

Commemoration of St John Fisher

Address by Dr Richard Chartres, Lord Bishop of London

19 January 2005

HM Tower of London

A prayer of St. John Fisher before a sermon: - I beseech thee Almighty God...that whatever I shall say may first be to thy pleasure for the profit of mine own wretched soul and also to the wholesome comfort to all sinners.

There could not be a better way of beginning Christian Unity Week than among Christian friends in this liminal place to honour the living memory of a great Christian and a holy Bishop, John Fisher.

It is particularly good to welcome our Cardinal and my brother of Rochester. This is a place of oecumenical adventure for here I, as Dean, am not responsible to myself as Bishop of London.

Everyone in the Chapel will want to pay tribute to Peter Bearcroft of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre whose initial concept this was and Allen Pease who has been responsible for the artwork.

Any dialogue between churches involves an early recognition that our traditions involve different views of history and often the histories imputed to others are not owned by them. What, you might say are a brace of Anglican Bishops doing, celebrating the life and martyrdom of someone who was judicially murdered by King Henry VIII. After all, I hear a voice crying out, it was Henry who founded your church, was it not?

That is not of course the understanding that the Church of England has of itself. Henry was a monster of egotism with a gift for propaganda. As the brilliant edition of some of our most disreputable fantasies and served by some very gifted artists, he has continued to fascinate and even impress posterity as he impressed and terrified his contemporaries. John Fisher had the courage to make his judgement on the King's policy and proceedings clear while he was in the tyrant's power and he paid for his candour with his life.

All the churches of Europe were reformed in the sixteenth century and alas in the process the Western Church was fragmented with consequences that haunt us to this day. It was the

great age of the cartographer and the drawers of lines in the sand. Nation states consolidated their boundaries and co-opted religious establishments of all kinds in the process. It was a time when Christians were tempted to over define mysteries in the interests of polemics. No Church emerged from the sixteenth centuries without radical change for good and for ill. John Fisher was himself a reformer, a fact which his martyrdom has tended to obscure. He has been miscast as an unbending champion of the old order but the truth is more complex. In addition to the excellent life by E.E.Reynolds new light has been shed on Bishop Fisher's theological position in Richard Rex's admirable book.

He was a Cambridge Reformer, a Reformer of his beloved university and a promoter of the study of Greek and Hebrew which opened the way to a fresh engagement with the Word of God in Scripture. Fisher himself was a copious preacher at a time when bishops tended to be more involved in juridical and strictly sacramental concerns. He knew very well that the Church needed reform and a renewal of its spiritual life – which of course it always does. In his controversies with Continental Lutherans, Fisher discerned and concentrated on the essential issues. As Rex says, he pushed to one side the debates about the value and application of the merits of the sacrifice of the mass. Instead “taking up patristic and mediaeval parallels between the Real Presence and the Incarnation” as well as drawing on a reading of St John Chapter 6, he fashioned an incarnational ecclesiology that made the Real Presence “an indispensable part of the economy of salvation”.

He also opposed the particular course which the Reformation was taking in England and especially the assumption by the King of the Supreme Headship of the Church. It was Fisher who insisted on the insertion in legislation of the phrase “as far as the law of Christ allows” but the arbitrary nature of the Caesaro-Papist Supreme Headship was fully asserted by Henry in the Act for the Restraint of Appeals. Fisher's clarity about the vocation of the See of Rome in the service of unity is a challenge and an inspiration as we grapple in our own day with the difficulty of maintaining international unity among Christians.

He spent fourteen months imprisoned in a cell which General Field has shown me. Already venerable, his head was struck off on June 22 1535. We honour his memory close to where he is buried. We honour his protest against any state with Messianic pretensions. His example is still eloquent even though the form in which Henry had asserted his ecclesiastical powers did not of course survive his reign and they were not revived by Queen Elizabeth. We salute the courage of Bishop Fisher but above all the discernment which came from prayer and study of the scriptures of the issues which were really at stake in the ebb and flow of political fortune. His devotion to John the Baptist is significant in a life, which always penetrated the camouflage to reveal the real issues. Others absorbed in the game, like Stephen Gardiner could not see where they had become accomplices or where they had failed to say no. This is a lesson for all time.

Bishops Fisher, Latimer and Ridley and Cranmer himself are united in death as they were tragically divided in life. They are all enrolled among those who however reluctantly at the end died for their loyalty to principle and conscience. In this our day, what are we prepared to die for? If we can give an answer to this question then it gives a clue to who we are. Any church that is too comfortable in the world as it is and has lost the capacity to discern when it ought to be saying "no", such a church is far away from the gospel which Fisher preached and for which he died.