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The Sermon Style of Saint John Fisher

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THE SERMON STYLE OF SAINT JOHN FISHER

by

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the Requirements for the Degree of
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LIFE

Herbert John Raterman was born at Cincinnati, Ohio, July 6, 1924.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A study of the sermons of St. John Fisher, the English martyr, is interesting and instructive not only because of their spiritual value but also because of their literary value. Even though the sentences and paragraphs are at times entirely too long and the phraseology sometimes obsolete, nevertheless the reader of his sermons on the seven penitential psalms will be impressed by their simplicity and clarity. In these sermons we see Fisher as a great teacher and preacher who would have made a name for himself in English literature, perhaps even as the Father of English Eloquence, if he had not been courageous enough to die for his faith rather than yield to his king in the divorce proceedings of 1527. Fisher's works are little known because the English government would not permit them to be published.¹ This paper will be an attempt to give a little well-deserved recognition to the beautiful style of St. John Fisher's sermons on the penitential psalms.

¹ J. S. Phillimore, Commentary on the Seven Penitential Psalms, St. Louis, 1914-1915, I, vii-ix.

Since the character of the man is so admirably expressed in his sermons, it would be well to give a brief picture of the man whose works we are studying. The eminent Cardinal Reginald Pole, exiled from England because of his loyalty to the Catholic Faith, was so impressed with the character of Fisher that he said of him:

"If an ambassador had to be sent from earth to heaven, there could not among all the bishops and clergy be found so fit a man as John Fisher; for what other man have you at present, nor for many years past, who can be compared with him in sanctity, in learning, in zeal and careful diligence in the office and various duties of a bishop? Above all other nations we may justly rejoice in having such a man; and if all the parts of Christendom were searched there could not be found one man that in all things did accomplish the parts and the degrees of a bishop equal to John Fisher."²

Not only prominent Catholics, but Protestants also thought and spoke highly of John Fisher. In the eighteenth century Edmund Lodge, a Protestant writer of heraldry, laments that Fisher shed his blood in defence of the Catholic Faith instead of dying with those whom Lodge calls the "Protestant Martyrs of the 16th century."

"At a time when the lower clergy were distinguished by their ignorance and debauchery, and the higher by a more refined luxury, and a turn for political intrigue, this bishop's conduct displayed the pure simplicity of a primitive Christian, and rigid morality of a Roman Stoic; plain,

² Cardinal Reginald Pole, Pro Ecclesiasticae Unitatis Defensione, 1536, cited in Moulton, ed., The Library of Literary Criticism, Buffalo, New York, 1901, I, 230.

patient, and sincere, humble but courageous, mild though determined, his character had defied that oblivion, which commonly obscures the favourers of an exploded cause, and in the midst of our veneration for the Protestant Martyrs of the 16th century, we regret that he suffered for the contrary doctrine, and feel that the name of this good Catholic would have been a valuable addition to the glorious catalogue."³

The character of the man found expression in the style of his speeches and writings. William Hepworth Dixon tells of the plain, simple, and lucid manner in which Fisher expressed himself:

"A Yorkshire lad, born in the town of Beverley, though he went to Cambridge early, had not lost his northern grit and twang. His tones were rough, his phrases curt. What other men hardly dared to hint, Fisher would throw into the simplest words. He called a lie a lie, a knave a knave, not caring who might take offense. This roughness of his speech, combined with his repute for piety and learning, took the world by storm. A thorough scholar, armed at every point, he feared no combat, and his nature was as unyielding as a rock."⁴

But St. John Fisher's personality is perhaps most admirably manifested in his sermons on the penitential psalms. There his natural simplicity of character expresses itself in the simplicity and purity of his style. In this paper I will prove that his simplicity of style results mainly from three factors: Unity of design, figurative language, and his gift of

³ Edmund Lodge, Imitations of Original Drawings by Hans Holbein with Biographical Tracts, Ibid., 231.

⁴ William Hepworth Dixon, History of Two Queens, book xiii, chapter ii, Ibid., 231.

repetition. - A chapter will be devoted to each of these. The fifth and final chapter will be a conclusion and brief treatment of Fisher's contribution to English literature.

The text of the sermons that will be used is Commentary on the Seven Penitential Psalms by John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester, edited by J.S. Phillimore. The advantage of this text is that the editor makes the sermons easier reading by changing the Anglo-Saxon spellings to modern and by giving a running glossary of obsolete words. In doing this Mr. Phillimore does not change the style or diction but gives us the sermons essentially as Fisher wrote them.

CHAPTER II

UNITY OF DESIGN, A MEANS TO CLARITY

Unity of design in a sermon may be defined as the arrangement of the parts in such a way that each contributes to the attainment of one definite purpose. Such unity is a great aid to simplicity and clarity. A study of Bishop John Fisher's sermons on the penitential psalms will prove that each is characterized by unity of design. In this chapter a thorough analysis of the first sermon in the series will be offered, pointing out how the parts are arranged to achieve the purpose. To give a similar analysis of the other sermons would not be necessary, for the style of the series remains uniform throughout. A summary of the sermon on the sixth penitential psalm, the familiar De profundus clamavi ad te, will be included to show the striking similarity in style and design between this sermon and the first.

It may be ventured as an opinion that Fisher had spent so many hours of prayer and meditation of these psalms that he knew them by heart. Repeating to himself the first psalm,

"Domine ne in furore tuo arguas me: neque in ira tua corripas

me. Misereere mei Domine quoniam infirmus sum: . . ."⁵ he discovered that it is composed of three parts: (1) David's petitioning Almighty God for mercy, (2) his four reasons why God should be merciful, (3) his joyful expression of courage on being forgiven. Then it occurred to him that, by telling the story of David and by commenting on the psalm, he had ample material for a sermon in which he could persuade sinners not to despair but, after the example of David, to trust in God's mercy.

The first sermon begins with an introduction in which he remarks that, instead of the usual sermon on a Gospel or Epistle, he will comment on psalm VI, the first of the penitential psalms. He utters a short prayer for himself and his people and then states what he will do in the sermon. Before beginning his commentary on the psalm he will show for what occasion David wrote it and the fruit he gained from it. Fisher then states the purpose of his sermon. This introduction is typical of Fisher's habit of informing his listeners of what he intends to do. Notice how this homely introduction, so abrupt, direct, and pointed, arouses an attention and interest which are maintained and increased by the promise of vivid story and of concrete and practical application of David's example to the needs of the audience.

5 J. S. Phillimore, Commentary on the Psalms, I, 8.

Friends, this day I shall not declare unto you any part of the epistle or gospel, which peradventure you do abide for to hear at this time. But at the desire and instance of them whom I may not contrary in any thing which is both according to my duty and also to their soul' health, I have taken upon me shortly to declare the First Penitential Psalm. Wherein I beseech Almighty God for His great mercy and pity so to help me this day by His grace that whatever I shall say may first be to His pleasure, to the profit of mine own wretched soul, and also for the wholesome comfort to all sinners which be repentant for their sins and hath turned themselves with all their whole heart and mind unto God, the way of wickedness and sin utterly forsaken.

But or [before] we go to the declaration of this Psalm, it shall be profitable and convenient to shew who did write this psalm, for what occasion he wrote it, and what fruit, profit, and help he obtained by the same. David, the son of Jesse, a man singularly chosen of Almighty God and endued with many great benefits; afterward he sinned full grievously against God and His law, and for the occasion of his great offence, he made this holy Psalm; and thereby got forgiveness of his sins. Behold, take heed who he was, of what stock he came that made this holy Psalm, for what occasion he made it, and what profit he obtained by the same. But these things shall be more openly declared, that each one of you may know how great a sinner this prophet was and also the greatness of his sin, that we by the example of him warned, instructed and monished, despair not in any condition, but with true penance let us ask of our blessed Lord God mercy and forgiveness. We shall perceive and know the greatness of his sin so much the better and sooner, if his great unkindness shewed against God Almighty that was so beneficial unto him, be made open and known to us.⁶

After this clear statement of his purpose he immediately begins carrying out his plan. The first step is to show how Almighty God blessed David, and the holy bishop does this with a conscious effort to speak in a pleasing and effective

6 Ibid., 2-3.

style. The simplicity of the parable he tells is reminiscent of the story of the "Prodigal Son."

Jesse, the father of David, had seven sons; David was the youngest of them all, least in personage, least set by, and kept his father's sheep. Notwithstanding, the goodness of Almighty God only did elect and choose him, all his brethren reject [being rejected] and set apart, and then commanded Samuel, the bishop and prophet, to anoint him king of Israel. Was not this a great kindness of Almighty God shewed unto such a manner [so to speak] vile person, set to the office of keeping beasts, that He of His goodness would call from so vile an office, set him by His commandment as king and head of all his people? But let us see what did He more for him."⁷

King Saul, having grievously offended Almighty God, was frequently tormented by an evil spirit. David won the favor of Saul because, through a special gift of God, he was the only one who could play the harp well enough to soothe the troubled soul of the king. When Goliath, a giant Philistine, challenged any of the Israelites to fight him single-handed, God gave David courage to fight the giant without any armour but only with his staff, sling, and a stone.

The pattern of scriptural simplicity and directness is continued here in Fisher's commentary on and application of the Bible story:

And as this Philistine came to himward with a cruel and blasphemous countenance, he hit him at one cast with a stone on the forehead and so overthrew him, and shortly drew nigh him and with the sword of the same deformed creature he struck off his head. O marvelous God, by whose only power this weak and little person David, un-

7 Ibid., 3.

armed, obtained the great and marvelous victory of so proud an enemy! But what of this? The benefits which Almighty God did for him be innumerable and impossible for me now to shew them all. He defended him against the envious minds of his brethren, He defended him from the dangers and perils of the two cruel beasts, the lion and the bear, He saved him harmless from the envious persecutions of King Saul, moreover against the hatred of the Philistines. And at the last, when King Saul was dead, He made him King of Israel. By these great and manifold gifts we may understand how much David ought to humble himself unto Almighty God and how much he was bounden to Him. And how ungentle he ought to be reputed and taken, if he should not serve his Lord and Maker with all his whole mind and true heart.

After having enumerated the manifold blessings God had showered on David, Fisher continues his story by showing the ingratitude of David as he fell from one sin into another. David was living in peace with many wives; and in spite of the goodness of God, he committed adultery with the wife of Uriah, one of his valiant knights then at war. He sent for Uriah, trusting that he would have intercourse with his wife and thus would prevent his sin of adultery being known. When Uriah refused to leave the battlefield, the king had him placed in the front ranks where he could easily be slain. Thus we see how unity of design is maintained by contrasting God's goodness with David's ingratitude.

Now we have an eloquent commentary on David's sin of sins:

Behold the accumulation and heaping of sin upon sin! He was not satisfied with the great offence of adultery done against Almighty God, but shortly after committed manslaughter. Adultery in any person is to be abhorred; and it is more to be abhorred if manslaughter be joined

to it; and namely the slaying of so clean and so holy a man to whom he was so greatly beholden for his truth [loyalty] and labours which he took in his wars and business. Now, moreover, how many great benefits had he before this of Almighty God, whereby he might not (of very right) break the least of His commandments without great unkindness! He nevertheless would not let [spare] to commit these abominable sins, adultery and manslaughter; and, a long season, lay and was accustomed in them.⁹

Fisher now calls to the attention of his listeners the goodness Almighty God showed David when He sent a prophet to warn him of his great offenses. On the acknowledgment of his sins David was forgiven; but notwithstanding the goodness of God he fell again into sin, this time taking great pride in the number of his people. But fearing the just punishment of God, he composed his first penitential psalm, expressing his deep sorrow for his many sins. Once again Almighty God forgave him. Characteristically Fisher summarizes what has already been said with: "Now ye understand who made this psalm, what occasion caused him to write it, and what profit he got by the same."¹⁰

The reader can see the logical design in Fisher's manner of persuading his people to trust in the mercy of God. So far, after having stated his purpose, he has told the story of David's many falls into sin and of his final and sincere contrition revealed in the first penitential psalm. If David was

9 Ibid., 5.

10 Ibid., 6.

forgiven after receiving so many benefits from God, why should not all sinners be forgiven who sincerely express the sentiments of the psalm? With that, there begins the larger and more specific commentary with the application addressed immediately to the audience before him.

As he begins his commentary Fisher prepares his listener for what is to come by stating that the psalm is divided into three parts. "In the first the mercy of God is asked. In the second reasons be made whereby the goodness of God should be moved to mercy. And in the third is great gladness shewed for the undoubtful obtaining of forgiveness."¹¹ Fisher wants his people to profit from David's example of begging mercy in the first part. So, to convince the sinner that it is not contrary to the nature of the immutable God to show mercy even though He may have been angry on another occasion, he uses a comparison that is beautiful in its simplicity.

Although Almighty God in Himself and of His eternal being and nature is without mutability or change, yet divers affects [affections] be given to Him in manner as be in man, as it might be thought: sometimes wroth, and sometimes merciful, in case He might be changed from wrath into meekness, but notwithstanding, as Saint James saith: Apud Deum nulla transmutatio est neque vicissitudinis obumbratio: "God is without mutability or change." He is always one. For as we see the beam that cometh from the sun always one in itself, hurteth and grieveth the eye that is not clean and perfect, and comforteth the eye which is pure without any change of his [its] operation; so Almighty God is called grievous unto a sinner

¹¹ Ibid., 5-6.

infected with the malice of sin, and meek and gentle unto the righteous man that is purged from sin. This is done without mutability in God. Truly as long as a creature continueth in the wretchedness of sin, so long shall he think that God is wroth with him; like as the eye while it is sore, so long shall the sunbeam be grievous and noisome to it, and never comfortable till the sickness and disease be done away.¹²

Fisher continues his plan to persuade his people to trust in the mercy of God by commenting on:

Domine ne in furore tuo arguas me: neque in ira tua corripas me. Miserere mei Domine quoniam infirmus sum: "Good Lord correct me not in the everlasting pains of Hell, neither punish me in the pains of Purgatory, have mercy on me good Lord for I am feeble and weak."¹³

Here he reminds us that those who die impenitent shall be cast into the eternal fires of hell, tortured with fearful and repugnant devils. For this reason David begs to be spared these pains and also those of purgatory. Truly God is merciful in sparing the penitent sinner the pains of hell and in permitting him to make complete satisfaction in purgatory. But God's mercy is even greater since it is possible to escape the tortures of purgatory by doing sufficient penance in this life. David, fearing he will fall again, pleads to be shown even this infinite mercy.

