

Readings for Today (England): 2 Maccabees 6: 18, 21, 24 – 31; Ps 31 (30); Matthew 24: 4 – 13.

John Fisher and Thomas More were both victims of Henry VIII's determination to marry Anne Boleyn in the hope that she would bear a son to continue his line, and his resulting break with the rest of the Western Church. Both refused to swear the oath, required by the Act of Succession made on 30 March 1535, declaring Henry's marriage to Katherine of Aragon invalid, and recognising children of Henry and Anne as successors to the throne. Each was condemned to death and beheaded – John on 22 June and Thomas on 6 July.

John Fisher was born in 1469, the son of a draper in Beverley. He studied in Cambridge, where he was an outstanding scholar, becoming Vice-chancellor of the University. In 1502 he became chaplain to Lady Margaret Beaufort, King Henry VII's mother, who was a great supporter of the movement to study the scriptures in the original Hebrew and Greek. Fisher administered her benefactions to Cambridge University and became its Chancellor. In 1504 he was made Bishop of Rochester and, while continuing his studies, was a zealous pastor. In 1534 he opposed the marriage of Henry to Anne Boleyn and the requirement that the clergy acknowledge the king as 'Protector and Supreme Head of the Church'. As a result he was tried for treason and condemned.

Thomas More was born in 1478, the son of a London barrister. Like Fisher, he was a supporter of Erasmus and the humanist movement. In 1529 he was made Lord Chancellor, but resigned the office in 1531, when he took the same stand as Fisher. He tried to live quietly, saying nothing about his own opinion on these matters, but in April 1534 he was summoned to take the oath. He refused to do so, but would not say why, believing that this silence would defend him against the charge of treason. Nevertheless, he was sent to the Tower of London and remained there until his trial on 1 July 1535. He was found guilty on false evidence and condemned to death.

After the verdict he broke his silence and denied that 'a temporal lord could or ought to be head of the spirituality'. On the scaffold he asked for the prayers of the people and said that he died 'the king's good servant – but God's first'.

S. John Fisher and S. Thomas More were canonized in 1935 – the 400th anniversary of their deaths – the first Englishmen to be declared saints since S. Osmund of Salisbury in 1457.