

**Sermon for the First Sunday after Trinity**  
**‘Erasmus’**

**Texts: I John 4:7-end and Luke 16:19-end**

Celebrity academics are an affliction of modern broadcasting.

Barely a day goes by, in which we are not blessed by the insights of a Mary Beard, or a Brian Cox, or a David Starkey.

The list goes on.

In the Sixteenth Century, by contrast, there as just one.

His name was Erasmus of Rotterdam. But Erasmus was arguably the greatest celebrity academic of them all.

The printing press had barely been invented fifty years, when Erasmus published his first book. But, for the remainder of his career, this cutting-edge technology enabled Erasmus’s work, and consequently his reputation, to acquire a continental reach.

Of course, Erasmus, just like the glitterati of the modern academy, knew that networking is quite as important as scholarship, in the cultivation of an academic profile. So he travelled across Europe making useful and often rather lucrative contacts.

One of those contacts was a scholarly clergyman called John Fisher.

John Fisher was, among other things, the Chancellor of this University. And Fisher persuaded Erasmus to come to Cambridge in 1511. And he served as the Lady Margaret’s Professor of Divinity until 1514.

In a letter to a friend, which he wrote, shortly after his arrival, Erasmus expressed his disappointment with the place.

‘Cambridge does not agree with me,’ he wrote, ‘the beer does not suit me, and the wine is unsatisfactory.’

Erasmus, of course, was a Fellow of Queens’, rather than King’s. I’m sure the wine here is altogether more satisfactory.

It was just two years after he left Cambridge, that Erasmus published the book, for which he is now most famous, and the book which explains why I’m speaking to you about Erasmus this morning.

This was his 1516 edition of the New Testament, the *Novum Instrumentum Omne*.

The *Novum Instrumentum* was the first edition of the New Testament to be printed in the original Greek. So it was a milestone of Renaissance scholarship.

That said, Erasmus’s Greek text was hardly a model of scholarly perfection.

Most famously, the sources Erasmus had used, didn’t actually cover the last few verses of the Book of Revelation.

But rather than postponing the date of publication, to research those missing verses; Erasmus simply translated back from the traditional Latin version, the Vulgate, into a Greek entirely of his own devising.

This is, of course, the kind of academic legerdemain that would get you into trouble in a peer review.

I mention this, not to belittle Erasmus’s scholarship; but because it reminds us that publishing the first Greek edition of the New Testament, though eye-catching to us, because of its primacy, was not actually the heart of Erasmus’s project.

For Erasmus, you see, the Greek text was merely the academic scaffolding for his principal object, which was to provide a new edition of the New Testament in Latin.

Erasmus had the Greek text of the New Testament printed alongside this new Latin version, so that those few scholars who could read Greek, would see how accurate his Latin version was.

He also had an extensive set of his critical notes published in the same volume, so that readers could see where and why his version had departed from the Vulgate.

The *Novum Instrumentum* was, in other words, primarily intended as a new Latin translation of the New Testament; albeit one that was accompanied by two scholarly props: one being the Greek text that lay behind it.

Now, to modern ears, composing a new Latin translation of the Greek New Testament, sounds a somewhat esoteric endeavour.

Greek and Latin are both dead languages, after all; and, for most of us, a Latin New Testament is barely more accessible than a Greek one.

But that was not how it appeared in Erasmus's day.

In the first place, Latin was the language of international scholarship, and everyone with a decent education could read it.

So if you wanted to spread your ideas across the continent, Latin was the way to do it. Peripheral languages like English had only a local reach.

More importantly though, Latin was the language in which the Scriptures were read.

Because, for ten centuries, Christians in Western Europe had encountered the Bible in the form of the Latin Vulgate.

The Vulgate was read out in church.

The Vulgate was expounded in the pulpit.

The Vulgate was the foundation of Christian Theology.

As a result, to publish another Latin version of the New Testament; to publish a version that had been freshly translated from the Greek; to publish a version, furthermore, that flagged up precisely where the Vulgate had got it wrong, was an audacious enterprise.

For with the *Novum Instrumentum*, Erasmus was effectively challenging the most powerful vested interest in the Western world.

Even the title was provocative.

The Vulgate called the New Testament the *Novum Testamentum*, just as we do. And that is a perfectly acceptable translation of the Greek. So acceptable indeed, that Erasmus adopted it in subsequent editions.

*Novum Instrumentum*, by contrast, was a wilfully iconoclastic translation. It was designed to shock. It was designed to make a splash.

This was what you might call head-banging humanism.

But Erasmus's humanism was a humanism that was quite unequivocal in its allegiance to Christ; and specifically to the Christ of the New Testament.

So, if his text was iconoclastic; it was an iconoclasm born of devotion to the Scriptures, not disparagement.

Erasmus made that clear in the preface he wrote for the 1516 edition, a document which we know as the *Paraclesis*, and which was translated into English, in 1529, as *An exhortation to the diligent study of Scripture*.

This preface explains the impulse behind the *Novum Instrumentum*; and it shows us that it was an impulse that was quite as much religious, as it was scholarly.

Erasmus tells his reader that the New Testament is a book without peer; it is ‘The immortal fountain of Christ’s pure philosophy.’ And for that reason, the New Testament it is infinitely more precious than all the volumes of Plato, or Aristotle, or any other thinker the human race has produced.

Christ’s philosophy is so valuable, of course, because it is a divine, not a human philosophy.

Jesus Christ is God Incarnate, so his wisdom is God’s own wisdom.

The New Testament is, consequently, ‘the storehouse or treasury of God’s own mind, from whence cometh all goodness.’ And that is precisely why it should be preserved in the purest possible form, cleared of the corruptions and accretions that have distorted God’s meaning.

But lest this all sound a bit abstract and intellectual, Erasmus underlines that the philosophy of Christ is not merely a system of thought. It is rather a way of life that touches every aspect of human existence.

‘This kind of philosophy,’ Erasmus wrote, ‘doth rather consist in the affects of the mind than in subtle reasons. It is a life, rather than a disputation. It is an inspiration, rather than a science. And rather a new transformation than a reasoning.’

The New Testament is the key to this life-transforming wisdom, because it exposes us more directly to the teaching and example of Jesus Christ, than anything else in the world.

As Erasmus put it, ‘In this, his Testament, he speaketh, breatheth and liveth among us in a manner more effectually than when his body was presently conversant in this world. The Jews neither saw nor heard so much as thou mayest daily both hear and see in the Scripture.’

It follows that the best possible way to celebrate Erasmus of Rotterdam, in this, his anniversary year, is to read the book that was the compass of his life. It is to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest the inspired words of the New Testament.

For, as Erasmus put it, ‘The first point of Christianity is to know what Christ hath taught. The next is to do thereafter and to fulfil it, as nigh as God giveth us grace.’