



Thursday 22nd June St John Fisher and St Thomas More

St John Fisher: Born 1469 in Beverley, Yorkshire. Educated at Beverly Minster school and Cambridge University. Became a priest and Fellow of his College. Chaplain to Lady Margaret Beaufort, mother of King Henry VII. Appointed Chancellor of Cambridge University and Bishop of Rochester. Austere and stern man. Great theologian and preacher. Funeral orations for Henry VII and Lady Margaret Beaufort. King Henry VIII declared him the most distinguished prelate in the kingdom. Published works against Luther. Gained King Henry the title "Defender of the Faith". Bishop John was a reformer, keen on pastoral care of his diocese and protested against abuses of power. Attracted leading scholars from Europe to Cambridge. Supported Catherine of Aragon when Henry tried to divorce her to Henry's fury. Henry started encroaching on the powers of the Church. Bishop John and other bishops protested in the House of Lords. Appealed to Rome. Was then arrested.

Henry married Anne Boleyn with the new Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Cranmer who had agreed divorce backed up by *First Succession Act* in 1534. Pope Paul II made Bishop John a Cardinal in 1535 hoping to ease John's treatment in the Tower of London. Had the opposite reaction and Cardinal John Fisher was put on trial for treason. A jury full of Henry's supporters found him guilty. Sentence was being hanged, drawn and quartered but commuted to beheading by Henry due to public reaction and comparison to King Herod's execution of John the Baptist. Cardinal John Fisher was martyred at Tyburn on Tower Hill on 22nd June 1535. Canonised 1935.

Born in Beverley, Yorkshire, just north of Hull in 1469, the eldest son of Robert Fisher, a modestly prosperous draper merchant, and his wife Agnes. John was one of 4 children and his father died when he was 8 years old. His mother remarried William White and had 5 more children. John continued to have close contact with his extended family all his life.

John's early education was at the school attached to Beverley Minster, founded in the 8th century by St John of Beverley. He proved to be a very able student and, aged 15 went on to study at Cambridge University in 1484, where at Michaelhouse he came under the influence of William Melton. He was a pastoral minded theologian open to the new current of reform in studies arising from the Renaissance. John earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1487 and then on to a Master of Arts degree in 1491. In the same year, aged 22, he received a papal dispensation to enter the priesthood despite being under canonical age. He was ordained on 17th December 1491 and was immediately elected a Fellow of his College, becoming Proctor of the university in 1494 and 3 years later was appointed Master of Debates. By now he had become chaplain and confessor to Lady Margaret Beaufort, Countess of Richmond and Derby and mother of King Henry VII. On 5th July 1501, John became a doctor of sacred theology and 10 days later was elected Vice-Chancellor of Cambridge University. His patroness Lady Margaret, under John's guidance, founded St John's College and Christ's College at Cambridge to increase the teaching of Greek and Hebrew and hugely increased the size and scope of the library. John is said to have acted as tutor to the future Henry VIII and also brought the great Dutch Christian humanist Erasmus to teach and lecture at Cambridge. Also created was the Lady Margaret Professorship of Divinity at both Cambridge and Oxford University.

In 1504 John was appointed Chancellor of Cambridge University, an appointment he held to his death, being re-elected annually. Later in the year King Henry VII appointed him the Bishop of Rochester, then the poorest diocese in England. Though reluctant to be parted from the academic life, he proved a caring and thorough bishop who took his responsibilities very seriously and stayed there for the remaining 31 years of his life, although he had certain State duties particularly in Cambridge University. John was a stern and austere man known to place a human skull on the altar during Mass and on the table during meals and later turned down offers of larger and much wealthier dioceses. From 1505 to 1508 John was also elected President of Queens' College and the only extravagance to his frugal life style was his collecting of books which gave him great pleasure and in middle age he learned first

Greek and then Hebrew.

