The Ghost of Father Raby

In the 1530s Henry VIII proclaimed himself Supreme Head of the Church of England. He had appointed Thomas Cromwell, (an earlier relative of Oliver Cromwell), to run the country on his behalf and it is from Cromwell’s state business papers that this story is found. England had been continuously Roman Catholic for almost 1,000 years so, to persuade people to accept this unpopular new measure, they were forced to swear an oath acknowledging the king as head of the church. Those who refused were declared traitors and hung, drawn and quartered. Unsurprisingly, not many refused to take the oath but a few honest ones went according to their conscience and died for their beliefs. Among them were Sir Thomas More and the Lord Bishop of Rochester, John Fisher, (born in Beverley), who was also the man in charge of Cambridge University. They were later canonised (made into saints).

This is an extract from a history book: Robert Hutchinson, *Thomas Cromwell: The Rise and Fall of Henry VIII’s most Notorious Minister*. London: Orion Books, 2007.

p.96 The London monasteries of Charterhouse and Syon had been centres of opposition to the reforms of Cromwell and Henry VIII but were seen by the public as centres of honest religion so Cromwell needed them to conform.

p.97 ‘The Charterhouse was a particular target: John Houghton, the prior, had been executed on 4 May 1535; three others died on 19 June, all for refusing to acknowledge the King’s authority over the Church. …

‘It was critical to win over the Carthusians’[[1]](#footnote-1) hearts and minds, as foreign reaction to the execution of their brethren had been especially violent. At the end of April 1535 Cromwell was told by his servant, John Whalley that the monks were “exceedingly superstitious, ceremonious and pharisaical and wonderfully addicted to their old mumpsimus[[2]](#footnote-2)”. He urged that a succession of approved preachers be sent into the Charterhouse to convert them ‘and if this does not answer, call them before the whole nobility, temporal and spiritual, and sentence them according to law”.

‘One of the monks, John Darley, had been at the bedside of a “very old man … of our religion“ called Father Raby when he lay dying the previous year. Darley asked him: “Good Father Raby, if the dead may come to the quick[[3]](#footnote-3), I beseech you to come to me.” The dead monk duly appeared to him at five o’clock on the afternoon of 24th June at the entrance to his cell, and asked him: “Why do you not follow our father [Prior Houghton], for he is a martyr in heaven next to angels?” The following Saturday the ghost reappeared, now “with a long white beard and a white staff in his hand”, terrifying Darley. The apparition spoke of his regret at not being a martyr in life, “for my lord of Rochester and my father was next unto angels in heaven” and added: “The angels of peace did lament and mourn without measure.” The ghost then vanished again.’[[4]](#footnote-4)

Questions:

1. What impressions of heaven are given in this story?
2. Why did Father Raby’s ghost regret ‘not being a martyr in life’?
3. What picture of the afterlife does this give?
4. Could this source be a reliable account of real events?
5. Is this evidence of life after death? Give reasons for your view.

St. John Fisher, the martyred Bishop of Rochester

1. Carthusians are a type of monk. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This word means ‘superstitious nonsense’. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Quick is an old word meaning ‘living’ or ‘alive’. In the old creed it says Jesus will judge ‘the quick and the dead’. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Original manuscript reference: BL Cotton MS Cleopatra E iv, fol. 129. See also LPFD, vol. VIII, p.365. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)