

Home Retreat – July 2023 St John Fisher

I am doing a good deal of gardening these days. At the moment I am clearing up the little rock garden behind the West end of the monastery. But I have one major difficulty: *hypericum*. This is the Latin name for St John's Wort, the plant which comes punctually into flower on the feast of the birth of John the Baptist, 24th June. It seeds itself everywhere and is flowering everywhere at the moment. No particular harm in that. The harm is that it hastened the death of one of my great saints, St John Fisher. When he had been condemned to death by Henry VIII he had to be quickly executed before the feastday because Henry feared there would be demonstrations and riots in protest on the feast of St John, John Fisher's own patron, of course. So he was beheaded on 22nd June. Thomas More, who had the same sentence, was allowed to live a few days longer. Should I take revenge by cutting down the plant, or should I leave it in honour of the saint? He is, incidentally, a Yorkshireman, born in Beverley; his first post, immediately after he took his degree, was as priest in Northallerton. Why is he such a great saint?

To begin with, he is a martyr, as he knew full well he would be. He and Thomas More stood out against the rest of Europe, the universities and other theologians, not to mention the rest of the English Bishops (though Fisher persuaded the aged Archbishop of Canterbury, William Warham, to stand firm – he died before receiving the consequences) in declaring Henry's marriage to Catherine of Aragon valid. Henry's argument (and the king was no mean theologian, though Henry's famous *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum* was probably largely written by Fisher rather than the King himself) was that since Catherine had been married to Henry's elder brother, Prince Arthur, after Arthur's death not even the Pope could legitimize her marriage to Henry. Fisher appealed to the Old Testament, Dt 25.5-6, the Levirate Law, that Henry was not merely allowed, but bound to marry his dead brother's widow. Already in the Tower, Fisher in good faith was tricked into the statement which led to his death by Richard Rich's statement that the King was having scruples and asking for Fisher's private and confessional advice. When it came to the execution itself Fisher was so weak after his months imprisoned in the Tower that he had to be carried to the execution-block in a chair. But he still had the courage and presence of mind to joke with his gaoler, 'If I am not back in time for my lunch, eat it yourself!'

The martyrdom was only the crown of his life, for he was first and foremost a man of prayer. When he was imprisoned in the Tower he wrote seven short prayers for his sister, one for each day of the week, which show his peace and acceptance. At a time when bishops were often courtiers and politicians, and when non-residence was the norm he stuck to his small diocese of Rochester which was normally a stepping-tone to a richer and larger diocese. He was punctilious in keeping to his schedule of annual priestly ordinations and regular visitations. He complains that every day spent at court was robbed from his diocese. He was assiduous in visiting the sick, so that his priest-secretary writes:

Many times it was his chance to come to such poor houses as for want of chimneys were very smoky, and thereby so noisome [i.e. smelly], that scant any man could abide in them, He himself would sit there by the sick patient many times the space of three or four hours,

when none of his servants were able to abide in the house, but were fain to tarry without till his coming abroad. And in some poor houses, where stairs were wanting, he would never disdain to climb up by a ladder.

It was an era when heresy trials were common, a rough and demanding time, when all too often heretics were burnt at the stake. In his case he presided at ten heresy trials, at all of which the accused heretic was reconciled. He reckoned to dialogue and persuade the suspects, saying that anyone could

‘come unto me secretly and break his mind at more length, I bind me by these presents both to keep his secrecy, and also to spare a leisure for him to hear the bottom of his mind, and he shall hear mine again, if it so please him; and I trust in our Lord, that finally we shall so agree, that either he shall make me a Lutheran, or else I induce him to be a Catholic, and to follow the doctrine of Christ’s Church.’ (Dowling p. 92)

The records show several cases when Fisher persuaded accused heretics to return to Catholic doctrine and be reconciled.

Most of all Fisher was a theologian, respected throughout Europe. King Henry’s secretary wrote, ‘As much as he fled from glory, so much did glory pursue him.’ As Chancellor of Cambridge University he was re-elected several times annually and finally elected for life. His great drive was for the education of the clergy, which at that time was grievously neglected. He teamed up with Lady Margaret Beaufort, mother of Henry VII, to whom he was confessor and spiritual guide, re-founded one College, Michaelhouse, and founded a second, St John’s, with seven preaching fellowships (these Fellows were bound to preach six times a year). He set up Chairs of Theology at both universities, which still continue to this day, the Lady Margaret Professorships (in 1502). He realised the importance of learning the biblical languages, himself learned both Greek and Hebrew quite late in life, and even persuaded Erasmus, the most famous Renaissance scholar of his day, to learn Greek. Fisher was responsible for more than one correction in Erasmus’ first printed edition of the New Testament in Greek.