David begs God to cure him completely of sin: "Sana me

12 Ibid., 7.

13 Ibid., 8.

Domine: 'Good Lord make me whole.'¹⁴ He is troubled in every part of his body and soul, for there is no pain greater than that caused by an evil conscience. Fisher continues:

Truly that creature hath need for to be made whole which is sore vexed with grievous sickness, that he utterly can find no rest in any part of his body; where also not only the members which be strong feel trouble and pain, but as well they that be feeble be troubled in like manner. It is the property of sin to infect any creature in that manner wise. For as Isaie [sic] the prophet saith: Cor impii quasi mare fervens quod quiescere non potest: "The heart of a sinful person is like unto the troublous sea which never hath rest." What thing may be thought more troublous and more unquiet than is the sea when that it rageth? Even in like wise is the heart of a sinful person. Saint Ambrose asketh this question, as thus, "What pain is more grievous than is the wound of a man's conscience inwardly? It troubleth, it vexeth, it pricketh, it teareth, and also it crucifieth the mind, and it stirreth up-so-down the memory, it confoundeth the reason, it crooketh the will, and unquieteth the soul." Therefore our prophet addeth in his prayer: Quoniam conturbata sunt omnia ossa mea, et anima mea turbata est valde: "Lord make me whole, for all the parts of my body be without rest, and my soul is sore troubled."¹⁵

Frightened as their ship was tossed about in a storm, the Apostles called upon our Lord who calmed the sea by a word. If our Lord but turns to the sinner and grants him mercy, the tempest in his soul will be quieted. The mercy of God is great, but how long will He take before He pardons the sinner?

Sed tu, Domine, usquequo? "Good Lord why tarriest Thou so long?" As he might say: "Thou knowest my tribulation, and now I am turned to Thee; why sufferest me so

14 Ibid., 10

15 Ibid.

long to be vexed with this trouble? Command the winds, suage the tempests, deliver my soul from these storms, for if Thy meekness be turned and look upon me, all the members of my body and also my soul shall be in rest and peace." Convertere ergo, Domine, et eripe animam meam: "Therefore, good Lord, be Thou turned unto me, and deliver my soul from this tribulation wherewith it is troubled by reason of my sin. Deliver my soul, make it whole from the sickness of sin by the medicine of penance, deliver it also from the bitter pains of Purgatory, deliver it also from the eternal punishment which shall be exercised in Hell." This holy prophet meekly prayeth Almighty God for to be delivered from all these pains. He saith: Salvum me fac: "Good Lord, save me from all these outrageous pains."¹⁶

The above quotation ends the commentary on the first part of the psalm. We now discover a special quality in the style of Fisher. Frequently, he will give brief summaries at the end of sections and short introductions at the beginning of new ones to weave together and fix fast the diverse elements of his sermons. For instance, after commenting on David's petition for mercy and before beginning to give reasons why God should be merciful, we hear him say: "All this while it hath been spoken to you of this holy prophet's petition. Now followeth the reasons which he made, whereby Almighty God must needs be moved to grant his petition."¹⁷ By similar short summaries and introductions throughout his sermons he unifies the parts in order to present his main idea more clearly.

16 Ibid., 11.

17 Ibid., 12.

But let us return to his line of thought. He now gives the reasons why God should be merciful. First of all God is merciful from His very nature as scripture tells us: "It is written by the prophet: Misericors et miserator Dominus, patiens et multum misericors: 'Our Lord is both merciful inward and also the doer of mercy outward, patient and always merciful.'"¹⁸ God need not show mercy to the righteous but to the sinner who, as our Lord says, is the one who need the physician. The greater the sickness in the sinner's soul, the greater need he has of God's mercy. But we must remember that God will be merciful only to those sinners who do penance. At this point Fisher gives a summary repeating his argument:

David, therefore, after he had sinned and turned himself by penance unto God, asketh this petition, that our Lord of His goodness would vouchsafe to be turned again to him, delivering his soul from all perils. He fortifieth his reason by His mercy, saying: Propter misericordiam tuam: "Good Lord save me for Thy great mercy."¹⁹

Fisher's commentaries indicate his depth of thought and the hours of meditation he must have spent on the psalms. Interpreting: "Quoniam non est in morte qui memor sit tui: 'No creature being in Purgatory may have Thee in remembrance as he should.'"²⁰

18 Ibid., 12.

19 Ibid., 13.

20 Ibid.

and also: "In inferno autem quis confitebitur tibi? 'Blessed Lord, what creature shall honour and worship Thee in Hell?'"²¹ he cleverly argues that because of His infinite wisdom God should be merciful:

It should seem that he [David] was created of God but in vain and for nothing, without he might come to the end that he was made for. He was brought forth into this world by His creation, to the intent he should know God, and, that knowledge had, should love Him, and in that love he should always bear God in his remembrance and never cease in giving thanks to Him for His innumerable benefits. But these things cannot be done in Purgatory, and much less in Hell; for in Purgatory is so great sorrow for the innumerable pains, that the souls there may scant have remembrance of anything else save only those pains. Sith [since] it is so that the sorrows of this world more vehemently occupieth the mind than doth the pleasures, and also the pleasures of this world (if they be great and over many) will not suffer the soul to remember itself; much less therefore it shall have any remembrance abiding in torments. For cause [because] also the pains of Purgatory be much more than the pains of this world, who may remember God as he ought to do, being in that painful place? Therefore the prophet saith: Quoniam non est in morte qui memor sit tui: "No creature being in Purgatory may have Thee in remembrance as he should." Then sith it is so that in Purgatory we cannot laud and praise God, how shall we do if we be in Hell? Truly in that terrible place no creature shall neither love God, neither laud Him. But always they shall be inured with continual hatred and blasphemings, crying out upon Almighty God and despising His holy Name. This prophet for this cause addeth saying: In inferno autem quis confitebitur tibi? "Blessed Lord, what creature shall honour and worship Thee in Hell?"²²

The third argument pertains to the justice of God. It

21 Ibid., 14.

22 Ibid., 13-14.

would be unjust for God to punish a second time for an offense already punished; and because David has borne so much pain and punishment by his incessant weeping for his sins, God could not justly punish him again for the same sins. To convince his people that weeping for sins merits forgiveness, Fisher quotes our Lord and then uses a homely figure of scrubbing pots to stress his point:

The weeping heartily for sins is of so great virtue and strength unto God that for one weeping coming from the heart of a sinner, our Lord forgiveth his trespass. Nam in quacunq[ue] hora peccator ingemuerit saluus erit: "For whenever a sinner weepeth and walleth heartily he shall be saved." Weeping doeth that thing in the soul which rubbing and fretting doeth in the iron. Rubbing taketh away rust and cankering from the iron. And weeping putteth away from the soul the infection of sin. The iron with rubbing anon will shine full bright. So the soul with weeping is made fair and white. Weeping cometh of the very sorrow from the heart, like as sin is caused and cometh of the unlawful pleasures of the body. So doth hearty weeping for sin expel sin, and is a sufficient and just recompense for it.²³

The figure of washing pots is repeated again as it is pointed out that David wept every night for his many sins. This passage, beautiful in its simple and instructing message, is representative of Fisher's style:

Also he wept not only, but also very sore and pitifully, for because he might wash every sin in him with his bitter tears. In like wise as we see by rusty and cankered pots, when they shall be made clean, first they rub away the rust, and after that wash it with water. So did this

holy prophet, first by his weeping scoured and made full clean his soul from the rustiness and cankering of his foul sin, and after washed it with his weeping tears. He made his promise not only once or twice to do, but also every night to weep and wail; he saith: Lavabo per singulas noctes lectum meum lacrimis meis: "I shall every night wash my bed with my weeping tears." And by this said bed is understand [understood] the filthy voluptuousness of the body, wherein the sinner walloweth and wrap-peth himself like as a sow walloweth in the stinking gore-pit or in the puddle. If thou wilt understand by the nights the darkness of sins, then it is all one to wash every night thy bed and to weep and wail the pleasure of thy body by the sorrowful remembrance of all thy sins one after another. It followeth again in the same: Stratum meum rigabo: "I shall wash my bed." By this bed is understand [understood] the heap and multitude of sins wherein all be heaped and gathered together upon a rock. [ruck, a stack] Then if every oblectation of sin shall be done away by weeping tears, it may well be called a shower or a flood of them wherewith the heap of sins shall be washed away.²⁴

Fisher's fourth reason is based on the power of God.

In one of the most beautiful passages of this sermon he argues by using scripture quotations, comparisons, and repetition that God would not show great power if He were to exercise His strength on the weak. The passage is typical of Fisher's method of instructing and persuading his people, and could be quoted in either of the chapters on figurative language or repetition. It is included here since it is an excellent example of how he proves a point necessary for the accomplishment of his purpose:

Fourthly he maketh his reason by the great power of Almighty God; by this manner. It seemeth not so great majesty to exercise and prove His strength upon a

24 Ibid., 15.

feeble and weak person; for then it would be as Job sayeth: Contra folium quod vento rapitur potentiam ostenderet suam: "He should shew and prove his strength against the leaf that with a little wind is wagged and blown down." It becometh not Him so to do which hath all power and is almighty, but rather that He defend and save them that be impotent and feeble; for of them that foolishly did tempt the goodness of Almighty God it is written: Et salvavit eos propter nomen suum ut notam faceret potentiam suam: "He saved them for His holy Name that His power might be known." On this wise without doubt the power of Almighty God is shewed to His great honour and glory. What praise were it to a giant to fight against a gnat, or how should his strength be known although He have the better of the gnat? Should He not be dispraised for that victory? Great laud and praise is in wild beasts lacking reason, that they will forgive and not venge themselves upon other weak beasts that acknowledgeth their feebleness and bow down to them. They abstain from their cruelty and malice. Parcere prostratis vult nobilis ira leonis: "The lion is so noble that in his anger he will not hurt the beast that falleth down and meeketh himself unto him." Shall not therefore God, to whom is ascribed all goodness and praise that may be in any creature, be meek and gentle? And shall He not be patient and spare weak and feeble creatures, meeking themselves and owning their own infirmity? Yes, doubtless; for the more that a man is endued with the virtue of strength, the more meek and gentle shall he be. Therefore Almighty God, that is most mighty of all, must needs be most gentle and meek. The prophet therefore sheweth his feebleness, willing thereby to move the goodness of God to mercy and pity. Turbatus est a furore oculus meus. He saith, "Good Lord, the eye of my soul is troubled and feared of thine infinite punishment."²⁵

In a brief summary of his fourth reason Fisher says:

"The whole effect of this fourth reason is this. Since it is so that this prophet is in so great feebleness and submitting himself all whole to God, He of His great power may not be but

merciful to him."²⁶

This brings us to the commentary on the third part of the psalm "wherein the prophet trusting verily of forgiveness joyeth in himself with a bold and hardy spirit."²⁷ Since there is no need for the penitent sinner to fear the devil and his enemies if he has turned to God and confidently trusts in His mercy, David rejoices because God has forgiven him while his enemies are overcome and bewail the loss of a soul returned to God. In a final appeal, really a summary of the entire sermon, to profit from the example of David, Fisher describes the prophet's joy and boldness on having obtained mercy:

The virtue and strength of the grace of God is marvelous, that where it once pierceth and entereth into the soul of any creature, it maketh him bold and to hope well, in so much that he dare make battle afresh against his enemies. Take heed and behold the sudden change of this prophet, caused by the goodness of God; where but late he was vexed and troubled with fear and dread, nevertheless now being comforted by the grace of Almighty God, he hath audacity to despise his enemies and command them to go away from him. He saith: Discedite a me omnes qui operamini iniquitatem: "All ye that be the doers of wickedness, I command you, go from me." . . . Nevertheless as soon as they be penitent and willing to forsake their sins, they be utterly delivered from their power; and also they dare no more meddle with them, for the which they be sore vexed and troubled, seeking their prey, whether they will or will not, to be taken away from them. Certainly then they gnash with their teeth, they wail, they be full of wrath and wax wood [mad]. And that they may oft be vexed on

26 Ibid., 17.

27 Ibid.

this wise, the prophet maketh this imprecation:
Erubescant et conturbentur vehementer omnes inimici mei.
 This imprecation is good and rightwise. For why? Great honour by it is given to Almighty God, great help and succour unto them that be penitent, great joy to them that be rightwise of overcoming their enemies, and marvellous great confusion unto the devils. Wherefore the prophet again maketh his imprecation, desiring that sinners may be turned to God, and forsake their sinful life, and by that the devils may be more and more ashamed. Convertantur et erubescant: "Blessed Lord, give sinners that grace they may be turned to the great shame and confusion of the devils." Valde velociter: "And grant that it may be done shortly."²⁰

To sum up: We see that Fisher achieves unity of design in this sermon by informing his listeners right from the start what he intends to accomplish. Then to create interest and to impress deeply upon sinners that God will forgive the greatest of them, he tells the story of David; how God blessed him manifoldly; how David sinned grievously; and how he obtained forgiveness. Having told the story Fisher begins his commentary on the psalm which is made up of three parts: (1) David's petitioning for mercy, (2) his four reasons why God should be merciful, (3) his joy and courage on being forgiven. By means of comparisons, summaries, short introductions, and repetition, Fisher keeps drumming into the ear of the sinner that he should never despair but always trust in the mercy of God.

This sermon pattern is followed throughout the series. The similarity in structure between two model sermons will show.

how closely Fisher adhered to the original design. A study of the sermon on the sixth penitential psalm reveals a pattern essentially the same as the first.

