

We have, it seems, an eternal fascination with the ‘The Tudors’, at least in Britain. Is it because they hold up to us a mirror of the complexity and awfulness of our own times? This strange mix we now have of flawed personalities and misinformation at a time in which truth is, once again, very much at issue. Who and what to believe? Which story of the Reformation to follow? Which novel of the period to trust? Hilary Mantel has had a great time exploiting this uncertainty, turning history on its head and making Thomas More more of a villain than a Catholic saint. When Pope John Paul II proclaimed Thomas More to be the patron saint of politicians, in October 2000, there was a mixed reaction because he did indeed have views quite contrary to those of the present day. There was no doubt he hated heretics, that is, anyone who threatened the unity of the Church and had no hesitation in sending them to a fiery death. But that was no less true of Thomas Cromwell in his zeal for the disunity of the Church. They were both men of their time. I’m not sure where John Fisher stood on this but perhaps it wasn’t his job, after all, to burn heretics. Where both men differ from Cromwell is in their agonising over loyalty to God or loyalty to the king and their willingness to die rather than compromise their faith in God. Indeed, it is their faith in God which carries them through this trial. More’s letters to his daughter, Meg, reveal something of this agonising: of the real fear he has of failing God at the last but praying that, like Peter, God will come to his aid and

*make me stand up again and confess the truth of my conscience afresh and abide the shame and the harm here of my own fault.*

And, when it comes to his trial, once he had done his best to avoid a verdict of guilty through a brilliant and honest defence but fails, then he feels free to speak the full truth of his feelings about what the king and Cromwell were really up to. And concludes:

*This realm, being but one member and small part of the Church, could not legislate in a manner disagreeable with the general law of Christ’s universal Catholic Church.*

And he was able to go to his death famously saying:

*I die the King’s good servant but God’s first.*

At a time of such disingenuous characters as Donald Trump, Berlusconi, Boris Johnson and many more, this choice is every bit as much a challenge to us now, as in the days of John Fisher and Thomas More. Who and what to believe?