If you look at the features of St John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester, in the fine line-drawing of Hans Holbein (which rests incongruously in the Royal Collection at Windsor Castle), you will see the perfectly-drawn countenance of a saintly medieval English Bishop. Grave and intelligent, he gazes placidly at the world before him; and everything we know of him from his writings speaks of a deep inner sanctity and a penetrating mind. In him, and in the much more familiar Thomas More, we see men who were at home in the world into which they were born: at home in the University, at home in the law of their country, at home in the faith of their fathers. As men of tremendous gifts and quality, they were rewarded by their King and rose to great places. And there God called both of them to stand out from their contemporaries and oppose the King with their whole lives. If John Fisher had said what he said privately, as a humble baker in some country town, he would have died in his bed. As the only English Bishop who opposed the King's assault on the nature and freedom of the Church, he was doomed to die in the hands of a Tudor monarch desperate to keep the throne.

That these men were so isolated in their heroic resistance says one of two things. Either they were fools, fanatically and unnecessarily sacrificing themselves against the inevitable march of history; or they were prophetic figures, with the loneliness of Ezekiel and Jeremiah, or the loneliness of Jesus on the Cross. They should at least deserve the respect that is owed to men of principle; and they also deserve to have their principles remembered.

They did not die for Papal Authority as the Pope who canonised them in 1935 may have assumed. Nor did they die for any political theory, as Henry VIII may have believed. They died for the deepest truths: for the Gospel to be stand above all human devices and motives: for the Church to be allowed the freedom to preach the Gospel to the King, little as he might welcome it; and they died for the unity of Christendom to stand higher than the unity of any individual state within it - one of the noblest ideals of the Europe in which they lived. They knew that if the faith and liturgy of the Church were to become an engine of the royal power - above all when the royal power were as autocratic and venal as Henry VIII's was becoming - the people as a whole were running the risk of losing their faith.

I think it is not hard to draw a straight line between the dethronement of the Gospel John Fisher and Thomas More could not accept, and the loss of the Christian faith which we now see around us in the England we inhabit. The placing of Henry above the Church made thinkable the banishment of God from the counsels of the country. These movements made possible many further ones, far in the future. The Enlightenment, the extreme atheism of Russian and Chinese communism, the post-modern placing of the individual at the centre of the world all lie hidden in the actions of the Tudor king; Thomas More was a man well able to read the ulterior dimensions of what he was seeing. The seriousness of his opposition must give us pause for thought about our own world and its values. Even more, about our own friendship with the world, and our ability to be at peace in our feather beds.