The sixth begins with the story of Jonas, the prophet, and points out the seven steps or degrees in his sin of disobedience. Then Fisher compares these steps to the seven degrees of mortal sin that a sinner can fall into. The example of a sinner that he uses is that of a fornicator. Here he clearly describes how far a sinner can fall and nevertheless be forgiven if, like Jonas, the sinner does not despair but begs Almighty God to forgive him. After his forceful narrative of Jonas and the seven degrees of sin, Fisher begins his commentary on the psalm to prove his point that sinners should never despair but put their confidence in God's mercy by being truly penitent. Fisher gives a clear explanation of the three parts of true penitence, namely, contrition, confession, and satisfaction. Frequently repeating himself with arguments from scripture, the saints, and reason, he proves that no matter how great and numerous a man's sins are: (1) God must forgive him if he is truly penitent; (2) God has promised forgiveness; (3) Because of His superabundant mercy God will forgive every true penitent. The sermon is summarized in the following paragraph:

Now let us conclude this sermon with a short rehearsal of the same. All ye have heard what we have spoken in it, I pray you remember yourself by how many degrees, and how perilously ever sinner descendeth, slippeth down suddenly, without he take heed, toward the deep pit of

Hell. Therefore do penance in this life as soon as ye may, and beseech Almighty God to accept your penance. Trust verily (if ye so do) neither your sins, nor the rightwiseness of God, neither the ordinance of His holy law shall withstand, but ye may ever be in a surety to have forgiveness; first by His promise, by His great power whereby He may observe the same; last because He is so ready to forgive every hour and every moment. Without doubt, every sinner, be he never so wicked, by these great benefits of Almighty God may trust verily to have forgiveness, if he do penance and hold up himself by the grace of God from falling down into the deep dungeon of despair. Which our Lord Jesus Christ grant us. Amen.²⁹

Notice the similarity in structure between this sermon and the first. Fisher begins his first sermon with the story of David and his fall. He begins the sixth by telling the story of Jonas and the seven stages of his sin of disobedience. After expressing the purpose of each sermon, he comments on its particular psalm in order to achieve his purpose. In the commentary he argues forcefully, following a logical outline and giving arguments from scripture, the saints, and reason. By means of his figurative language he frequently repeats his main theme. Finally he concludes, if not with a stated summary or repetition of the whole sermon as he does in the sixth, at least with a prayer to Almighty God in which he repeats once again the purpose of his talk.

In brief then, Fisher follows a well-knit pattern something like this: He deliberately designs his sermon to achieve his purpose which he states at the beginning. In order to arouse

interest, he usually tells a story or uses a comparison. By following a clearly planned outline, he divides the talk into parts which are so arranged to put across his key idea. By using figures, comparisons, repetition, and brief introductions and summaries throughout, he keeps driving home his arguments and his main idea to persuade his audience to adopt the practice he wants them to adopt. Finally he will give a summary of the sermon to repeat once again his purpose.

The above is a brief skeleton of the structure of the sermons on the penitential psalms. This structure lends itself beautifully to unity of design. For the interest of the reader I will append here a more detailed analytical outline of the first sermon. It will serve as a final proof that unity of design is a characteristic of these sermons.

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. Commentary on the first of the penitential psalms instead of preaching on a Gospel or Epistle text.
- B. Prayer
 - 1. For pleasure of Almighty God
 - 2. For profit of his own soul
 - 3. For comfort of repentant sinners
- C. Profitable to show:
 - 1. Occasion of psalm
 - 2. Fruit obtained from it
- D. Purpose of sermon
 - 1. Not to despair in sin
 - 2. To ask mercy and forgiveness

II. Body: Story of David and Commentary on psalm

- A. Story of David, occasion of the psalm, and profit derived
 - 1. God's gifts to David
 - a. Chosen to be king in preference to his brothers
 - b. Favored by Saul

- c. Strengthened to defeat Goliath
- d. Defended against his brothers
- e. Protected against lion and bear
- f. Saved from persecution of Saul and hatred of the Philistines
- g. Finally made King of Israel

2. David's sins

- a. Though living in peace with many wives, David committed adultery with the wife of Uriah.
- b. David had Uriah, a valiant knight in his army, sent to the first ranks to be slain.
- c. For a long time David remained in his sins.
- d. Then after being warned by a prophet and forgiven by God, David fell into sin of pride.

B. Commentary on the three parts of the psalm

1. Petition for mercy

- a. David asks to be spared pains of hell where sinners:
 - 1) Are deprived of seeing God,
 - 2) Suffer everlasting fires,
 - 3) Are surrounded by fearful devils.
- b. David asks to be spared pains of purgatory where God punishes repentant sinners.
 - 1) Prayers for these souls are heard.
 - 2) Pains of hell and purgatory are the same except that those of purgatory are not eternal.
- c. David asks God to permit him to make complete recompense in this life.
 - 1) Mercy of God is so great that sinner deserving eternal pains can by penance mitigate them by enduring temporal pains in this life and by making full satisfaction in purgatory.
 - 2) God is so merciful that if sinner does sufficient penance he can escape even the pains of purgatory.
 - 3) David fearing that he will fall again asks God to show him infinite mercy.
- d. David begs to be healed completely from sin.
 - 1) Description of sinner torn and vexed by evil conscience
 - 2) Christ calmed sea by mere word.
 - a) Turbulent sea signifies soul when Almighty God turns from sinner.
 - b) No calming of soul until sinner is repentant.

2. Reasons for God to show mercy

- a. Of His nature God is merciful to the sinner.
 - 1) Greater the sin, greater need the sinner has of God's mercy which is medicine to his soul.
 - 2) God is merciful only to repentant sinners.
- b. The All-wise God would be foolish to let him perish since He made David to know Him, to love Him, and

- in that love to always remember Him.
- 1) In purgatory creature is suffering too much to remember anything but his pains.
- 2) In hell David will love God not at all.
- c. Because of His righteousness it is unjust for God to punish a second time for an offense already punished.
 - 1) God gives sinner time to do penance; and if sufficient is done, God is content.
 - 2) David points out what pain and punishment he is bearing.
 - a) Weeping from the heart washes away the infection of sin.
 - b) David tells God he weeps frequently and washes his bed steeped in sin.
- d. Because of His great power Almighty God should be merciful.
 - 1) It is not a sign of great majesty to exercise strength on the feeble and weak.
 - 2) Therefore God is merciful to the weak.
 - 3) David then admits his weakness to move God to pity and mercy.
- 3. Being forgiven, David rejoices with a bold and hardy spirit.
 - a. David's tears of penitence ascend to throne of God.
 - b. God has heard David's prayer and forgiven him.
 - c. Devil bewails over loss of soul returned to God.
 - d. David begs the grace that sinners may be turned from sin and that their enemies may be overcome.

III. CONCLUSION: Short prayer of David that sinners may repent and turn back to God.

CHAPTER III

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE, A MEANS TO CLARITY

The speaker who puts his thought into a clear picture or story will be much clearer and more persuasive than if he neglected the picturesque element in his work. For example, it is obvious that the listener prefers seeing Christ hanging on His Cross to just hearing about His Crucifixion. To make his listener "see," the speaker must play upon his imagination; and he does this, as Genung and Hanson say, by using figurative language.

The expression of imagination in our talking and writing is largely through the use of figurative language. We speak of a "blood-red sunset," "the moaning of the sea," "the sighing of the wind," "a tempest in a teapot," - expressions which are not literally exact, but which make a strong appeal to the imagination.³⁰

By appealing to the imagination through the use of figurative language, the speaker wins his listener's attention and interest and is well on his way towards being clearly and easily understood.

Since Bishop John Fisher, humanist as he was, knew the

³⁰ John Franklin Genung and Lane Hanson, Outlines of Composition and Rhetoric, Boston, 1915, 138.

importance of arousing the interest and attention of his people, he uses figurative and imaginative language constantly in his sermons on the seven penitential psalms. In this chapter many examples will be quoted to give the reader a clear idea of how he uses the comparison, his distinctive type of figure, as a means for clearly expressing himself.

The first example is taken from the first sermon and comes after Fisher has explained to his people the story of David and how he obtained mercy by repeatedly reciting the first penitential psalm. The comparison is homely and very commonplace and helps Fisher put his point across clearly.

Which of us now that were sick in any part of his body, being in jeopardy of death, would not diligently search for a medicine wherewith he might be healed, and first make inquisition of him that had the same sickness before? Would we not also put very trust and hope to have remedy of our disease by that medicine whereby like manner sickness and diseases were cured before? Sith [since] we now therefore have heard tell for a truth how greatly sick and diseased this prophet David was, not with the sickness of his body, but of his soul, and also with what medicine he was cured and made whole, let us take heed and use the same when we be sick in like manner as he was, by our sins, shortly to be cured; for he was a sinner as we be, but he did wholesome penance, making this holy Psalm whereby he got forgiveness and was restored to his soul's health. We in like wise by oft saying and reading this Psalm, with a contrite heart (as he did), asking mercy, shall without doubt purchase and get of our best and merciful Lord God forgiveness for our sins.³¹

On page eleven I have quoted Fisher's explaining to

31 J. S. Phillimore, Commentary on the Psalms, I, 6.

his audience the difficult point of how the immutable God can have diverse affections. He explains simply and clearly by comparing the wrath and mercy of God to the rays of the sun. The sun still remains the same while its rays hurt a sore eye but comfort a good one. God is always one; but He is called "grievous unto a sinner infected with the malice of sin, and meek and gentle unto the righteous man that is purged from sin."³² This is the type of figure that drives home the speaker's argument, a handy tool for persuasion and fine rhetoric. Such a figure is just what Fisher's audience understood and what they wanted because it is homely and familiar to them.

From studying Fisher's comparisons, I have come to the conclusion that their characteristic results in all probability from his searching for common ground between the listener and himself. Searching for common ground is just another way of saying that the speaker constantly keeps his audience in mind as he prepares his talk so that he may speak ideas, language, and figures that are common and easily known by the listener. If the speaker does not, the sermon is bound to be a failure; for it is impossible to instruct or to persuade an audience to action if they do not know what the speaker is talking about. Looking for common ground, or in other words looking for examples and figures familiar to the listener, is essential for

32 Ibid., 7.

every good sermon. Henry Ward Beecher, a prominent Protestant preacher, attributed his success to an habitual search for common ground:

"I got this idea: That the Apostles were accustomed first to feel for a common ground on which the people and they stood together; . . . Then they heaped up a large number of particulars of knowledge that belonged to everybody; and when they got that knowledge which everybody would admit, placed in proper form before their minds, then they brought it to bear . . . with all their excited heart and feeling.

"Now," said I, 'I will make a sermon so.' . . . First I sketched out the things we all know . . . And in that way I went on with my 'you all knows,' until I had about forty of them. When I got through with that, I turned round and brought it to bear . . . with all my might; and there were seventeen men awakened under that sermon. I never felt so triumphant in all my life. I cried all the way home. I said to myself: 'Now I know how to preach.'"³³

As I said above, I believe the clarity of Fisher's comparisons and figurative language is a result of his searching for common ground. Fisher was a brilliant scholar, and it would have been easy for him to speak beyond the mental grasp of his people. The only way he could possibly have come down to their level was by a constant effort to speak in figures, examples, stories, etc., familiar to his people. I sincerely believe that the reader will not find one figure in his sermons on the psalms that would not have been clearly known to his people. As a matter of fact his figures are so common that people today would

³³ Henry Ward Beecher, Yale Lectures on Preaching cited in Atkinson, How to Make Us Want Your Sermon, New York, [Second Printing, 1942], 46-47.

readily understand them. The reader will enjoy the following examples:

In his sermon on the second penitential psalm Fisher again gives figures, arguments, and frequent repetitions to persuade his people to do penance. He says that penance cleanses the soul as scraping erases writing and leaves the paper clean.³⁴ Then he describes the misery of the sinner who does little or no penance. Here we have an instance where he does not hesitate to express himself in the frankest of terms:

Moreover if the filthiness of sin be once conceived in the soul, and long continue there by unhappy custom, it maketh foul and infecteth it more and more; as we see by urine or any other stinking liquor put in a vessel, the longer it be kept in the same, so much more it maketh foul the vessel and corrupteth it. Another example. As we see a boil or botch full of matter and filth, the more and the longer it be hid, the more groweth the corruption and venomous infection of it, and also pierceth to the bones and corrupteth them. In like wise the longer that sins be kept close in the souls, the more feeble they be made and the more contagiously corrupt.³⁵

The reader will probably object that this figure is shocking and entirely out of place in the pulpit. It is true that it may be out of place today, but we must remember that Fisher was speaking before the influence of Puritan prudery had been felt. In his day the audience would take such a figure as a matter of course, for he certainly would not have used it were

34 Ibid., Phillimore, Commentary on the Psalms, I, 21.

35 Ibid., 23-24.

it to offend his listener.

Later in the sermon when speaking of satisfaction for sin, he points out that God's grace is necessary for the sinner and compares the light of grace to a beam coming from the sun:

From the eyes of Almighty God, which may be called His grace, shineth forth a marvellous brightness like as the beam that cometh from the sun. And that light of grace stirreth and setteth forward the soul to bring forth the fruit of good works, even as the light of the sun causeth herbs to grow and trees to bring forth fruit. Therefore if we that be set amongst the perilous floods of these worldly pleasures will lift up our minds to God, not setting our felicity on them, busily asking His help, He shall comfort us.³⁶

On December the Eighth, the feast of our Lady's Nativity, Fisher was confronted with a problem. He had promised before beginning his series of sermons on the penitential psalms to speak of our Lady's Nativity, and yet many friends insisted that he continue with the psalms. How was he to make himself clear when speaking on two subjects as diverse as Penance and our Lady's Nativity? As a solution he divides his sermons into two parts. In the first he exhorts the sinner to fly to Mary for the grace to be truly penitent, and in the second he takes up the commentary on the third penitential psalm.

When exhorting the sinner to seek Mary's intercession, he repeatedly says that Mary is the morning between the darkness of sin and the light of Christ. Since he repeats the figure

36 Ibid., 32-33.

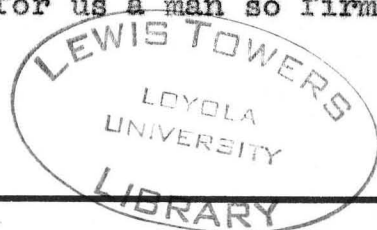
throughout the first part, I will discuss it in my chapter on repetition. However, there are some other figures from the same sermon which should be incorporated here.