As a preacher his reputation was so great that John was appointed to preach classic funeral orations for King Henry VII and Lady Margaret Beaufort, both of whom died in 1509. The new King Henry VIII declared him to be the most distinguished prelate in any kingdom. In ecclesiastical affairs he was a reformer, but he saw reform as necessarily organic and from within. John produced the first English refutation of Luther in four large volumes published in 1521, which won for King Henry VIII the title "Defender of the Faith". He protested against any abuses of power by the nobles and clergy but was not divisive, being adamant that unity had to be preserved. With regards to his responsibilities in academic life, his strategy was to assemble funds and attract to Cambridge leading scholars from Europe, promoting the study not only of Classic Latin and Greek authors, but of Hebrew. He placed great weight upon pastoral commitment, above all popular preaching by the endowed staff. John's foundations were also dedicated to prayer for the dead, especially through chantry foundations. He had a vision to which he dedicated all his personal resources and energies. A scholar and a priest, humble and conscientious, he managed despite occasional opposition to administer a whole university, one of only two in England. He conceived and saw through long-term projects and the Christian humanist lecturer at Cambridge, Erasmus said of Bishop John Fisher: "He is the one man at this time who is incomparable for uprightness of life, for learning and for greatness of soul".

When Henry tried to divorce his wife Catherine of Aragon, John became the Queen's chief supporter. As such, he appeared on the Queen's behalf in the legates' court, where he startled the audience by the directness of his language and declared that, like St John the Baptist, he was ready to die on behalf of the indissolubility of marriage. Henry VIII, upon hearing this, grew so enraged by it that he composed a long Latin address to the legates in answer to the bishop's speech. John's copy of this still exists, with his manuscript annotations in the margin which show how little he feared the royal anger. The removal of the cause to Rome brought John's personal involvement to an end, but Henry never forgave him.

In November 1529, the "Long Parliament" of Henry's reign began encroaching on the Church's powers and John, as a member of the House of Lords, at once warned Parliament that such acts could only end in the utter destruction of the Catholic Church in England. A year later, in 1530, the continued encroachments on the Church moved John, as Bishop of Rochester, along with bishops of Bath and Ely, to appeal to the Holy See in Rome. This gave Henry his opportunity and an edict forbidding such appeals was immediately issued and the three bishops were arrested, but released after a few months. In May 1532, Sir Thomas More resigned the Chancellorship and in June John preached publicly against the divorce. In August, William Warham, Archbishop of Canterbury, died and Thomas Cranmer was at once proposed by Henry to the Pope as his successor. In January of the next year, Henry secretly went through a form of marriage with Anne Boleyn. Archbishop Cranmer's consecration took place in March 1533 and, a week later, John was arrested for the second time. It seems that the purpose of the arrest was to prevent him from opposing the sentence of divorce which Cranmer pronounced in May, or the coronation of Anne Boleyn which followed on 1st June, for John was set at liberty again within a fortnight of the coronation, no charge being made against him.

When the *First Succession Act* of 30th March 1534 required all the king's subjects to recognise the children of Henry and his new wife Anne Boleyn as successors to the throne, John's fate was sealed. He refused to take the Oath and was imprisoned in the Tower of London on 26th April 1534 charged with treason. Several efforts were made to induce him to submit, but without effect. Like Thomas More, John believed that because the statute condemned only those speaking maliciously against the King's new title, there was safety in silence. However, on 7th May he fell into a trap laid for him by the Solicitor General Richard Rich who asked him in strict confidence his opinion and John declared that the King was not Supreme Head of the Church of England.

In May 1535, the newly elected Pope Paul II created Bishop John Fisher a Cardinal, apparently in the hope of inducing Henry to ease John's treatment. The effect was precisely the reverse. Henry forbade the cardinal's hat to be brought into England, declaring that he would send his head to Rome instead. John was deprived of his position of Bishop of Rochester so that he could be tried for treason as a commoner and tried by jury. On Thursday 17th June 1535, in Westminster Hall, before a court of 17, including Thomas Cromwell, Anne Boleyn's father, and 10 Justices, John was found guilty, the only testimony being that of Richard Rich, and condemned to be hanged, drawn and quartered at Tyburn on Tower Hill outside the Tower of London.

