

HOMILY FOR THE FEAST OF ST. JOHN FISHER

GREAT ST. MARY'S, CAMBRIDGE

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Sir Hermann Black was an outstanding Chancellor of the University of Sydney until his death in the year 1990. He once shared a childhood experience with the students gathered in his august presence. He spoke of the time when his father took the young Hermann for a walk past the impressive University buildings of which he was now Chancellor. *"What do they do in there, Dad?"* he asked his father. His father was puzzled by the question and took a few minutes to reply. Eventually he said *"They think"*. All these years later, it would be hard to find a better description of the purpose of the university. *"They think"*.

But what does it mean to think? D.H. Lawrence gives a good description in his poem "Thought":

Thought. I love thought.

But not the jiggling and twisting of already existing ideas.

I despise that self important game.

Thought is the welling up of unknown life into consciousness;

Thought is the testing of statements on the touchstone of conscience;

Thought is gazing onto the face of life, and reading what can be read;

Thought is pondering over experience, and coming to a conclusion.

Thought is not a trick, or an exercise, or a set of dodges;

Thought is a man, in his wholeness, wholly attending.

For Lawrence, thought is not jiggling or twisting, not a trick, or exercise, or set of dodges. It is much more that the acquisition of facts, or the pressure to publish or perish. For Lawrence, thought is *"the testing of statements on the touchstone of conscience"*. Our thoughts have a moral dimension, they have implications and consequences, they inform the decisions we take. Thinking is not a self indulgent hobby, but in it's fullness must benefit others, not just ourselves. That is what the Jewish and Christian tradition calls "Wisdom".

It was *"...the testing of statements on the touchstone of orthodoxy"* which informed the life and teaching, the dedication and decision making of your patron, St. John Fisher. His thought and his actions were based first or all on his spirituality and personal self discipline. As a result of his thinking and praying, his theology had an academic rigour, which was not afraid of challenge and engagement, not least with Reformation controversy and 'the New Learning'. His commitment to learning and his pastoral care left no room for worldly ambition, despite opportunities for preferment. Fisher was a free man who lived and died *"...in his wholeness wholly attending"*. The balance in his life of body, mind and spirit made him a man of integrity, of wholeness, of holiness. He modelled his life, and death, on that of the Good Shepherd who *"...lays down his life for his sheep"* (Jn. 10:11). The martyrs of your Cambridge colleges reached the same thought filled conclusions as Fisher did, and with the same consequences. In them, there was no separation between their public, personal, intellectual and spiritual life. The logic of their thought and prayer led them to *"...the testing of statements on the touchstone of conscience"*. Their thinking had a logic which they could not deny. To say they died for their convictions puts it dryly and clinically. Theirs was a lived faith, which demanded not just thought or words but also action. *"For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship Him day and night within his temple"*. (Rev.7:15).

In three weeks time, another martyred bishop will be beatified, declared Blessed, 'put on the road to sainthood' as the newspapers say. Oscar Romero was assassinated by members of the military in El Salvador in 1980 because he preached against the oppression of the poor in that country. A shy and timid man by nature, he was appointed Archbishop because the authorities thought

he would not challenge the status quo. In his thinking, writing and preaching he became more and more convinced that he would have to speak out in solidarity if his ministry was to have any integrity. He knew he would be murdered, but he wasn't afraid. In one homily he said: *"You can tell the people that if they succeed in killing me, that I forgive and bless those who do it. Hopefully, they will realise that they are wasting their time. A bishop will die, but the Church of God will never die"*.

"Thought is a man, in his wholeness, wholly attending". St. John Fisher "wholly attended" the challenges of his time, as did the blessed martyrs of your Cambridge colleges and also Blessed Oscar Romero. From the depth of his experience Romero was able to say: *"Aspire not to have more, but to be more"*. Now that, surely, is a thought worth thinking about!