In an allegorical interpretation he compares sin to a serpent:

A serpent hath a head, a body and a tail; semblably so hath sin, for when any man feeleth the first instigation or stirring to sin, doubtless there is the serpent's head. When afterwards he consenteth to the same instigation, then he suffereth the body of that serpent to enter. And at last when he fulfillleth the sin in deed, then is the venomous tail of the serpent entered. Without thou resist and withstand the head, that is to say the first suggestion, it shall be very hard for thee to exclude sin; for whereas a serpent may get in his head, anon he bringeth after the residue of his body. So by sin, if also the straight passage be made open to the first admonition or stirring of sin, anon he draweth after him the whole body, and never ceaseth till it come into the highest part of the soul. He advanceth himself and is lifted up far above the mind, which ought to be the head of the soul. And this of a truth is a great misery, whereof this holy prophet David maketh his complaint saying Quoniam iniquitates meae supergressae sunt caput meum: "All the parts of my body be without rest because my sins be exalted far above mine head." We have given so great licence to this serpent sin, and so easily entreated [dealt with] it, that now when it is once entered it will not out again, but, as a tyrant, hath decreed to keep in possession the habitacle that he hath won, either peaceably or by strength.³⁷

Sin can gain such control of a sinner's soul that often the soul is almost compelled to do what it would not. In the following quotation Fisher shows his penetrating knowledge of human nature. Here Fisher pictures for us a man so firmly

37 Ibid., 51-52.



held in the clutches of sin that he doesn't feel its burden until he has fallen into the pit of hell.

Peradventure some sinner will say, "I perceive not feel any weight in myself, do I never so many sins." To whom we answer that if a dog, having a great stone bound about his neck, be cast down from a high tower, he feeleth no weight of that stone as long as he is falling down, but when he is once fallen to the ground he is burst all to pieces by reason of that weight. So the sinner going down towards the pit of Hell feeleth not the great burden of sin, but when he shall come into the depths of Hell he shall feel more pain than he would.³⁸

The next example I have selected is taken from the second part of the sermon on the third penitential psalm. One would think Fisher had read St. Ignatius Loyola's rules for the discernment of spirits since he, like St. Ignatius, gives us an accurate description of how the devils will try to deceive us. After stating that the power of the devils is so great that if God permitted them to exercise it in its entirety upon mankind, all men would be destroyed, he tells us that the devils attempt to lead us into sin by means of sinful pleasures and worldly vanities. If they cannot take us by pleasures:

then they lay in our way other subtle and crafty baits; for their purpose is, either by continuance of one temptation or other, to make a man weary and cause him to think at the last that God will not help him, and so he falleth into despair. Either they be about to bring a man to a higher perfection of life, to the end anon after they may overthrow him again, else they persuade

and propose to a man's mind a more profitable place to get virtue in. Because why? They may likely or sooner put him down and make him forsake it; like as fishers do when they be about to cause fish to come into their nets or other engines, they trouble the waters to make them avoid and flee from their wonted places. Sometime they persuade a man to change the manner of his life into a more strait way of living than peradventure any person may bear or suffer, that then he that is grieved afterward give over and forsake it; like as men say apes be taken of the hunters by doing on shoes. For the property of an ape is to do as he seeth a man do. The hunter therefore will lay a pair of shoes in his way, and when he perceiveth the hunter doing on his shoes he will do the same; and so after that it is too hard for him to leap and climb from tree to tree as he was wont, but he falleth down, and anon is taken. Or else at some time they lay before a man venom privily hid under the colour of appearing virtue, as to set his mind on getting and to lay up worldly riches for the exercising of the works of mercy. Either [or else] they move a man to chastise his body above his power from the sin of lechery. Thus by these frauds and other innumerable the devils be about to turn us from virtue, wherefore the prophet added Et dolos tota die meditabantur: "Daily their mind was to beguile me."³⁹

One of Fisher's best comparisons is quoted at great length in The World's Best Orations.⁴⁰ From my analysis of the selection I would say that it merits to be included in such a noteworthy volume mainly because it is an excellent example of his figurative language and of the flowing rhythm of his lines. He teaches us that we sinners are in constant danger of being

39 Ibid., 67-68.

40 John Fisher, "The Jeopardy of Daily Life," [From his "Sermons on the Psalms"], The World's Best Orations, eds., David J. Brewer, Edward A. Allen, and William Schuyler, St. Louis, [1899], VI, 2164.

dropped into hell. The idea is brought out clearly and forcefully and is such an universal comparison that it would be effective even in a modern sermon. It is taken from the first part of Fisher's sermon on the fourth penitential psalm. Since the passage is too long to quote in its entirety, I will quote parts and summarize others.

That man were put in great peril and jeopardy that should hang over a very deep pit, holden up by a weak and slender cord or line, in whose bottom be most wood [furious] and cruel beasts of every kind, abiding with great desire his falling down, for that intent, when he shall fall down, anon to devour him; which line or cord that he hangeth by, should be holden up and stayed only by the hands of that man to whom by his manifold ungentleness he hath ordered and made himself as a very enemy. Likewise, dear friends, consider in yourself. If now under me were such a very deep pit, wherein might be lions, tigers, and bears gaping with open mouth to destroy and devour me at my falling down, and that there be nothing whereby I might holden up and succoured but a broken bucket or pail which should hang by a small cord, stayed and holden up only by the hands of him, to whom I have behaved myself as an enemy and adversary by great and grievous injuries and wrongs done unto him, would ye not think me in perilous conditions? Yes, without fail. Truly all we be in like manner. For under us is the horrible and fearful pit of Hell, where the black devils in the likeness of ramping and cruel beasts doth abide desirously our falling down to them. The lion, the tiger, the bear, or any other wild beast never layeth so busily a-wait for his prey when he is hungry, as doth these great and horrible hell-hounds, the devils, for us. . . . There is none of us living but that is holden up from falling down to Hell in as feeble and frail vessel, hanging by as weak line as may be. I beseech you, what vessel may be more bruckle [brittle] and frail than is our body that daily needeth reparation, and if thou refresh it not, anon it perisheth and cometh to nought? A house made of clay, if it be not often renewed and repaired with putting it of new clay, shall at the last fall down. And much more this house made of flesh, this house of our soul, this vessel where-

in our soul is holden up and borne about, but if [unless] it be refreshed by often feeding and putting to of meat and drink, within the space of three days it shall waste and slip away.⁴¹

Fisher quotes Solomon to warn us that we must be careful even in our youth that our bodies be not broken and our souls slip down into hell just as a pot may be broken over a fountain and crash down into the well below. After all a man's body hangs but by a slender cord, the life of the man, which in turn is held in the hands and power of God. Yet we sin and provoke to wrath Almighty God who has but to break our life-line for us to tumble down into the pit of hell.⁴² Then calling out to God, Fisher repeats the above situation by telling God of man's miserable plight. There is a beautiful rhythm to his lines as he describes the blindness of us men who have received so many benefits from God, who have been spared endless misfortunes by the goodness of God, and who have passed up countless opportunities for doing penance.⁴³ We must always remember that the "stinking abomination of our sins"⁴⁴ is within us; so most certainly we should fear God.

41 Phillimore, Commentary on the Psalms, I, 78-79.

42 Ibid., 79-80.

43 Ibid., 80.

44 Ibid.

lest that He let fall this line from His hands, and the pot our body be broken, and we then fall down into the deep dungeon of Hell. Therefore what shall we wretched sinners do? Of whom may help and succour be had and obtained for us? By what manner sacrifice may the wrath and ire of so great a Majesty be pacified and made easy? Truly the best remedy is to be swift in doing penance for our sins. He only may help them that be penitent. By that only sacrifice His ire is mitigate and assuaged chiefly. Our most gracious Lord Almighty God is merciful to them that be penitent. Therefore let us now ask His mercy with the penitent prophet David. Let us call and cry before the throne of His grace, saying Miserere mei Deus: "God have mercy on me."⁴⁵

Later in the sermon Fisher begs God to show us mercy because of our great weakness. He reminds God that we are but dust and clay and that we are daily under the captivity of sin because of the weakness of our bodies:

If a commandment were given to a man that hath but a weak and feeble body in strength, to roll and turn up a millstone of a great weight unto the highest part of a hill, and that he put his good will to perform the same; nevertheless, peradventure whilst he is about to do the deed, the stone for greatness of his [its] weight above his strength falleth down backward into a valley. Were not this man more worthy to be pardoned and forgiven (seeing and knowing his good mind) than he that were mighty and hath great strength? We be in like condition, we be about to bring this our body unto Thy holy hill; nevertheless it is thrust down by the heavy burden of sin, that oftentimes it boweth and slippeth down backward. For that same sin that by our first father and mother, Adam and Eve, was brought amongst all men is heavy and grievous on us like as an heavy burden, and daily grieveth us more and more; it maketh us also prone and ready to all other vices. Therefore and for this cause have mercy on us, for this sin of our forefather, this heavy and grievous weight, was conceived and be-

45 Ibid., 81.

gotten with us, according to the saying of the prophet Ecce enim in iniquitatibus conceptus sum et in peccatis concepit me mater mea: "Behold I was conceived in sin, and my mother conceived me in sin."⁴⁶

After showing in Part II how abominable in the sight of Almighty God sin is by considering how God put the bad angels out of heaven and our first parents out of paradise and how He drowned almost all mankind and lastly permitted His Son to die upon the Cross, Fisher comments on these words of David:

"Averte faciem tuam a peccatis meis: 'Good Lord, look not upon my sins.'⁴⁷ But how can God fail to look upon our sins?

Fisher says that He must behold our sins as long as they remain on our souls. He explains himself in the following manner:

As, by this example, who may perceive and see a wall painted with many divers images, but first He [sic] look upon these same pictures? For they be as a veil or covering to the wall, wherefore needs the sight must first be applied unto them. In like manner therefore since our sins in respect of the soul be to it as a picture or covering is to a wall, Almighty God must needs first look upon our sins or ever [before] He look upon our souls. Alas what shall we sinful wretches do? Certainly this only remedy is necessary: whoso will look upon a bare wall, must first do away the painting or covering; and that done all shall be clean and pure to behold. So if our souls should be seen and not our sins, first our sins must be clean done away; for all the while they be infected with the least spot of sin, so long they may not be seen without the sin be seen also.⁴⁸

46 Ibid., 90-91.

47 Ibid., 100.

48 Ibid.

St. John Fisher was a renowned scholar of his day; so it is not surprising that his sermons contain many quotations and references to scripture. Having given a detailed account of the seventh King of Israel, Ahab's, many sins of disobedience, he tells us that finally at Almighty God's threat to slay all of Ahab's posterity, Ahab repented and did penance. He then informs us that by penance a sinner may still merit a place in the heavenly Jerusalem whose high walls are not as yet finished. Since a great number of stones are still needed to take the place of those lost when the angels fell, the sinner who is polished and made square here on earth may find a place in the walls:

A great number of stones is wanting wherewith they should be performed and accomplished, for the ruin of angels which fell down from that City must be repaired and renewed by taking up of men and women, like as by quick stones. As we see in manner when stones be assumpt for the re-edifying of cities or towers with other. But it is according that into such a noble building no stone be taken up, but if [unless] that it be prepared as it should be and made meet before. For in that Heavenly Palace may no stone be shapen or made square. It must be made fit and perfect here on earth before, lest at the lifting up thither it be not able there to abide and so be cast down into the deep dungeon of Hell. The Heavenly Artificer useth many and divers manners in shaping or squaring of stones meet for those walls. Peradventure some be hard and them He must entreat hardly.⁴⁹

Because the fifth penitential psalm is too long for a

49 Ibid., 115-116.

commentary in one sermon, Fisher divided it into two main parts and gave sermons on two subsequent Sundays. He is now commenting on the words, "Et ossa mea sicut cremium aruerunt: 'For my bones (that is to say the strong parts of my soul) be dried away like unto the dross of scraps of tallow after it is clarified by the fire.'"⁵⁰ He understands David to mean that the fire of unlawful concupiscence has left his soul dry and devoid of all sweetness of prayer and devotion. He is worse off than grass dried up by the heat of the sun since one rainfall can give moisture and life to the grass; but his soul has no source of moisture.