However, a public outcry was brewing among the London populace who saw a sinister irony in the parallels between the conviction of Cardinal John Fisher and that of his patronal namesake, St John the

Baptist, who was executed by King Herod Antipas for challenging the validity of Herod's marriage to his brother's divorcee Herodias. For fear of John living through his patronal feast day, that of the Nativity of St John the Baptist on 24th June and attracting too much public sympathy, King Henry VIII commuted the sentence to that of beheading, to be accomplished before 23rd June, the Vigil of the feast day. This had the opposite effect from that which King Henry VIII intended, as it created yet another parallel with that of the martyrdom of St John the Baptist, who was also beheaded.

After surviving over a year in the Tower of London, Cardinal John was exhausted and emaciated and had to be carried in a chair to his execution at Tyburn on Tower Hill. He managed to summon enough strength to walk the final steps to the scaffold and told the crowd that he was dying for the faith of Christ's Holy Catholic Church. John's last moments were in keeping with his life and he met death with a calm dignified courage which profoundly impressed those present. He was martyred on 22nd June 1535 which happened to be at the time the feast day of St Alban, the first martyr of Britain.

Cardinal John Fisher was first buried in a rough grave in the churchyard of All Hallows' Barking, also known as All Hallows-by-the-Tower. A fortnight later, his body was laid beside that of St Sir Thomas More who was executed at Tyburn on 6th July in the Chapel of St Peter ad Vincula within the Tower of London. In the "Decree of Beatification" on 29th December 1886 by Pope Leo XIII, when 54 English martyrs were beatified, the greatest place was given to John Fisher. Canonised on 19th May 1935 by Pope Pius XI along with Thomas More, after the presentation of a petition by English Catholics



St Thomas More: Born in London in 1478. Page to the Archbishop of Canterbury. Went to Oxford University. Trained as lawyer at Lincoln's Inn in London. Called to the Bar in 1502. Enthusiasm for Greek. Friendship with Dutch Christian humanist Desiderius Erasmus which lasted for over 30 years. From 1500 lived in Carthusian monastery in London for 4 years. Decided against the monastic life and priesthood. Elected to Parliament in 1504. Married Jane Colt in 1505 and had 4 children. He welcomed into his home the greatest scholars and the leading religious thinkers of the time. Helped him with his writings including his great work *Utopia*. Wife died. Remarried an older widow with one daughter. Adopted two girls. Very happy family full of laughter. Returned to public life in 1509 with King Henry VIII. Appointed a Privy Counsellor. Knighted in 1521. Personal advisor to Henry. 1523 elected MP and Speaker of House. In 1525 appointed Lord Chancellor. Tried to avoid opinion on Henry's divorce from Catherine. Counselling Henry against marriage to Anne Boleyn. Refused to attend Anne's coronation. Resigned as Lord Chancellor. He

left public life and returned to live quietly with his family. Under *Act of Succession* was asked to *Swear the Oath* but refused. Imprisoned in Tower of London. Accepted without complaint. Wife pleaded for him to Henry. Tried for treason. Found guilty. Martyred at Tyburn on Tower Hill 1535

Born in Milk Street, Cheapside London on 7th February 1478, son of Sir John More, a successful barrister and later a judge, and his wife Agnes (nee Graunger). Thomas was the second and only surviving son of six children and was educated at St Anthony's School, then considered one of London's best schools. At the age of 13 he served John Morton, Archbishop of Canterbury and Lord Chancellor of England, as a household page.

