. Aghast at this display of sympathy for heresy in his beloved University, Fisher returned to preach three successive Sundays in this very church, urging the culprit to repent.¹

The second dramatic turn in Fisher's life was Henry VIII's decision, in 1527, that he must rid himself of his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, in order to free himself to marry his new innamorata, Anne Boleyn. This was a decision that put Henry on a collision course with the papacy, and Fisher on a collision course with his king. From that latter collision there could only ever be one outcome: John Fisher was executed on 22 June 1535. It is worth looking a little more closely at the path from 1527 to 1535.

¹ In vain. The culprit, it later became known, as a French scholar named Pierre du Val, or de Valence, a member of what was then known as Gonville Hall. He subsequently became chaplain to Thomas Goodrich, the first Protestant Bishop of Ely, and was also associated with Thomas Cromwell. He survived until the reign of Mary I, when he visited persecuted Protestants in prison.

For complex reasons, maybe good, maybe bad – Fisher very much thought for good reasons – it was much harder for Henry VIII than for Boris Johnson to sort out his matrimonial difficulties. The Pope would not grant Henry the annulment, which they called a divorce, that he required. So in order to get his way, Henry VIII had to redefine reality. He had to get rid of the authority of the pope. So he found, or chose to believe, that the Bible gave kings the supreme power to govern the people of God, the church, in their realms. By persuading Parliament to recognise this alleged scriptural truth, Henry was able to require his subjects, including his clergy and his bishops, to renounce the authority of the pope, whose claim to govern the universal church was obviously incompatible with Henry's newfangled claim to be the Supreme Head under Christ of the Church of England. Everyone had to swear an oath renouncing papal primacy and recognising the royal supremacy. And everyone did, except for a handful of people, best known among them Thomas More and John Fisher – certainly the most famous scholars in the land. The refuseniks were promptly consigned to the Tower of London. They didn't take up a lot of room!

It was difficult not to take the oath. All the Lords swore it, and all the MPs. All the judges swore it, and all the English bishops – except one. Parliament itself went on to declare Henry Supreme Head of the Church of England. To refuse the oath was to resist the will of the people as well as the will of the king. According to the bishops, it was also to resist the clear teaching of scripture. It was easy enough to pin your conscience to someone else's back. Then Parliament made it treason, punishable by death, to deny that Henry was Supreme Head. As Fisher learned from his brother, Robert Fisher, MP for Rochester – he had taken the oath, by the way – Parliament had at least insisted that only those who 'maliciously' denied the king's title would be deemed guilty of treason.

So, when a message came from the king asking Fisher, for the sake of the troubled royal conscience, to give his honest, confidential opinion about the royal supremacy – 'off the record', as we would say – he presumably saw no harm or danger in giving it. Thus, according to his indictment, 'on 7 May 1535, in the Tower of London in the County of Middlesex' did he 'contrary to his due allegiance, falsely, maliciously and traitorously utter and pronounce the following English words, namely: The king our sovereign lord is not supreme head in earth of the Church of England'. His defence was that his words were not malicious. The judges ruled that any denial of the king's title was, by definition, malicious. So it was that on 22 June 1535, a Tuesday like today, but a little brighter, a frail old man, pale and weakened from a year in

gaol, was led out into the early morning sunshine to be executed on Tower Green, and thus to remind us, as martyrs rather uncomfortably do, that sacred truth is more important than life or death.

The royal supremacy got Henry what he wanted: Anne Boleyn. But it turned out he did not want her long. Within a year of Fisher's death she had followed him to the Tower and then to the scaffold. And all those bishops who had meekly accepted Henry's redefinition of reality, who had decided to go along with his lie about the Bible, had to watch as the Defender of the Faith deployed the royal supremacy to dismantle much of the infrastructure of the Catholic Church. Under his teenage son they had to watch again as a cabal of arriviste aristocrats deployed that same supremacy to substitute Protestantism for Catholicism as the religion of the land. The royal supremacy itself was repealed under Mary I and was in fact never revived again, even though another Act of Supremacy was passed under Elizabeth I in 1559. Never again would the English monarch be known, officially at least, as the Supreme Head of the Church. The power over the church which had been usurped by Henry gradually found its way into the hands of the emerging State apparatus of England. Parliament and the judges would decide all the great questions of religion in England for the next few hundred years.

Henry VIII had tried to redefine reality, and for a short while seemed to have succeeded. He died thinking he had succeeded, but his achievement fell to pieces within a few years. For the royal supremacy depended not on the Bible but on his own ferociously tyrannical will to power. That died, as the will to power always does, with its owner. And redefinitions of reality never last, because we do not construct reality: reality is given, and it constructs us.

We should remember Fisher today, then, because we, like him, are surprised to find ourselves living in one of the three great crises of the Church. The first crisis, back in the fourth and fifth centuries, was over a simple question: 'What is God?' The answer defined our creeds. The second crisis, which broke in the sixteenth century, was over another simple question: 'What is the Church?' The great question of our own time is equally easy to state: 'What is Man?' A word of advice. In those two former crises, it came down to individual Christians to work out where they stood. The benches of bishops proved unreliable guides. As St John Henry Newman famously emphasised, countless bishops in the later Roman Empire bowed to the Arianism that watered down the divinity of Christ. In the sixteenth century, the bishops of many parts of Europe strayed *en masse* from the Church. In our own time, Catholic bishops have failed too often for counting in ways I hardly need to detail. Fisher, in taking his stand, did so

not with but against the episcopal bench. The English Synod of Bishops in the early 1530s went down a synodal path along which he alone refused to follow.²

John Fisher would not swear to that which he knew was not so. He would not swear to what he knew was false. In these times of ours, when, thanks to the rise of antisocial media, more and more people are, for whatever reasons of their own, striving to bully others into denying what they know to be true or affirming what they know to be false, when not just freedom of speech but, in particular, the freedom to speak the truth is in retreat, Fisher's example is a crucial lesson to us. To take just one example, the highest worldly authority in Europe, the European Parliament, is currently debating whether or not to declare that abortion is a human right. Some of those proposing this contradiction of reality wish to impose it upon the consciences of the rest of us, for example, by making it unlawful for doctors and nurses to refuse to be accomplices in the taking of innocent human life, with the penalty for refusal being exclusion from medical work. Will they wish to make it unlawful for us even to question their claim? At this time, more than ever, let us be inspired by the death of someone who would not bow down and worship the idols of his age. When they came for his conscience, he accepted death itself rather than deny the known truth. Let us pray that we may be allowed to keep our consciences to ourselves. But let us pray also that if – when – they come for ours, we may be granted the grace to keep them for God. St John Fisher, pray for us.

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² The English ecclesiastical institution of 'Convocation' was not strictly a 'synod' in technical terms. But the Northern and Southern Convocations (of, respectively, the Provinces of York and Canterbury) were composed of the bishops and of representatives of the lower clergy. Convened essentially on royal authority, to coincide roughly with Parliaments, the Convocations legislated on religious matters and dealt with questions of heresy and orthodoxy.