

470th Anniversary Commemoration of St John Houghton

Address by Dr Richard Chartres, Lord Bishop of London

5 May 2005

Stat crux dum volvitur orbis.

They could have saved themselves by a simple stroke of the pen. Most of their contemporaries were prepared to do so.

The charge was "machinating and desiring to deprive the King of his title as Supreme Head of the Church". John Houghton and his companions were accused of openly declaring at the Tower of London that "the King our Sovereign Lord is not supreme head on earth of the Church of England."

Most people preferred not to see the crucial significance of this issue. Four years earlier, Thomas Bilney had been burnt at the stake as a heretic for disseminating some of the notions of Martin Luther. By contrast, there were many who regarded the Oath of Supremacy, not as something which touched the faith, but as a claim on the part of Henry VIII to the kind of supremacy in Church and state which *de facto* the King of Spain possessed.

In truth, of course, the question of setting proper limits to the pretensions and the power of human government cannot fail to be significant for followers of our pioneer Jesus Christ, who was condemned by the authorities of his time for pointing to the transcendent claims of the Kingdom of God. In the 20th century the great engine of destruction was nakedly the secular state of Hitler and Stalin with its Messianic pretensions. Once again in Germany and Russia there were Christian martyrs who said "no". "No" is the hero's word; and this evening we salute those who had the profound discernment and the courage to say "no". That discernment came from standing close to the cross and seeing to the heart of the giddy whirl of political events. *Stat crux dum volvitur orbis.*

But what is an Anglican Bishop doing celebrating such an event? After all, I hear a puzzled voice crying out, it was Henry who founded your Church, was it not?

Of course not. If I believed that, I would leave tomorrow. 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 Houghton had the courage to make

his judgment on the King's claims clear while he was in the tyrant's power; and he and his companions paid for their candour with their lives. As a matter of historical fact, the title Supreme Head, a direct contradiction of Scripture which names Christ as the Head of the Church, was never revived after Henry's death. The Elizabethan legislation substituted the title of Supreme Governor.

A martyr, a witness to Jesus Christ, is one who is true to his deepest self in all circumstances. His commitment to life in all its fullness can even demand the sacrifice of his existence. I have no doubt that we are honouring here martyrs who deserve to be remembered with thanksgiving by the whole Church.

By the 1530s, all Europe was engulfed by the turmoil which attended the disintegration of the old Western Church. Every one of the fragments which were left after the explosion of that super nova were profoundly changed and reformed in the course of the century. There were some good results – a new relationship with lay and vernacular culture and a fresh missionary zeal.

But there were some malign developments, which constitute an oecumenical agenda for repentance and reform in our own day. There was an attempt to over-define mystery. At the time of his death in 1101, the founder of the Carthusian Order, St Bruno, re-affirmed his faith in "the mystery of the Holy Trinity" and "the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist" against attempts to reduce these mysteries into rationalizing definitions. No part of the Church in the 16th century resisted the temptation to over-define mystery in the service of inter-Christian polemic, often accompanied by violence. The reason why the Enlightenment in Europe had such an anti-spiritual bias is that Christian polemics played such a public part in the destructive European civil wars of the 16th and 17th centuries.

With over-definition went over-bureaucratization and an excess of law in the Church and - most destructively for the spirit represented by John Houghton - every part of the Church went into alliance with the new nation states and dynasties, as they struggled in that age of cartographers to draw lines around their territories and consolidate their rule.

Over-definition of mystery; over-bureaucratization; over-identification with nation states and dynasties - that is part of the agenda for reform and renewal in our own day.

But the blood of the martyrs renews the earth. It is good to remember these shameful events and the courage and witness of John Houghton and his fellow monks. I look forward to the day when we can also meet united on Smithfield to remember the martyrs of yet another twist in the tortured story of faith in our country. But I hope and believe that we do not meet here in any merely antiquarian spirit. Ours is a rootless and restless time, in which people with little

ground beneath their feet could be tempted to consent to illiberal acts by fear or gusts of indignation. It was not so very long ago that many Europeans, who were not deeply wicked, were persuaded to go along with communist and fascist regimes. To resist such storms of self-righteousness or terror, we need firm anchorage in the deepest, freshest spiritual wisdom and discernment. I believe that this wisdom and discernment is a gift which is given to those who stand by the Cross and are given the eyes to see the principles and values which are really worth dying for, and so living for. Rest and glory to the martyrs of the Charterhouse.

Stat crux dum volvitur orbis.