Archbishop Morton enthusiastically supported the "New Learning", later known as "humanism" or as "London humanism", and thought highly of young Thomas. He was sure that Thomas had great potential and nominated him for a place at Oxford University. Thomas began his studies at Oxford in 1492 and received a classical education studying under the great scholars Thomas Linacre and William Grocyn and became proficient in both Latin and Greek. After two years his father removed him from Oxford when he was only 16 years of age, thinking he was coming under dangerous humanism influences. He made his son study Law in London at New Inn, one of the Inns of Chancery. In 1496 Thomas became a student at Lincoln's Inn, one of the Inns of Court, where he remained until 1502,

when he was called to the Bar.

However, Thomas' enthusiasm for Greek and the new learning continued, helped by his friendship with the Dutch Christian humanist Desiderius Erasmus, which began in 1497, and lasted for over 30 years. Both enjoyed a fine sense of humour and a disdain for scholasticism, the system of theology and philosophy taught in Medieval European Universities based on Aristotelian logic. Thomas joked that "such studies were about as valuable as milking a he-goat into a sieve". Both loved the Church and wanted to see it reformed without upheaval. They did not want to see it split apart by hasty reasoning and futile disputes.

From 1500 Thomas spent 4 years living at London Charterhouse, a Carthusian monastery between the Barbican and Smithfield Market, outside the walls of London and joined the monks' spiritual exercise while still continuing his legal career. He was unsure about his future and considered whether to join the Carthusians or the Franciscans or even become a diocesan priest. However, although he deeply admired the monk's piety, he decided to remain a layman, his desire for monasticism finally being overcome by his sense of duty to serve his country in the field of politics. Despite this decision, he continued the habits of prayer, fasting and ascetic practices for the rest of his life, wearing a hair shirt and occasionally engaging in flagellation, a tradition of the Third Order of St Francis of Assisi.

Thomas was elected to Parliament in 1504 and he urged a decrease in a proposed appropriation for King Henry VII. In revenge, Henry imprisoned Thomas' father and would not release him until a fine was paid and Thomas himself withdrew from public life. In the next year, 1505, he married Jane Colt. Erasmus reported that Thomas wanted to give his young wife a better education than she had previously received at home, and tutored her in music and literature. The couple had four children Margaret, Elizabeth, Cicely and John and had a very happy family life.

With his friendship with the Dutch scholar Desiderius Erasmus, Thomas welcomed to his home the religious and learned of London. Thomas Linacre had attended Oxford University and was one of the first Englishmen to study Greek and was a lecturer of both Erasmus and Thomas. As well as a Greek scholar, he was a physician and medical researcher and distinguished humanist. He practised medicine and one of his patients was Cardinal Wolsey. Fr John Colet was a priest, humanist theologian, educational pioneer and friend of Erasmus. He had attended St Anthony's School in London and Oxford University the same as Thomas. He was Dean of St Paul's Cathedral, a great writer and preacher and Erasmus said "When I listen to Colet it seems that I am listening to Plato himself". William Grocyn was born in Wiltshire and educated at Winchester College before attending Oxford University. He was a friend of Erasmus and became a lecturer in Greek at Exeter College Oxford and was a tutor to Thomas. With his high reputation he was chosen by Fr John Colet to deliver lectures at St Paul's School in London. William Lily was appointed by Fr John Colet as High Master of St Paul's School which became a paragon of classical scholarship and had many famous pupils. William was born in Odiham near Hook in Hampshire and had attended Oxford University and was author of the most widely used Latin grammar textbook in England. He was also a Greek scholar and was ranked with Linacre and Grocyn as one of the most erudite students of Greek that England produced. He became a close friend of Thomas. Fr William Latimer was a priest and Greek scholar who had studied at Oxford University. On his return from a pilgrimage to Italy, William had entered the priesthood. He then became a Fellow at All Souls, Oxford, in 1489 and was considered one of the foremost scholars of his time. He and Bishop John Fisher had many theological discussions with Thomas and the three became good friends. This amazing collection of people created an incredible intellectual atmosphere in the home of Thomas.