For as the green grass or corn that now flourisheth, if it be not refreshed at some time with a dew or rain, anon it is smitten with the heat of the sun and waxeth dry even as hay; so my soul is dried up by the heat of unlawful desire, and all the sweetness of devotion is clean expelled from it, that not only the strong parts of my soul (understanding and reason) be dry and dull, but also I myself in every part percussus sum ut foenum: "Am smitten with the heat of temptation and withered as hay." But I am far in worse condition that is withered grass or hay. For although the green grass be dried up by the heat of the sun, yet it hath somewhat whereby it may be refreshed as long as the root is fast in the ground, by drawing up moisture out of the earth from the root into every other part; and as we see oftentimes when the green grass hath changed the colour after the earth be burnt, chined, [split], and chipped by the heat of the sun, as soon as it is watered with a shower of rain, within the space of one night it beginneth to quicken again and renew the [its] own colour. But nothing can be found whereof the soul may draw up and receive any moisture, any savour or any sweetness of devotion.⁵¹

50 Ibid., II, 10.

51 Ibid., 10-11.

If sweetness of devotion is to come to the soul, it must come from the heart; but David's heart is also dried up and withered away. Pleadingly he tells God that anything having life will soon die if it be not nourished. His soul will soon die if God does not nourish it:

The soul in like manner is nourished with a certain meat, and if it refuse and will not take the food, needs must it wax dry and lack good devotion. The meat according for the soul is the word of God, as it is written: Non in solo pane vivit homo, sed de omni verbo quod procedit de ore Dei. Man hath a body and soul, and as the body is refreshed with material bread, so the soul is nourished with the spiritual food which is the word of God. This spiritual bread, the word of God, maketh the soul to be full of juice, full of the liquor of good devotion; and also it maketh the soul strong and hardy to withstand all tribulations. Whosoever eateth not of this bread shall wax lean in his soul, and at the last dry and come to nought. For because, good Lord, that I have not eaten this spiritual bread, I am blasted and smitten with dryness like unto hay, having no devotion. And also my heart is withered, of whom the sweet fruit of devotion should spring out.⁵²

To eat this nourishing spiritual bread, more has to be done than merely to hear the word of God, for many hear the word but do not accept it. They receive it in a manner similar to a person who would take material bread into his mouth but neither chews it nor swallows it. On the other hand many eat the bread of the devil, listening to his words and following his suggestions which eventually cause the soul to become the slave of

52 Ibid., 11-12.

the flesh and to be led to eternal death. Fisher repeats this figure in detail:

But this is not the meat of the soul, it hurteth and is venom unto it, it doeth no good, it refresheth it not, it is a mortal infection and causeth the soul to die everlastingly; it maketh that the concupiscence of the flesh hath domination, and reason is set apart and laid under; where contrariwise the very bread of the word of God maketh reason lady and ruler and the flesh to be thrall and as a servant. The word of God causeth all goodness in the soul, it maketh it moist and ready to spring in good works. The word of the devil maketh dryness, dull and sluggish to do anything that is good. The word of God is the defence from the heat of carnal desire. The word of the devil kindleth that heat. The word of God maketh the soul strong, and the word of the devil maketh it feeble and weak. The word of God causeth the flesh to obey and follow reason; and contrary, the word of the devil maketh reason to be obedient to the flesh. This is the thing, good Lord, that maketh me sad and sorrowful, forasmuch that I have rather given audience and followed the word and enticing of the devil. Therefore the strength of my soul, that is to say my reason, which should be to it as a post or pillar, hath inclined and been obedient to my flesh: whereof now I am sore-a-dread.⁵³

In part two of this sermon there is a famous passage which shows the forthright mind of Fisher. From it we see that he was not hesitant to speak openly against the vices of the clergy. It is a beautiful example of his figurative language and could well afford a priest or a seminarian material for hours of meditation. Praising the commentaries on the psalms and especially the passage which will be quoted below, Paul

53 Ibid., 12-13.

McCann says: "Many parts of the book are worthy of comment, but the most significant and widely quoted passage is that dealing with true Christianity among priests."⁵⁴

The thing that was signified in the old law by gold is cleanness of conscience; and by precious stone, virtues of the soul. As St. Paul witnesseth, saying Gloria nostra haec est, testimonium conscientiae nostrae: "Our joy is the testimony of a clean conscience:" which joy without fail shone more bright in the poor Apostles than doth now our clothes of silk and golden cups. Truly, it was a more glorious sight to see St. Paul, who got his living by his own great labour in hunger, thirst, watchings, in cold, going woolward, [in garb of penance], and bearing about the Gospel and law of Christ both upon the sea and on the land, than to behold now the Archbishops and Bishops in their apparel, be it never so rich. In that time were no chalices of gold, but then was many golden priests; now be many chalices of gold, and almost no golden priests. Truly, neither gold, precious stones, nor glorious bodily garments be not the cause wherefore kings and princes of the world should dread God and His Church; for doubtless they have far more worldly riches than we have. But holy doctrine, good life and example of honest conversation be the occasions whereby good and holy men (also wicked and cruel people) are moved to love and fear Almighty God. Cruel Attila feared Leo the Pope, wicked Totila dreaded St. Benedict the Monk and Theodosius the emperor feared St. Ambrose, and why? Truly, because they heard their doctrine, and saw their lives so good and honest. O blessed Lord, how glorious and beautiful should Thy Church be, if it were garnished and made fair with such virtuous creatures! For then should all people fear Thy holy Name, and all kings and princes should dread Thine excellent glory, if Thou wouldst edify and ornate Thy Church on this matter. Videbitur in gloria sua: Then shall it be seen in a shining garment of divine grace, gilt with the golden wisdom of holy scripture, and garnished round about with all

⁵⁴ McCann, Paul, A Valiant Bishop against a Ruthless King, St. Louis, 1938, 48.

manner precious stones for the diversity of virtues. Which glory shall bind the worldly sight of kings, it shall turn the hearts of princes from voluptuous delectations, and pierce through unto the minds of all people much more than all the riches of this world. The holy Apostles were glorious not by gold or silver, silk or precious stones, but only by their virtues. St. Peter said Aurum et argentum non est mihi: "I have neither gold nor silver." Notwithstanding, in the Name of Christ he made a lame man to go, also raised from death to life a dead woman. Paul in like manner, who had no worldly riches but got his living with his own sore labour, made whole one that was born lame into this world, and delivered another who was vexed with a wicked spirit, by calling upon the Name Jesu.⁵⁵

After quoting the above passage McCann has this to add:

Such was the temper of the spiritual warrior who was destined to become one of England's greatest saints. The commentaries, a collection of sermons on the Penitential Psalms as preached by Fisher in the bleak years at the turn of the sixteenth century when storm and stress were in the air and a great foreboding of impending evil held all Christendom enthralled, were like a light in the darkness.⁵⁶

Fisher's comparing the seven degrees of a sinner's descent into hell to the seven stages in the story of Jonas is one of the most interesting passages in the entire series, mainly because it shows his deep knowledge and understanding of human nature. I will give the degrees of the two falls and will include a few quotations.

55 Phillimore, Commentary on the Psalms, II, 39-40.

56 McCann, Paul, A Valiant Bishop, 49.

First of all Fisher enumerates the degrees in the fall of Jonas. These are: (1) Jonas disobeyed God's order to preach to the people of Ninive. (2) At Joppa he hired a ship as a means of fleeing from God. (3) Even in the face of a sudden storm he entered the ship and remained within it. (4) He went to the bottom of the ship and fell soundly asleep. (5) Jonas is cast into the sea and drowned. (6) He is swallowed by the whale. (7) If he had not remembered to beg God for help, he would have been digested within the whale.

Fisher compares the seven degrees of a sinner's descent from God to the above degrees in the fall of Jonas. Since his description of the sinner's falling more and more into the clutches of the devil is based on his penetrating knowledge of human nature, the description may be applied to our modern times as well as to his own time. (1) The sinner disobeys God when he deliberately consents to anything forbidden by the law of God; for example, a young man's deliberate consent to sin with a woman if he should have the opportunity. (2) The sinner searches for the time and opportunity when he can accomplish in deed the sin he has already consented to in his will. (3) Even though he may feel disgusted at the foulness of the sin, the sinner fulfils the act. (4) He frequently repeats his sin and develops a habit as Fisher says:

The more that a sinner accustometh himself in sin, the more grievous and deeper is his descension toward the

pit of Hell, although he perceive it not. For by little and little he sinketh into the filthy pleasure of it, even as a horse, the softer mire or clay he waltereth [wallows] himself in, the more easily he lieth and imprinteth deeper his similitude in it; but when he is about to rise again, the softness of the clay will not suffer to take hold whereby he might be assisted.⁵⁷

This fourth degree is summarized briefly: "So after the sinner be come into the custom of sin, he goeth down and in manner sleepeth in it."⁵⁸ (5) The sinner has slipped so deeply into sin that now he boasts of his sins and is "drowned utterly in sin, overwhelmed with the manifold floods of it."⁵⁹ The reader will enjoy reading Fisher's account of the sinners of his own time who had fallen into the fifth degree because again his description is applicable to our own time.

Such persons be both without fear and shame. They show openly and many times in common taverns to others of like disposition, their ignominious and shameful offences, making great cracks how wickedly they have done with that woman and with that; and peradventure will slander her which they never touched. Thus they make open vaunt of themselves to the intent other should laud and praise their wickedness.⁶⁰

(6) The sinner, now so accustomed to sin, scorns virtue and seeks to cause others to do likewise. Fisher says he

57 Phillimore, Commentary on the Psalms, II, 60.

58 Ibid., 61.

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid.

fears that no longer does the devil have to go about searching those whom he may devour; for he has so taken possession of the sinner that the sinner goes about doing his work, reproving the virtuous and praising the wicked.

St. John sheweth that our adversary the devil goeth about searching whom he may devour; but now I fear he needeth not so to do, for his purpose in manner is already fulfilled, he hath devoured and swallowed many into the lowest part of his belly. This sixth degree is well shewed by the sixth act of Jonas, when the great mighty whale devoured and swallowed him down into the vile and lowest part of his carcass. In like manner these obstinate and abominable sinners be utterly devoured and swallowed down of our great enemy the devil.⁶¹

(7) Finally the sinner has fallen so far from God that he despairs of God's ever showing him mercy. Fisher's open and frank description of despair is a masterpiece whose persuasive beauty and thought will be a consolation to every sinner:

It is like a deep pit whose mouth is stopped up with a great stone so that nothing may get out, but if [unless] the stone be removed. The covering of this deep pit, desperation, may not be taken away without strong and steadfast hope in the great mercy of Almighty God; of the which superabundant mercy we have so much spoken in the other Psalms before that, if great plenty of Scripture were not, which, by and by, in every place praiseth and exalteth this great mercy, I should be afear'd lest no more could be spoken of it. Then sith since this mercy is never void but always spoken of in Scripture in every corner, it must needs (as me seemeth) be a great comfort to all true penitents. It is also approved by so many parables and similitudes, promised with so many affirmations, and, last, hath been so oft exercised upon so many sinners, that of a truth the sinner is over much

61 Ibid., 62.

obstinate and hard-hearted which cannot meek himself lowly, having full confidence and steadfast hope in the endless mercy of God. He that cannot find in his heart to submit himself by this manner is digested and incorporate into the substance of the devil, even as meat and blood. For amongst all sins desperation is the thing that most maketh us devilish, and our condition like to damned spirits: for they shall ever be in despair, never trust to have forgiveness. But now to our purpose. If Jonas being in the whale's belly, destitute and wide [afar] from all help of any creature, had not been succoured by the great mercy of our Lord, I beseech you, who could have saved him from turning apart into the whale's nature by digestion, and the residue to have been voided out through his guts like dung into the deep sea? Whereby we may well perceive that a sinner falling down from one degree of sin into another, without he shortly return to the state of grace, amending his life, call to Almighty God his Maker for help, and have a full trust in that merciful Lord, shall at the last by despair be incorporate to the substance of the devil, so shall be conveyed through his belly and fall down into the deep pit of Hell. But Jonas in all his jeopardies cried to our merciful Lord God, asking mercy; which anon he obtained, for by the commandment of God he was delivered from all perils and set again upon the earth. If a sinner will do in like manner, Almighty God without doubt shall shew His mercy and clean deliver him from all peril of damnation.⁶²

Sometimes in the series Fisher will use a comparison that was effective in one sermon again in another sermon. For instance, in the sixth sermon he said that the sinner who had fallen into the fourth degree of sin is like a horse wallowing in mire.⁶³

62 Ibid., 62-63.

63 cf. supra., 46.

Again in the seventh sermon he uses a very similar comparison when he compares the sinner to a hog immersed in mire:

Beside this he hath sent us into his village, there to keep hogs. The devil putteth every sinner into that vile office, which is his servant and so will continue. What may better be understood by the uncleanness of hogs or swine than the filthy appetite of the flesh? Those most unclean sinners whose affection is set in fleshly pleasures ought of a more congruence to be called swine than the hogs which daily walter themselves in mire and clay.⁶⁴

There is certainly nothing original about these two figures since we know from Fisher that St. Peter centuries before used about the same figure. "Wherefore St. Peter saith Sus lota in volutabro luti: 'The sinner is like unto a sow soused in dirt and mire.'⁶⁵ A lack of originality here on Fisher's part only serves to prove that he strove so much to fill his sermons with comparisons that he often borrowed from the saints and from scripture to make himself clear.

In the seventh sermon when encouraging sinners to return to God as the prodigal son returned to his father, he points out that drinking from the fountain of worldly pleasures never satisfies but always leaves us more thirsty. On the other hand when once we drink of the joy of God in heaven, our thirst for happiness will be satiated. Let us listen to Fisher again:

⁶⁴ Phillimore, Commentary on the Psalms, II, 94.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

And, for to shew more openly the inward desire of our minds, let us bring to remembrance the pleasures of this world, how vain they be, and how shortly they vanish as doth a shadow. For the more that any person hath a steadfast pleasure and delectation in them, the more is his desire to increase the same, and the less is he satisfied: like as Our Saviour said unto the woman Samaritan Qui bibit ex aqua haec sitiet iterum: "Whosoever drinketh of this water shall be thirsty again." That is as much to say, what manner of persons soever they be that is inordinately desirous for to have worldly pleasures, delectations and riches shall never be satisfied and appetited; but ever his appetite shall be to have more and more, never content. But there is another liquor, and, if a man drink no more but once of it, he shall be satisfied and replenished abundantly, and never after be thirsty; the which liquor issueth out from the river of all pleasure, wherewith all blessed people be given drink, and plenteously are satiate in Heaven. . . . Almighty God is the fountain of this said pleasure and most delicate liquor, the which liquor all blessed souls desire fervently to have. Among whom one said Quemadmodum desiderat cervus ad fontes aquarum: ita desiderat anima mea ad te, Deus: "Blessed Lord, like as the wild hart," after he hath drunk poison, "desireth to come unto the fresh springing fountain," for his singular remedy and comfort, "even so doth my soul," after the remembrance of my sin, "desire for to come unto Thee," by the fountain of penance. Now sith it is so we know this most delicious liquor, and where it is, let us therefore spread our souls abroad desiring to be satiate with it, whereof ourself we be void from all moisture of goodness, and alienate from all virtue. Our saying shall be this, as it followeth, Anima mea sicut terra sine aqua tibi: "Like as the earth, of his nature without moisture is dry and barren, so is my soul of itself void from all goodness"; wherefore, Blessed Lord, vouchsafe to water it with the liquor of Thy grace, to the intent it may finally come unto Thine everlasting bliss.⁶⁶

After reading the above examples I feel certain that the reader will agree it is evident Fisher had his audience in

66 Ibid., 100-101.

mind as he spoke, always seeking to find common ground as a medium which would enable him to be clearly understood. To quote many more examples at length would be beyond the scope of this chapter, but there is space to include some briefer ones plus a fairly long allegory.

