

## Reflection Thursday Week 11 St John Fisher and St Thomas More 2023

**St John Fisher** was born in Beverley, in Yorkshire, in 1469. He studied theology at Cambridge, and eventually became chancellor of the University and bishop of Rochester. He paid great attention to the welfare of his diocese. He wrote against the errors and corruption into which the Church had fallen, and was a friend and supporter of humanists such as Erasmus of Rotterdam but was greatly opposed to Lutheranism in its doctrine and its ideas of reform. He supported the validity of King Henry VIII's marriage to Catherine of Aragon, for which he was briefly imprisoned. When the King had divorced Catherine, married Anne Boleyn, and constituted himself the supreme Head of the Church in England, John Fisher refused to assent. He was imprisoned in the Tower of London charged with treason. On 22<sup>nd</sup> June 1535, a month after being made a Cardinal, he was executed. He was so ill and weak that he had to be carried in a chair to the place of execution. He was the only bishop to oppose Henry VIII's actions because of Henry's repudiation of papal authority. Yet he avoided direct confrontation with the other bishops: *I condemn no other man's conscience: their conscience may save them, and mine must save me.* Let us remember to treat our opponents as if they were acting in good faith, even if they appear to be acting out of spite or self-interest.

**St Thomas More (1477)** was born in London, the son of a judge. He became an eminent lawyer. He married twice, and had four children. He was a humanist and a reformer, and his book, *Utopia*, depicting a society regulated by the natural virtues, is still read today. Thomas More was a close friend of King Henry VIII. As a judge, he was famous for his incorruptibility and impartiality, and he was made Lord Chancellor – the highest legal position in England – in 1529. When Henry VIII demanded a divorce from Catherine of Aragon, Thomas More opposed him. He resigned the chancellorship in 1532 and retired from public life. Because of his reputation, however he was ordered to take the oath of the Act of Succession, which effectively repudiated papal religious authority. He refused, and was imprisoned in the Tower of London. After the execution of John Fisher, he was charged with high treason for denying the King's supreme headship of the Church, found guilty, and sentenced to death. He was executed on 6<sup>th</sup> July 1535. With a clear conscience and a light heart; he told the spectators that he was still "the king's good servant – but God's first," and carefully adjusted his beard before he was beheaded. He wrote a number of devotional works in prison awaiting trial. He fought his fight without acrimony, telling his judges that he wished that "we may yet hereafter in Heaven, merrily all meet together to everlasting salvation."