Erasmus and all these scholars were crucial to the development of Thomas' ideas on literary studies, in particular the revival of Greek, and on the social possibilities of education. While Thomas cannot be classified in any formal sense as a philosopher, it is in his writings in defence of humanism and in his best known and most controversial work, "*Utopia*", that he can be seen as an exponent of important ideas. He, and many of his friends, sought ways of reconciling Catholic tradition with Greek classical scholarship. In the early years of their association, Thomas and Erasmus shared a critical interest in exposing the follies and abuses of contemporary life, not least in matters of religious practice. Now with all his academic and religious contacts, Thomas was drawn into the savage polemics of the early Reformation, he defended Catholic orthodoxy with all the weapons at his disposal.

Unfortunately in 1511 his beloved wife Jane died in childbirth. Then going "against friends' advice and common custom", within thirty days Thomas had married one of the many eligible women among his wide circle of friends. He chose Alice Middleton, a widow 7 years his senior, to head his household and

care for his small children. The speed of the marriage was so unusual that Thomas had to get a dispensation, which, due to his good public reputation, he easily obtained. Thomas had no children from his second marriage, although he raised Alice's daughter from her previous marriage as his own. He managed his household as part monastery and part school, sleeping only 4 or 5 hours a night in order to combine a secular career as a lawyer with observance of much monastic discipline and pursuit of learning. Despite this personal austerity and discipline, Thomas was careless of dress and formality, was cheerful with a quick humour and ready smile, inclined to jokes and pranks, and his house was a place of laughter. Erasmus declared: "What did Nature ever create milder, sweeter and happier than the genius of Thomas More"

He also became the guardian of two young girls. Anne Cresacre would eventually marry his son John More, and Margaret Giggs (later Clement) who would be the only member of his family to witness his execution. Margaret died on the 35th anniversary of that execution. Thomas was an affectionate father and wrote letters to his children whenever he was away on legal or government business, and encouraged them to write to him often. He insisted upon his daughters receiving the same classical education as his son, an unusual attitude at the time. This set an example for other noble families and even Erasmus became much more favourable once he witnessed their accomplishments. His eldest daughter attracted much admiration for her erudition, especially her fluency in Greek and Latin. Thomas told Margaret of his pride in her academic accomplishments and showed his friends examples of her work which impressed them all. A portrait of Thomas and his family, "Sir Thomas More and Family", was painted by Holbein, but was lost in a fire in the 18th century. His grandson commissioned a copy, of which two versions survive today.

After the death of Henry VII in 1509, Thomas returned to public life and earned the favour of Henry VIII. He was appointed reader at Lincoln's Inn and as one of the two under-sheriffs of London, a position of considerable responsibility in which he gained a reputation as an honest and effective public servant. Thomas became Master of Requests in 1514 and appointed as a Privy Counsellor the same year. In 1515 Thomas Wolsey, Cardinal Archbishop of York, sent him on a trade delegation to the Netherlands, where the negotiations failed to make progress, enabling him to write the second part of "*Utopia*" while staying with a humanist friend, Peter Giles. This work, an account of an ideal state, was largely a learned frolic, though it owed a lot to monastic ideas of communal living. The first part was written when his first wife was alive and was a savage attack on the current state of the criminal law. King Henry VIII might well have enjoyed the book but in any event Thomas was drawn closer into his circle as both friend and advisor.