First of all here are a few more comparisons about sin and the sinner. There are two types of sinners who refuse to do penance. The first type is made up of those who yield to the unlawful pleasures of the flesh and are like the horse that never was bridled.⁶⁷ Then there are those who have been brought up in sin and become accustomed to it and like the stubborn mule will not give it up.⁶⁸ Again he says that the sinner is like a bondsman thrust under the cloud and darkness of sin.⁶⁹ Sin is the ugly monster that the sinner hugs and kisses, lying in wait for it more eagerly than the hungry lion does for its prey.⁷⁰ In a very blunt figure which would be out of place in the modern pulpit, we are told that the sinner returns to his sin as the dog returns to his vomit.⁷¹

67 Ibid., I, 33.

68 Ibid.

69 Ibid., 56.

70 Ibid., 58.

71 Ibid., 74.

Here are a few more examples before we conclude this chapter with a study of one of his allegories. If God be not merciful, "[w]hat shall we do but fall into the deep dungeon of despair?"⁷² Daily the devils tempt us with the false joys of the flesh and the vain pleasures of the world like the man who in his dream thinks he has great pleasure but on waking finds that he has been deceived.⁷³ For a final example we have the Church Militant sailing in the way of virtue but hindered by the great tempests of temptation and by the storms of troubles.⁷⁴

John E. B. Mayor,⁷⁵ having praised Fisher's scripture narrative and parables by saying that they are often told with graphic power, is a little less favorable in his criticism of the allegories. I believe the reason is that, though they are clear, they are a little far-fetched. A typical example is the use Fisher makes of three birds: the pelican, the night crow, and the sparrow, to symbolize the three parts of penance: contrition, confession, and satisfaction. The basis for this comparison is his interpretation of these words of the 101st psalm:

72 Ibid., II, 68.

73 Ibid., I, 67.

74 Ibid., II, 50.

75 Mayor, John E. B., The English Works of John Fisher, London, 1876, I, [Mayor intended to write a second volume but did not live to do so].., xxii.

Similis factus sum pellicano solitudinis: "I am made like to the pelican by contrition."

.....
Et factus sum sicut nycticorax in domicilio. By the sorrow for my sin and true confession made with penance for the same, I am clean without trouble in my conscience. I am in sure rest and peace, "even as the night crow when she is in that place of the house where it liketh her best."

.....
Vigilavi et factus sum sicut passer solitarius in tecto: "I have given heed, I have been wary of worldly conversation and pleasure, and as the sparrow slieth up to the house for her succour, so have I set my mind above in Heavenly things."⁷⁶

Now let us listen to Bishop John Fisher, explaining to his flock the three parts of true penance. The quotation will be given almost in its entirety since it is the only allegory quoted in this paper.

First let us consider and shew the order and disposition of these birds. The pelican of his nature abideth in a desolate place where nothing in manner groweth, the night crow abideth in old walls, and the sparrow maketh his resting-place in the covering of a house, or in the house-eaves. In a desolate and barren place is nothing that pertaineth to a building, save only the waste and void ground; in old walls, or in walls which be not perfectly made up, is somewhat framing upward towards the house or building; but when the roof of the house is up and covered, then the building is finished and made perfect. Contrition, which is the first part of penance is signified by the pelican. Confession, the second part, is signified by the night crow; and the third, that is satisfaction, is signified by the sparrow. The pelican, as St. Jerome writeth. . . is of this condition; when she findeth her birds slain and destroyed by a serpent, she mourneth, she walleth, she smiteth herself upon the sides, that by the effusion and shedding of her blood, her dead birds may be revived. Truly,

76 Phillimore, Commentary on the Psalms, II, 14-17.

they that are very contrite be of like condition. For when they search their conscience and find their children, that is to say their good works, slain and destroyed by the serpent, deadly sin, then they mourn and wail sore, they smite themselves upon the breast with the bill of bitter sorrow, to the intent the corrupt blood of sin may flow out.⁷⁷

Fisher elaborates on his reference to St. Jerome showing how the saint, like the Publican in the temple, beat himself on the breast "that the corrupt blood of sin might be done away from his soul."⁷⁸ When the sinner does such penance, he will regain the merit he lost by his sins. Fisher continues by telling us of the night crow:

The night crow or the owl, as saith St. Jerome, is of this condition, that as long as it is day she abideth privily in the walls or secret corners of some house and will not be seen. But when the sun is down and is dark as in the night, anon she sheweth herself and cometh out from that secret place with a mournful cry and miserable and sorrowful lamentation. She never ceaseth so crying until that it be day again. To the which night crow may well be likened they that shew their minds by true confession of their Sins unto priests; for when they were baptised and so made clean from Original Sin, the Sun of rightwiseness did rise upon them, gave light to their souls and so continued as long as they were without deadly sin. As that time no sorrowful remorse was in their conscience but all in rest and peace, like as in strong and sure resting-places. But, anon as they committed deadly sin, the Sun of rightwiseness went down and shewed no more light unto them, and their conscience was covered

77 Ibid., 13-14.

78 Ibid., 14.

with the darkness of sin.⁷⁹

Fisher repeats the application of the night crow by explaining again how the sinner who laments over his sins and confesses them to a priest regains a clean and peaceful soul which can be compared to the night crow's regaining her peaceful nest at daybreak. Now he compares the penitane's satisfaction for sin to the sparrow:

After we have been sorrowful and contrite for our sins, and also have shewed them by Confession, it is needful to beware, to be diligent, and to take heed of the devil's snares, that by his crafty and false means he catch not and bring us again into his danger. . . . When the sparrow suspecteth those snares or traps be laid for her on the ground, anon she fleeth up to the covering of the house or to the house-eaves, and if any time she be constrained by reason of hunger to come down again, yet, for fear, she will shortly return up; so that thither she will flee for succour and surety in her danger and peril, there she wipeth and feateth her bill, there she preeneth, and setteth her feathers in order, there also she bringeth forth birds, and there resting maketh merry as she can after her manner. In like wise they that desire and be about to make satisfaction for their offences must be wary and wise to keep themselves from the devil's snares and traps, whereof all the world is full; they must flee unto Heaven, set their felicity in Heavenly things and not in worldly pleasures. . . . Nevertheless, if at any season we come down, busy ourself to get anything needful for our bodies, let us shortly return, lest that we be taken in the snares of worldly pleasures. In every evil, peril and danger let us flee unto Heaven, set our pleasures on Heavenly things, and for the consideration and love of it, we shall purge ourself from sin. For why? Nothing that is foul and corrupted by sin may enter into the everlasting kingdom; we must preen and order all our feathers, all our acts in

79 Ibid., 14-15.

every condition, that we may be the more apt to flee up unto the place of everlasting bliss. There also we shall bring forth and hide our good works, which be our birds.⁸⁰

The many examples quoted in this chapter by no means exhaust the different types of figures that St. John Fisher uses in his sermons on the psalms. For the most part his predominant type is that of the comparison: similes, metaphors, and allegories. He also employs such types as alliteration, anaphora, antithesis, balance, metonymy, personification, onomatopoeia, synecdoche, etc. all as helpful tools for clearness.

CHAPTER IV

REPETITION, A MEANS TO CLARITY

To make himself understood, a preacher faces a greater problem than the teacher does because the preacher's audience is more varied and heterogenous than the teacher's class and because his listeners have no text books to refer to or to reread when they miss a point. The preacher's listeners may range intellectually from a man with the mentality of a six grade boy to that of a learned college professor. Since the Word of God is meant for all men, it is not right for the preacher to attempt to reach only those of the higher mental levels. He has to express his thought so clearly that even the most unlearned can understand him. Consequently, the preacher labors under a great necessity of repeating himself over and over again until everyone understands him.

Now suppose the priest is giving a talk on how to prepare for Holy Communion. The main point of his talk is that there is no need to go to confession everytime one goes to Holy Communion. However, he makes the fatal mistake of mentioning this main idea only once or at the most twice. Each time he attempts

to convey this theme idea, a street car rambles by or someone in the church coughs or sneezes. Many of the parishoners do not hear him, perhaps the very one who needs the instruction the most of all; and the whole point of his sermon is lost to them. As for achieving the purpose of his talk, he might just as well have not given it. Lew Sarett and William Foster, authors of an outstanding speech book succinctly repeat what I have said above:

Repetition. Skillful repetition may help to establish belief. Especially in public speaking, the expression of an idea in different ways may clarify the idea, amplify it and reinforce it. If a reader does not grasp the meaning on the first reading he can reread the passage. A listener has but one chance. Moreover, repetition - skillful repetition - has persuasive force. A speaker wisely repeats, in one form or another, his most important ideas.⁸¹

Repetition is a must for clarity, but it presents a great difficulty. Because the mentalities of a large audience are so varied, there is grave danger that those who grasp the point quickly will be insulted by what appears to them useless repetition. They feel that the speaker is talking down to them, certainly bad psychology which can easily alienate the more intelligent listener. The repetition could become so monotonous that he refuses to listen and soon forgets what the speaker is saying. Since the speaker must repeat himself so that the un-

⁸¹ Lew Sarett and William T. Foster, Basic Principles of Speech, Boston, 1946, 431.

learned can understand him, the only thing he can do if he is not to lose his more learned listeners is to find different and interesting ways of saying the same thing over and over again.

One of the characteristic notes of Bishop Fisher's sermons on the seven penitential psalms is his clever, but not monotonous, usage of repetition. His is that of the skillful speaker Father Coppens writes of:

There are parts of the speech that may be more concise; but the general characteristic of the oratorical style is fulness, copiousness, rather than brevity. Skillful speakers dwell long on the same thoughts, if important, presenting them now in plain, then in figurative language, now by reasoning, then by illustration; now in general, then in particular examples, etc.⁸²

Many examples of Fisher's repetition will be studied in this chapter to prove that he uses this skill to present his thoughts clearly.

In the second paragraph of his sermon on the first penitential psalm Fisher repeats his topic sentence four times in four sentences. After explaining that instead of using a Gospel or Epistle for his text he will comment on the first of the penitential psalms, he begs Almighty God for blessings and then gives his audience the purpose of his talk in the following paragraph:

⁸² Coppens, Rev. Charles, S.J., The Art of Oratorical Composition, New York, [Copyright, 1885], 199.

But or [before] we go to the declaration of this Psalm, it shall be profitable and convenient to shew who did write this Psalm, for what occasion he wrote it, and what fruit, profit, and help he obtained by the same. David, the son of Jesse, a man singularly chosen of Almighty God and endued with many great benefits; afterward he sinned full grievously against God and His law, and for the occasion of his great offence, he made this holy Psalm; and thereby got forgiveness of his sins. Behold, take heed who he was, of what stock he came that made this holy Psalm, for what occasion he made it, and what profit he obtained by the same. But these things shall be more openly declared, that each one of you may know how great a sinner this prophet was and also the greatness of his sin, that we by the example of him warned, instructed and monished, despair not in any condition, but with true penance let us ask of our blessed Lord God mercy and forgiveness. We shall perceive and know the greatness of his sin so much the better and sooner, if his great unkindness shewed against God Almighty that was so beneficial unto him, be made open and known to us.⁸³

Since this paragraph is a sign post, telling just what he is going to do and where he is going, Fisher repeats his topic sentence four times, becoming more explicit with each repetition. In the first sentence, the topic sentence, he states that it is important to show who wrote the psalm, the occasion for writing it, and the fruit the writer obtained. In the second sentence he becomes more specific and tells his listeners that David, the prophet, wrote the psalm and obtained forgiveness after he had seriously sinned. Then almost in the same words of his first sentence Fisher directly calls for the attention of his audience: "Behold, and take heed who he was, of what

83 Phillimore, Commentary on the Psalms, I, 2-3.

stock he came that made this holy Psalm, for what occasion he made it, and what profit he obtained by the same."⁸⁴ In each of the next two sentences the topic sentence is repeated once again, giving us the third and fourth repetitions.

It is hard to believe that many members of Fisher's audience missed the point of this paragraph, for only those who absolutely refused to pay attention could miss grasping a thought clearly expressed five times in five sentences. The beauty of Fisher's repetition in this paragraph is that he is clear without being monotonous or offensive to his more educated listeners.

In order to convince his audience of the wickedness of David so that they might learn to trust in the mercy of Almighty God, Bishop Fisher enumerates the many gifts Almighty God had showered upon David and then in comparison shows how ungrateful David was when, instead of giving thanks, he fell miserably into sins of adultery and manslaughter. It was important for Fisher to convince his listeners that David, though singularly gifted by God, was a great sinner. Otherwise the force of his sermon might be lost. What does he do but repeat again and again that David committed adultery and manslaughter? Few listeners could have missed the point:

By these great and manifold gifts we may understand how much David ought to humble himself unto Almighty God and how much he was bounden to Him. And how ungentle he

⁸⁴ Ibid., 2.

ought to be reputed and taken, if he should not serve his Lord and Maker with all his whole mind and trueheart. Furthermore, after he was made king he lived in peace and ease, and had many wives, not content with them, set apart [despite] the goodness and gentleness of Almighty God, he took to him another man's wife, and with her committed adultery, contrary to God's law. This woman was the wife to his true knight called Uriah, which at that time was in the king's wars as a valiant knight. David then fearing that his grievous offence of adultery should be openly known, sent for Uriah, trusting verily at his coming that he would resort unto his wife; but firmly he denied it, and would not come at his sending for. Then David, seeing that, found the means by his letters sent unto Joab, the chief captain of his host, that the said Uriah should be set in the foremost ward of the battle, and so for to be slain; which according to his desire was done, and this good knight Uriah there suffered death. Behold the accumulation and heaping of sin upon sin. He was not satisfied with the great offence of adultery done against Almighty God, but shortly after committed manslaughter. Adultery in any person is to be abhorred; and it is more to be abhorred if manslaughter be joined to it; and namely the slaying of so clean and so holy a man to whom he was so greatly beholden for his truth [loyalty] and labours which he took in his wars and business. Now, moreover, how many great benefits had he before this of Almighty God, whereby he might not (of very right) break the least of His commandments without great unkindness! He nevertheless would not let [spare] to commit these abominable sins, adultery and manslaughter; and, a long season, lay and was accustomed in them.⁸⁵

To achieve a desired effect a speaker will sometimes repeat a particular word or synonym a number of times. To lead his listeners to contrition Bishop Fisher describes how David's soul is pierced through and through at the thought of the punishment due to his sin. In a passage of the second sermon he repeats the word pricketh four times, each time to remind the sin-

85 Ibid., 4-5.

ner of how his soul is torn by the thorn of sorrow and remorse so that he may turn to God in his agony with true contrition in his heart.

