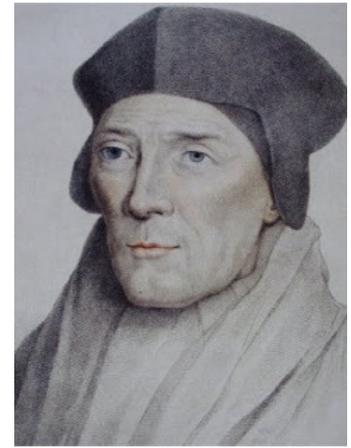


## *Prayer for Holy Bishops by Saint John Fisher*



Lord, according to thy promise that the Gospel should be preached throughout the whole world, raise up men fit for such work. The Apostles were but soft and yielding clay till they were baked hard by the fire of the Holy Ghost. So, good Lord, do now in like manner with thy Church militant, change and make the soft and slippery earth into hard stones. Set in thy Church strong and mighty pillars that may suffer and endure great labours – watching, poverty, thirst, hunger, cold and heat – which also shall not fear the threatenings of princes, persecution, neither death, but always persuade and think with themselves to suffer with a good will, slanders, shame, and all kinds of torments, for the glory and laud of thy Holy Name. By this manner, good Lord, the truth of thy Gospel shall be preached throughout the world. Therefore, merciful Lord, exercise thy mercy, show it indeed upon thy Church. Amen.

John Fisher

This prayer was part of a sermon that Bishop Fisher preached in 1508, 27 years before he was executed for treason because he refused to acknowledge Henry VIII as head of the Church in England. It reminds us of a time in our national history when matters of faith were a life or death matter. However, Fisher sees religious matters in a bigger context: the whole world. He sees the pressures on the church which it needs to resist. Bishops are in an unenviable position, as leaders, preachers, guides, the pressures are particularly on them. Although the pressures are more subtle these days, it is a prayer that is worth reflecting on. ‘Great labours’ are always necessary that the Gospel may be preached faithfully throughout the world.

John Fisher was born in 1469 in Beverley, Yorkshire, eldest son of a moderately prosperous merchant. He was educated at Beverley Grammar School and Cambridge University. After completing his theological studies at Cambridge, he was ordained to the priesthood, having obtained papal dispensation in 1491 for ordination, since he was under the normal age. He became Vicar of Northallerton. In 1504 he was appointed Bishop of Rochester at the personal insistence of Henry VII. Although considered the poorest diocese in England he was to stay there for the next 31 years, until the end of his life. He led a most austere life and fulfilled his pastoral role by frequently visiting the faithful. He also composed works against the errors of the time. He soon came into conflict with Henry VIII, his former pupil. When Henry tried to divorce Queen Catherine of Aragon, Fisher became the Queen’s chief supporter and most trusted counsellor. He preached publicly against the king’s divorce, which enraged Henry. He was sent to the Tower of London in April 1534. The Pope created Fisher Cardinal apparently in the hope of inducing Henry to ease Fisher’s treatment. The effect was the reverse: Henry forbade the cardinal’s hat to be brought into England, declaring that he would send the head to Rome instead. He was sentenced to be beheaded. Henry was concerned that the sentence should be carried out before the feast of the Beheading of John the Baptist (24 June). He was executed on Tower Hill on 22 June 1535. Feast day 22 June (RC), 6 July (C of E, with Thomas More).

Colin Lunt