When it came to the confrontation with Luther Fisher was the leader of Catholic theologians. At the burning of Luther’s works in St Paul’s Churchyard in 1521 Fisher was chosen to give the sermon, later published in Antwerp, Cologne, Paris, Venice and running through 20 editions in his lifetime. It was therefore regarded as a vital tool in the defence of the Catholic faith against Luther. This is the more remarkable in that on many points, even the theology of grace, Fisher agreed with Luther’s early position before Luther was pushed into a corner by those who were investigating his case.

Fisher was already in the Tower when the Pope made him Cardinal, planning that he should be one of the leaders in the impending Council of Trent. To this, that monster Henry VIII riposted, ‘He can put the Cardinal’s hat on his shoulders, for I am going to have his head’. Nevertheless, Fisher was still a dominating factor in the Council. There he is referred to as ‘gloriosissimus martyr’ as ‘athleta et martyr’. He is quoted again and again, especially on two subjects, grace and the eucharist.

Most striking is Fisher's stress on the mercy of God, especially in his commentary on the psalms. This is a thoroughly biblical emphasis, for the *hesed* or 'faithful love' is God's chief characteristic, stressed again and again in the Old Testament, as when the Lord passes before Moses, hidden in a cleft of the rock (no man can see God and live), calling out the divine Name and for the first time explaining it: 'the Lord, the Lord, God of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in faithful love and constancy, maintaining his faithful love to thousands, forgiving fault, crime and sin' (Ex 34.6-7). To these Fisher adds the New Testament image of grace as sunlight ('I am the light of the world': Jn): 'From the eyes of almighty God what maybe called his grace shines forth, a marvellous brightness, as the beam that comes forth from the sun. And that light of grace steers and sets the soul to bring forth the fruit of good works.' Or again, 'the beams of almighty God, spread upon our souls, quickens them and causes this light in us and the fruit of good works' (This is against Luther in 1521, who of course with his emphasis on salvation by faith alone, denied that good works were necessary or possible). Another lovely metaphor is of grace as a liquid, without which 'I am blasted and smitten with dryness, like hay.' This stress on the generosity of God and the working of his grace was vital at the Council and no less inspiring today. By the grace of God we can act upon our surroundings and bring the light of Christ to others.

On the eucharist Fisher's contribution was so central to the Council that it is now familiar from our common eucharistic practice. There is, however, one jewel which is normally associated with Pius X at the beginning of the twentieth century, frequent communion. In earlier works, for example his commentary on Psalm 22. It was already the practice that priests celebrated Mass daily, but laity often received communion only once a year at Eastertime. On Psalm 22 Fisher used the analogy of the body, saying that if the mouth received food the whole body benefited; so the devoted laity benefit from the priest's communion. In his great tome *De Veritate Corporis et Sanguinis Christi in Eucharistia*, written chiefly to refute the Reformers' teaching that Christ is present only symbolically in the eucharist, he at least twice insists that actual communion makes a difference:

Suppose two people who have the same faith, of whom one piously frequently eats this incomparable food, the other seldom, there can be no doubt that the soul of the one who more frequently will be more solidly enriched.

And again, 'It is indeed true that we eat spiritually by faith and love, but unless we are strengthened by eating the body, this faith will soon perish and slip away.'
(Notes 78-80 in Rex)

I would like to end this glance at the great Renaissance figure of John Fisher, who was so crucially important at the time, and to whom we still owe so much, with two glimpses which enfold what seems to me to illustrate his character, one on his simplicity, the other on his sense of occasion. On his simplicity and directness. I mentioned earlier the simplicity of the prayers he wrote for each day of the week to his sisters, a nun. This is typical of his prayer, as he wrote in his *Treatise on Prayer*:

If thou wert mending thy shoes or washing clothes or what else so ever, thou mayest pray. It is lawful for the servant, whatever business so ever he is about

of his master's to pray, in the court, in the market-place, in the midst of never so great a multitude of people a man may pray. St Paul prayed in the prison, the prophet Jeremy in the dirt, Ezekiel against the wall, Daniel in the lions' den, Jonah in the whale's belly, the thief on the cross, and all these were heard praying in very few words.

And on his sense of occasion, just before his execution he laments to Cromwell, 'I have neither shirt nor sheet nor yet any other clothes that are necessary for me to wear but that be ragged and rent-to shamefully' and despite this he dressed carefully for the execution, saying 'I must be gay this day for honour of the marriage'. His last recorded words were from that hymn of praise, the *Te Deum*, 'In te Domine speravi – in you, O Lord, I have put my trust.'

So St John Fisher brings a new dimension to the war against the spread of the decorative and harmless flower, *hypericum* or St John's Wort. We may reflect on his steadfast courage in martyrdom, his profound but straightforward theology, his zeal for the true faith, but above all on his noble simplicity in prayer.