For doubtless the remembrance of sin pricketh and tear-eth the conscience of a penitent creature even as sore as the thorn doth that is sticked fast in a man's body. This holy prophet by the sore and bitter pricking of his conscience was made so sorrowful and so full of wretchedness, that he is fain to turn to Almighty God. . . . Nevertheless when his conscience by the remembrance of his sin was pricked, like as I might be thrust through with a thorn, and he is coming again to himself, fearing and sorrowing, he turned unto God and forsook his sin. He saith: Conversus sum in aerumna mea dum configitur spina: "Good Lord, when my conscience was sore pricked by the remembrance of mine own wretchedness I turned myself to Thee."⁸⁶

On page 33 I promised that I would treat more fully in this chapter the figure in the sermon on the third psalm by which Fisher compares Mary to the morning between the dark night of sin to the light of Christ. It is proper in nature that morning should come between night and day; so too there should be a morning between the night of darkness that Adam and Eve's sin brought and the daylight that the "Sun of Rightwiseness,"⁸⁷ Jesus Christ, would bring to the world. This figure is an outstanding example of Fisher's sense of repetition, for in six pages of text it is repeated in one form or another close to

86 Ibid., 25-6.

87 Ibid., 39.

forty times as a means of persuading the sinner to beg Mary for the grace of being truly penitent. The following excerpts will demonstrate Fisher's skill in repetition:

For of a truth it has not been seeming and well ordered that after so great and horrible darkness of the night, the marvellous clearness of this Sun should have been shewed immediately. It was according of very right that first a morning should come between, which was not so dark as the night, neither so clear as the Sun. This order agreeth both to Nature, Scripture and reason. First, by the order of nature we perceive that between the darkness of the night and clear light of the day, a certain mean light cometh between; the which we call the morning. It is more lighter and clearer than is the night, albeit the sun is much more clearer than it. Every man knoweth this thing well, for daily we have it in experience. Holy Scripture also teacheth that in the beginning of the world when heaven and earth should be created, all things were covered with darkness a long season; and or ever the sun in his very clearness gave light to the world, a certain mean light was made which had place between darkness and the very clear light of the sun. This is well shewed by Moses in the beginning of Genesis. Reason also, which searcheth the knowledge of many causes, findeth when one thing is changed into his contrary, as from cold to heat, it is done first by certain means or by certain alterations coming between. Water, which of its nature is very cold, is not suddenly by the fire made hot to the uttermost; but first cometh between a little warmth, as we might say lukewarm, which is neither very hot nor very cold, but is a mean between both. An apple also which first is green waxeth not suddenly yellow; but first it is somewhat white, between green and yellow indifferent. Thus we perceive by reason that it was not convenient this great clearness of the Sun our Saviour should have been shewed so soon and immediately after the so fearful and dark night of sin, without rising of the morning, which is a mean between both.

.....
 This blessed Virgin, full of the beams of grace, was ordained by God as a light of the morning, and afterwards brought forth the bright shining Sun with His manifold beams, our Saviour Christ: . . . Take heed how conveniently it agreeth with holy Scripture, this Virgin to be

called a morning. Also whereas reason, or a congruence, will that between two contraries a mean must be had, maketh marvellously well that this Virgin may be called a morning; for like as the morning is a mean between the great clearness of the sun and the ugly darkness of the night, so this blessed and holy Virgin is the mean between this bright Sun our Saviour and wicked sinners, and a partaker of both, for she is the Mother of God's Son and also the Mother of sinners.

.....
 Therefore since this blessed Lady Mary as a morning goeth between our night and the day of Christ, between our darkness and His brightness, and last, between the misery of our sins and the mercy of God, what other help should rather be to wretched sinners whereby they might sooner be delivered from their wretchedness and come to mercy than by the help of this blessed Virgin Mary? Who may come or attain from one extremity unto another without a mean between both? Let us therefore acknowledge to her our wretchedness, ask for help: she cannot but hear us, for she is our Mother; she shall speak for us unto her merciful Son and ask His mercy, and without doubt He shall grant her petition, which is His Mother and the Mother of mercy. Let us therefore call upon her saying: "O most holy Virgin, thou art the Mother of God, Mother of mercy, the Mother also of wretched sinners and their singular help, comfort to all sorrowful; vouchsafe to hear our wretchedness and provide a convenient and behovable remedy for the same."⁸⁸

Another excellent example of fine repetition can be taken from the same sermon. Even if we are spared the fires of hell, nevertheless we should fear the pains of purgatory which are greater than any pains of this life. This is confirmed by quoting St. Austin. Examples of earthly suffering are given, and then the listener is reminded that no pain on this earth is ever so great as the pains in purgatory. The topic sentence is

88 Ibid., 40-44.

put into a rhetorical question: "What marvel is it then if the fear of so great and painful fire trouble us sinners?"⁸⁹ David's petition to be spared these pains is given, and finally our Blessed Lady is asked to intercede for the sinner. Therefore, Fisher repeats his topic sentence at least five times. Notice the interesting way he does this:

If peradventure we be delivered by the infinite mercy of God from crucifying in the fire of Hell, yet there is another fire to be feared, that is to say the fire of Purgatory, which fire is so hot and full of diversity of pain, that all torments and diseases of this world be nothing compared to it: which thing holy St. Austin confirmeth by these words, saying Ille ignis gravior est quam quicquid homo pati potest in hac vita: "The fire of Purgatory is more grievous than any pain man may suffer in this life." Alas we wretched sinners, what hard saying is this? Be there not some grievous pains in this life? Those that be vexed with the stone, stranguary, and the flux, feel they not marvellous great pains when they cannot keep themselves from wailing and crying out for sorrow? What shall I say of them which suffer pain in the head, tooth-ache, and aching of bones? Do they not suffer great pains? And also martyrs, of whom many were slain, some boiled, another sawed in two, another torn with wild beasts, another roasted on the fire, another put into scalding hot pitch and resin, did they not suffer bitter pain? Notwithstanding, to be punished in the fire of Purgatory is far more grievous pain than all these we have rehearsed. What marvel is it then if the fear of so great and painful fire trouble us sinners? Wherefore it followeth: Et ne in ira tua corripias me: "Blessed Lord," said David, "correct me not in the fire of Purgatory." So let us call unto our Blessed Lady, praying her to be mean for us that her Son, our Judge, not only punish us not in the pains of Hell which be everlasting, but also that He correct us not in the pains of Purgatory which have an end.⁹⁰

89 Ibid., 47.

90 Ibid.

This sermon contains another outstanding example. Sin is a terrible thing. So after listing a number of evils that sin is the cause of, Fisher very masterfully and effectively repeats, "if sin had not been."⁹¹

That thing must needs of very right be thought ugly and detestable, which is the cause of so many great miseries and bitterness afore rehearsed; for neither the pains of Hell nor of Purgatory had never been thought, if sin had not been. Mankind should never have felt any weariness or bodily grievance by the reason of labour, if sin had not been; neither any distemperance of cold or heat that should annoy the body, hunger, thirst, no grief of sickness or of violent stroke, if sin had not been. Also the soul should have wanted ignorance, inconstancy, and rebellion of understanding against reason. These miseries and many more which now I leave of happen to us because of sin. Nothing in the world displeaseth Almighty God but sin. For as Moses saith Vidit Deus cuncta quae fecerat: et erant valde bona; "Almighty God looked and saw all things which He made, and they were very good." Every creature of God is good and acceptable to Him if sin be away. But if it be never so goodly a creature defiled with sin, it is abominable in the sight of God, and far more abominable than is the stinking carrion of a dog or any other venomous worm in the sight of men.⁹²

The first part of the fourth sermon contains a passage which should be most interesting to the reader. Fisher, by means of figures, scripture quotations, and rhetorical questions, very convincingly proves the greatness of God's mercy. Unlike earthly rulers who are not superior to the laws of the state the all good God is superior to His laws and will show great

91 Ibid., 57.

92 Ibid.

mercy to the penitent sinner. Fisher continues:

Truly the mercy of our most mighty and best Lord is great, and so great that it hath all measure of greatness. Sometimes trees be called great for their goodly and large height. Pits be called great for their deepness. Far journeys be called great because they are long. Streets and highways be called great for their breadth and wideness. But the mercy of God containeth and is measured by all these measures of greatness, and not only by one of them. Of the greatness in height is written Domine, usque ad coelos misericordia tua: "Lord Thy mercy extendeth and reacheth up to the heavens." It is also great in deepness, for it reacheth down to the lowest Hell. The prophet saith Misericordia tua magna est super me: et eruisti animam meam ex inferno inferiori: "Lord, Thy mercy is great over me, and Thou hast delivered me from the lowest and deepest Hell." It is broad, for it occupieth and overcovereth all the world, the same prophet saying Misericordia Domini plena est terra: "The earth is full of the mercy of our Lord." It lacketh no length, for also it is spoken of the same prophet Misericordia ejus ab aeterno et usque in aeternum super timentes eum: "The mercy of God is without end on them that dreadeth Him." Therefore sith the mercy of God is so high, so deep, so broad and so long, who can or may say or think it little? Who shall not call it great by all measures of greatness? Then every creature that will acknowledge himself to this mercy may say Miserere mei, Deus, secundum magnam misericordiam tuam: "Lord have mercy on me according to Thy great mercy."⁷³

In part two of the same sermon Fisher displays the teaching ability that every preacher must have, and he also shows his own mastery of interpreting David's words. His repetition is clever here also. First of all he speaks of craftsmen in general who would prefer making a new product rather than repairing an old one. He becomes more specific by giving the

example of the clocksmith repairing an old clock and then applies this to the human heart led astray by sin, pointing out that it is more difficult to straighten out the sinner than to repair a clock. St. Augustine goes so far as to say that it is more difficult work to repair the sinner's heart than to create heaven and earth. Therefore, David begs God to create a new heart within him. But just as the best of clocks is useless for telling time if its mechanism is not started; so too the heart of a man made new must be set on its right course. Finally, David begs God to set his heart upright so that he may not fall again.

Many craftsmen had liefer take upon them to make a thing all new than to botch or mend an old foreworn thing, as we see by experience. Better it were for the artificer to make a clock all new than to mend, or bring again into the right course, a clock which long hath continued out of its right order. But it is much more diffuse to bring the heart of man that is broken and brought out of good order by continual custom of sin into the right way again than it is to bring a clock into its true course. A thing customably used is hard to be left. And, as St. Augustine saith, it is more hard work to bring the heart of a man long customed in sin into the way of virtue, than it is to make again heaven and earth. Our prophet for this cause beseecheth Almighty God, to Whom is nothing impossible, that He vouchsafe for to create within him a new heart, saying Cor mundum crea in me, Deus: "Good Lord, make Thou of nought a clean heart within me." Moreover it is necessary that a new work be set in a right course. For what profiteth a clock, be it never so well and craftily made, if it stand still or go not as it should in a due and just course? Truly nothing. So when the heart is once made new, first it must be set in a due and right course. Wherefore the prophet addeth Et spiritum rectum innova in visceribus meis: "Blessed Lord, grant me the Holy Ghost to guide and set me in a right way that I

err not. "94

The following selection, taken from the sermon on the fifth penitential psalm, is another wherein we see the oratorical genius of Fisher displayed. Listen to him as he reminds his flock of the folly and shortness of this life by a series of beautiful rhetorical questions:

Whether we eat or drink, wake or sleep, laugh or weep, ever our life here draweth to an end. Where be now the kings and princes that some time reigned over all the world, whose glory and triumph was lifted up above the earth? Where is now the innumerable company and puissance of Xerxes and Caesar, where are the great victories of Alexander and Pompey, where is now the great riches of Croesus and Crassus? But what shall we say of them which some time were kings and governors of this realm? Where be they now which we have known and seen in our days in so great wealth and glory that it was thought of [by] many they should never have died, never to have been out of mind? They had all their pleasures at the full, both of delicious and good welfare, of hawking, hunting, also goodly horses, goodly coursers, greyhounds and hounds for their disports, their palaces well and richly beseen, strongholds and towns without number; they had great plenty of gold and silver, many servants, goodly apparel for themself and for their lodgings; they had the power to proscribe, to punish, to put down and make low their enemies, and also to punish by temporal death rebels and traitors. Every man held with them, all were at their commandment, every man was unto them obedient, feared them, lauded also and praised them, and over all shewed their great renown and fame. But where be they now? Be they not gone and wasted like unto smoke? . . . St. James compareth the vanity of this life to the vapours, and saith it shall perish and wither away as a flower in the hay season. Therefore since that the time of our life draweth fast unto an end, if we be not heard shortly and soon of Almighty God when we call for help, death shall come upon us or ever we can be succoured.

For this cause, Blessed Lord, have in mind the shortness of our life here, and as soon as we call to Thee give audience unto us all.⁹⁵

In the sixth sermon Fisher consoles his listeners by proving that God will forgive them in this life whenever they ask Him, no matter how often they have sinned. Does not God tell us in the Gospel of St. Luke to forgive as often as man offends us? If man is to forgive always, should not the all good God be even more willing to forgive? Fisher continues repeating his argument by refering to scripture for many examples of God's mercy towards the sinner.