After undertaking a diplomatic mission to the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, accompanying Thomas Wolsey to Calais and Bruges, Thomas was knighted by Henry VIII and made under-treasurer of the Exchequer in 1521. As secretary and personal advisor to Henry VIII, Thomas became increasingly influential welcoming foreign diplomats, drafted official documents and, serving as a liaison between the King and Lord Chancellor Wolsey. He helped Henry in writing his "*Defence of the Seven Sacraments*", a repudiation of Luther, and wrote an answer to Luther's reply under a pseudonym. Thomas later served as High Steward for Cambridge and Oxford Universities. In 1523 Thomas was elected MP for Middlesex and, on Cardinal Wolsey's recommendation, the House of Commons elected Thomas the Speaker of the House. He became Lord Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster in 1525, with executive and judicial responsibilities over much of northern England. When Cardinal Wolsey failed to negotiate the annulment in Rome of Henry's marriage to Catherine of Aragon he was stripped of his government titles and Sir Thomas More was appointed, in 1529, Lord Chancellor of England. Cardinal Wolsey retreated to York to fulfil his ecclesiastical duties as archbishop, a position he nominally held but had neglected during his years in government.

Like John Fisher, Thomas was inevitably drawn into the question of Henry's divorce. Ever the subtle lawyer, he tried to avoid expressing a personal opinion on the matter, confining himself to expounding the law, but could not avoid counselling against Henry's marriage to Anne Boleyn and resigned as Lord Chancellor in 1532, after only three years in the post, citing ill health. He refused to attend Anne's coronation ceremony, which did not escape the King's notice. Reduced to poverty, he lived quietly with his family until in 1534 he was one of the people accused of complicity with Elizabeth Barton, the nun of Kent, who opposed Henry's break with Rome. However, he was not arrested due to protection from the Lords who refused to pass the bill until More's name was removed from the list.

Like John Fisher, he was summoned to *Swear the Oath* required by the *Act of Succession*. He refused, giving no personal reasons, in the belief that he was safe as long as he said nothing that could be

constructed as treasonable. Sir Thomas was first put under the custody of the Abbot of Westminster but when he again refused to take the Oath, he was imprisoned in the Tower of London on 17th April 1534. There he steadfastly upheld the decision of his moral conscience, refusing every effort of his family to seek reconciliation with the King. Lady More had to sell her clothes to buy necessities for him and consequently the family was reduced to abject poverty. She twice petitioned the King Henry on grounds of the health of Thomas and the family's poverty, but all in vain. Sir Thomas More accepted his situation without complaint but was very distressed when his actions caused sufferings for others, especially his wife and eldest daughter Margaret. His love for his family, and theirs for him, remained constant, if not a bit strained, as shown in letters with Margaret.

Sir Thomas More was tried for treason on 1st July 1535, before a panel of judges that included the new Lord Chancellor, Sir Thomas Audley chosen by Henry, as well as Anne Boleyn's father Thomas Cromwell, her brother and her uncle. The most powerful of the King's advisors, Thomas Cromwell, brought the Solicitor General Richard Rich to testify that More had, in his presence, denied that the King was the legitimate head of the Church. This testimony was characterised as being extremely dubious and unlikely by two other witnesses but the jury took only 15 minutes to find Sir Thomas More guilty of treason. After the jury's verdict Thomas claimed, with his legal mind, that the Statue of Supremacy was contrary to the Magna Carta and to Church laws of England, attempting to void the entire indictment against him. Unfortunately this had no effect and he was sentenced to be hanged, drawn and quartered, the usual punishment for traitors who were not the nobility.

On Tuesday 6th July, his friend Sir Thomas Pope came to warn Sir Thomas that he was to be executed at 9 o'clock but the King had commuted the sentence from hanged, drawn and quartered to beheading. Thomas thanked him and said he would pray for the King and comforted his weeping friend. He then put on his best clothes, walked quietly to Tower Hill just outside the Tower of London, and mounted the scaffold with a jest for the lieutenant. Sir Thomas More forgave his executioner and declared that he "was dying in the faith and for the faith of the Catholic Church, the king's good servant, but God's first". He asked that his adopted daughter Margaret Clement (nee Giggs) be given his headless corpse to bury. She was the only member of his family to witness his execution and he was buried at the Tower of London, in the chapel of St Peter ad Vincula. His head was fixed upon a pike over London Bridge for a month, according to the normal custom for traitors. His head replaced that of John Fisher whose head was thrown into the River Thames.