Whether thou come early or late, trust verily of forgiveness for the asking. Did not the thief in the hour of his death obtain mercy as soon as he called for it? Jonas also, being in jeopardy of death? Ezechias in like wise, whom all physicians judged to die, was forgiven. Nabuchodonosor, which oft forsook and oft turned again to Him, did not our merciful Lord forgive all his trespasses? The prophet David in like manner, after he had committed adultery and manslaughter, yet he fell again to sin, was not Almighty God merciful to him indeed when meekly he acknowledged his grievous offences? Who dare now be so bold to say that God will not forgive the sinner more often than once? It is written: In quacunque hora ingemuerit peccator, salvus erit: "At any time when the sinner is sorry for his offences, he shall not be damned." Therefore every hour, early or late, whosoever is penitent in this life may trust verily to be forgiven of our meek Lord and Master. To the which our prophet exhorteth us, saying A custodia matutina usque ad noctem speret Israel in Domino: "Every true penitent trust in our Lord both early and late," that is to say, in every age from the first hour of our coming into this world unto the last when we shall die. Every true penitent may be called Israel, 'a man seeing God,' trusting to have for-

giveness of Him. We now may be in a surety that Almighty God shall be merciful to all true penitents.⁹⁶

Bishop Fisher employs repetition again in the seventh sermon as a tool for persuasive argumentation. Here we find him convincing the sinner that his redemption had been fully bought. Almighty God, unlike man, is rich in mercy. His treasure house is filled with the coin that can buy man's redemption. This is not perishable gold or silver but the Blood of Jesus Christ. The physician will bleed a man only to a certain point, but our Lord shed His Blood so plenteously that not a drop was left in His Body. Although one shedding would have been sufficient for the redemption of all sinners, Christ shed His Blood over and over for us in His Passion. After describing seven different times in the Passion where Christ shed His Blood, the learned bishop continues assuring us repeatedly that Christ's Blood was sufficient for man's redemption:

These be the riches, this is the treasure wherewith the ransom of our redemption was paid, as well for sinners that be past and gone out of this world as for us that are now alive; also for them which be to come, and for all that will ask mercy and forgiveness with true penance. This most precious Blood was shed without measure, without number as we rehearsed, seven times, (which signifieth all time) to the intent our sins, be they never so great and many, shall in every hour, every moment by the virtue of this precious Blood be cleansed, done away; and we to be partakers of this redemption once done, if at any time in this life we come to Almighty God with true penance asking mercy for our offences. One

drop of His Blood, as St. Bernard and St. Anselm beareth witness, had been sufficient for the redemption of all the world, also of many worlds. What may be said of all His precious Blood so oft shed? Shall we not say our redemption is performed to the uttermost? Which our prophet witnesseth by these words: Et copiosa apud eum redemptio. Therefore sith the mercy of God is so great, and our redemption so plenteous, who may despair?⁹⁷

Throughout this paper we have seen examples of Fisher's interpreting scripture to prove his point and then by various means repeating his thought so that it will strike home. Another example is found in the seventh sermon. To obtain mercy we must ask for it. God is more willing to be merciful and has more affection for us than the husband for his wife, the mother for her child, or the father for his son. Fisher elaborates on each of these three, uses scripture to strengthen his argument, and in the process repeats himself at least twenty-five times in two pages of text. The following are some excerpts from these pages:

For it is written Relinquet homo patrem et matrem et adhaerebit uxori suae: "A man once married, according to God's law, shall forsake his father and mother, and keep him unto his wife;" as much to say, love his wife better than his father and mother. Many causes there be why a man may put his wife away from him with right; and, so put away, if she come again he may utterly reject her. But Almighty God loveth us with a more constant mind. For if we sin never so often, never so grievously against Him, yet if we will return He anon taketh us unto Him at all times; . . . Here we see that God loveth us much more constantly than a man doth his wife. Also it is manifest

how tenderly those that are mothers do love their children, by the great labours and adversities which they suffer for their causes, to bring and nourish them forth in this world. But Almighty God is far above them in loving, for when the mothers perceive and feel the unkindness of their children, anon they forget them. Almighty God dealeth not so with us; which He confirmed by His prophet Isaie, saying: Numquid potest mulier oblivisci infantem suum ut non misereatur filio uteri sui? Et si illa oblita fuerit, ego tamen non obliviscar tui: "May a woman forget her infant, or child, and not be merciful unto the child born of her own body? And if she do at any time, for unkindness shewed, yet," saith our Lord, "I shall not forget thee, be thou never so unkind," if thou wilt ask mercy. Therefore we be more dearly beloved of God than children be of their mothers. Last, fathers whose love is longer-during and more constant unto their children be not to be compared unto the love of Almighty God. No carnal father may love his child better than our Heavenly Father loveth us. It is written Quomodo miseretur pater filiorum, ita misertus est Dominus timentibus se: "As the carnal father is merciful unto his children, so our Lord God Almighty is merciful unto all that fear Him."
 . . . This thing appeared well in this Prodigal Child when he came toward his father to ask forgiveness. Anon his father beholding his coming afar was moved with mercy, went toward his child, and at their meeting took him about the neck and kissed him. O singular love of a father! O great pity, not a little to be marvelled of! Let us wretched sinners return from our sinful life, come unto our Heavenly Father like as this Prodigal Child did, ask mercy with true penance and hope of forgiveness: for else we cannot have it.⁹⁸

From the many examples given the reader can see that St. John Fisher used repetition frequently in his sermons on the penitential psalms to put his thought across most clearly. He was so conscious of the need of repetition that it is characteristic of him to bind together the parts of his sermons by brief

98 Ibid., 103-104.

summaries. On page twenty-two a summary of sixth sermon is quoted. As a conclusion to this chapter I will include here an example of his summarizing just a part of one sermon.

Before beginning the second part of his sermon on the fourth psalm, we hear him repeat the first part with this brief summary:

That we promised in our beginning is now performed and shewed in this first part of the Psalm. First what thing we that be penitent should ask; second, what reasons we may make and bring for ourself for the grant of our petition; and last, that we may trust without doubt to obtain our asking. Which our Lord grant us. Amen⁹⁹

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

In virtue of the many examples quoted from Fisher's sermons I believe my thesis that the simplicity and clarity of style characteristic of St. John Fisher's sermon on the penitential psalms are a result of unity of design, figurative language, and frequent repetition has been proved. Unity of design in a sermon was defined as the arrangement of the parts in such a way that each contributes to one definite purpose. In the first chapter after stating that the purpose of the first sermon was to convince the sinner he should never despair but always trust in God's mercy, I gave a close analysis of the sermon showing how the different parts, figures, scripture quotations, etc. all helped Fisher attain his purpose. As an added proof a very detailed outline of the sermon was given which the reader could study to see how the different parts were knitted together to attain the purpose. Since the sermons in the series are all essentially alike, there was no need for an analysis of the other sermons; however, a brief sketch of the sixth was given to show the similarity in structure between it and the first.

In the chapter on figurative language it was pointed out how the figures of speech are an aid to clarity of expression. Then we studied and commented on selections which contained typical examples of Fisher's figurative language. After reading these selections the reader could not help but be impressed by the way in which Bishop Fisher used figures of speech to express himself clearly.

The fourth chapter was devoted to a study of Fisher's skill in using repetition to help put his point across clearly. After showing how important it is for the speaker to repeat his main thought over and over again without being monotonous, numerous passages were given wherein we could see how skillfully Fisher used repetition.

Even though the reader of the sermons will be greatly impressed by their clarity and forcefulness of thought, nevertheless these sermons do have their faults and limitations. For instance there is little appeal to the senses in many of the figures and comparisons as is seen from the following example taken from the first sermon. It follows after the saintly bishop has explained to his people how David from fear of God begs to be spared the fires of hell and purgatory and to be shown infinite mercy so that he might not fall again.

Truly that creature hath need for to be made whole which is so sore vexed with grievous sickness, that he utterly can find no rest in any part of his body; where also not

only the members which be strong feel trouble and pain, but as well they that be feeble be troubled in like manner. It is the property of sin to infect any creature in that manner wise. For as Isaie the prophet saith: Cor impii quasi mare fervens quod quiescere non potest: "The heart of a sinful person is like unto the troublous sea which never hath rest." What thing may be thought more troublous and more unquiet than is the sea when that it rageth? Even in like wise is the heart of a sinful person. Saint Ambrose asketh this question, as thus, "What pain is more grievous than is the wound of a man's conscience inwardly? It troubleth, it vexeth, it pricketh, it teareth, and also it crucifieth the mind, and it stirreth up-so-down the memory, it confoundeth the reason, it crooketh the will, and unquieteth the soul." Therefore our prophet addeth in his prayer: Quoniam conturbata sunt omnia ossa mea, et anima mea turbata est valde: "Lord make me whole, for all the parts of my body be without rest, and my soul is sore troubled." Whereof cometh this great trouble but only of sin, which turneth away the face of God from sinners? We read in Scripture that on a time the sea was very troublous, whilst our Saviour Jesus Christ once slept in a ship; all the sea was moved and stirred with stormy tempests, but, anon as He opened His eyes, with one word it was suaged and at rest.¹⁰⁰

Fisher goes on to explain how the restlessness of the sea signifies the trouble a sinful soul endures when Almighty God turns away from it. There will not be a calm again until our merciful Lord turns to it. Though the passage is clear, how much more effective it would have been if, instead of illustrating the state of a sinner's soul by quoting Isaiah and St. Ambrose, Fisher would have given a vivid description of a stormy sea by appealing to the different senses of his people. How im-

100 Ibid., 10-11.

pressed each would have been if he could have heard the roar of the sea, if he could have smelled and tasted the salt water spraying into his face, and if he could have felt the breakers rolling up and tossing him about on the sea of a troubled conscience. It is true that the mere statement of a comparison may draw the listener's attention and interest, but language in pictures will captivate him. Often Fisher fails to do this.

Reverend F. E. Hutchinson¹⁰¹ criticizes Fisher for his sentence constructions, neglect in paragraphing and in the obscure connection between some sentence because of defective punctuation. However, when we consider that Fisher was one of the first of the English clergy to preach in the vernacular instead of in Latin, it is not surprising that such mistakes be found in sermons written when English language was comparatively young.

Another fault might be that the sermons are entirely too long, for a modern-day congregation might fall asleep after the first ten minutes. We must remember that they were not too long for Fisher's people who lived in an age when preaching was one of the few entertainments they had during the week, as Rev-

101 Rev. F. E. Hutchinson, "The English Pulpit from Fisher to Donne," The Cambridge History of English Literature, eds. A. W. Ward and A. R. Waller, New York, Eighth Impression, 1928, 259-260.

erend Hutchinson says: "In an age when men read few books and had no newspapers, the sermon at Paul's or the Spital was the most exciting event of the week."¹⁰² Moreover, since Fisher was one of the few of the English clergy to preach frequently, the people were even more greedy to hear him. Nowadays, we have too many diversions to want to listen to a long sermon; but in Fisher's day, we would have been more than happy to hear him deliver a lengthy sermon.

Though there are defects in his sermons, Fisher, nevertheless, merits to be ranked among the great English preachers because his sermons are a worthy contribution to English literature. The words of noteworthy authorities will verify my opinion. Hutchinson says of him: "It is, therefore, a real gain to English literature that Fisher did not count it below his dignity to issue some treatises in the vernacular, while he continued to use Latin for his larger efforts."¹⁰³ He also adds that many of the faults he found in the sermons on the psalms are not found as frequently in his sermons at the funerals of Henry VII and of the king's mother, Lady Margaret:

Here, Fisher is at his best, and displays a noble and sonorous rhetoric with all the charms of rhythm and ca-

102 Ibid., 258.

103 Ibid., 259.

dence. It is impossible to doubt that, even better than Malory, he knew what he was doing and delighted in it. Perhaps to him first among English prose-writers it was given to have a conscious pleasure in style. Here is something more than the naive charm of the old-world story-teller; here is the practised hand of the artist.¹⁰⁴

Professor J. E. B. Mayor of St. John's College, Cambridge on comparing the sermons on the psalms to the funeral orations mentioned above says:

The long treatise concerning the penitential psalms, though of less enduring interest, contains here and there bursts of manly eloquence which, with the sermons on the king and princess, entitle the writer to an honorable name among the early masters of English prose.¹⁰⁵

In The Library of Literary Criticism Henry Craik speaks very highly of Fisher's style:

Fisher shared with the composers of the English liturgy a peculiarity which greatly contributed to the richness and variety of their diction - that coupling of the Saxon word with its classical synonym, which has become familiar to our ears through the Prayer Book. Fisher's prose style may, indeed, be considered as a corner-stone in the foundation of the best type of English pulpit eloquence--simple almost to an extreme, but yet instinct with earnestness and feeling, and at the same time with the balance that comes from careful scholarship and fastidious taste.¹⁰⁶

As a final quotation showing the place of Fisher in English literature, I offer words taken from The World's Best

104 Ibid., 260.

105 J. E. B. Mayor, The English Works of John Fisher, viii.

106 Henry Craik, English Prose, 1893, I, 142, cited by Moulton, The Library of Literary Criticism, 231.

Orations which contains a long passage from Fisher's sermon on the fourth penitential psalm: "Fisher's (Sermons on the Psalms) are admirable examples of Saxon-English. In eloquence they will not suffer by comparison with the best examples of other pulpit orators in his day or in the Shakespearean age."¹⁰⁷

The quotations above are fitting tribute to a great preacher and Saint, but why are Fisher's works so little known even among Catholics? How is it that seldom will they be found in English anthologies? The reason, as we have seen,¹⁰⁸ is that Fisher, adhering to his Catholic beliefs, was put to death by a Protestant government which could never permit his works to become known and admired. Thus they were banned from print. On the other hand if Fisher, the outstanding prelate in England, had become a heretic by denying the Pope's authority, his name and works would have been lauded before the English people and today would have their place in anthologies of great English oratory. But instead he has been raised to even greater heights than his voice and pen could have brought him. He has been raised to the very altars of the Church.

107 David J. Brewer, ed., The World's Best Orations, 2164.

108 Cf. supra., 1.

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APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by **Herbert J. Raterman, S.J.** has been read and approved by three members of the Department of **English**.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

July 13, 1952

Date

Rev. John B. Cowrath, S.J.
Signature of Adviser