



Saints – Thomas Becket

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Acts 6: 8–end; 7: 55–end passage from ‘*The Life of St Thomas*’ by Edward Grim

By this time of the year, the evenings begin to draw in. The earth, though not the Church, turns towards darkness and the cold; the hours between wolf and dog when grey shows as black, and windows stare blank at those indoors. It was 848 years ago at Vespers, a month or so from now, definitely out of any university term, that, on 29 December 1170, Thomas Becket was murdered in his cathedral at Canterbury. The actual events of that December evening, so well read for us as the second lesson this evening, do not bear repetition here. Martyrdom, then as now, was a grim business. Yet, ever since, historians and politicians, theologians and poets have drawn inspiration from Becket’s death. One of the two greatest poets to write of Becket is commemorated here in the Trinity ante-chapel. Tennyson’s 1876 verse-drama of *Becket* presented the archbishop’s death as a case of heroic conscience, of a moralist and truth-teller (determined to rid the King of his adulterous infatuation for the Fair Rosamond) brought low by scandal-mongers and court flatterers. Performed at Windsor Castle, in 1893, with Henry Irving in the title role, Tennyson’s *Becket* was a particular favourite of Queen Victoria (albeit that the Queen Empress deprecated, in her own words, some of the play’s ‘coarse and disagreeable language’).

We have just listened to one contemporary version of what happened, from which coarse and disagreeable language is by no means banished. According to this account, the archbishop’s death was the unintended consequence of a confrontation in Canterbury Cathedral between Becket and four knights acting as agents of the King. Here anger provoked tragedy. In an interview between the archbishop and his assailants lurid accusations were hurled (against Becket of treachery, and by Becket in response, a tirade of abuse including a claim that one of the knights who confronted him was a whoremonger or ‘pander’). Violent words led to violent deeds and thence to the spilling of Becket’s brains and blood – the lily and the rose, crucial here to a story in which reason (the faculty of the head and brain) was overwhelmed by the harsher realities of steel and bone. Note also the way in which Becket, and those who wrote of him, deliberately crafted their words and actions in accordance with earlier accounts of holy martyrdom, from St Denis, patron saint of the French martyred under the Decian persecution, all the way back to St Stephen, the proto-martyr, whose death we have heard described in the words of the Acts of the Apostles.

Martyrs are grim figures. Edward Grim, the author of the particular account to which we listened, therefore bore a name appropriately combining Englishness (Edward) with northern hardiness (Grim); an even more appropriate witness for us to listen to here, since Grim himself was a native of Cambridge, indeed the first certain native of this place to bear the title 'Magister' or 'Master' suggestive of an emerging community of scholars in due course to rival or surpass those other English centres of learning, London, Lincoln, and, perhaps very much in third place by the 1170s, that small town on the Thames between Gloucester and Reading, where oxen forded the river. 'Grim' is no inappropriate name for a native of what was then this fenland outpost of drainage ditches and wide grey skies.

It is also worth noting that Edward Grim was NOT a member of Becket's inner circle: on the contrary, he was probably there at Canterbury in December 1170 as a clerk dispossessed by Becket, now seeking restitution. Becket himself was neither a great aristocrat nor a university man. True, he laid great emphasis on his ownership of books (various of them still down the road at Corpus, looted from Canterbury after the Reformation), but his love of books derived from his tastes as an autodidact rather than his status as scholar. Becket was a man never entirely at his ease either with kings and barons, with their effortless social superiority, or with those such as John of Salisbury or indeed Edward Grim who through talent and hard work had acquired the classical learning and literary polish that Becket himself so signally lacked. None of this prevented Edward Grim from going to the aid of the archbishop, defending him even at the cost of his right arm that was nearly severed, as one of the four knights smashed down his sword upon the archbishop's head.

The actions of the Cambridge man, Edward Grim, are here entirely appropriate in their ambiguity for an event, and a martyr who have remained ambiguous ever since.

Martyrs, however grim, are generally supposed to die for a cause. Yet for what cause did Becket die? His detractors (and there have been many of them, ever since the 1170s inclined to call him 'Becket', rather than 'Thomas' or 'St Thomas') were immediately keen to point out that the murdered archbishop could be no true martyr: martyrs die despite their own best intentions, defending causes for which they do not themselves deliberately seek death. Becket, by contrast, his detractors alleged, died not for a cause but out of vanity, personal pique over a poisoned friendship with the King, and a determination to press his grievances so far that no reasonable solution, save death, was possible.

By contrast, his supporters (and they are inclined to refer to him not as 'Becket' but as 'St Thomas') claimed that the archbishop died defending the liberty of the Church. Thomas's death, they argued, was the only means by which a tyrant king, Henry II, could be brought to recognize the liberties and privileges of an international organization, the Church, answering to clerical and particularly to papal, not to royal instruction.

Even here, paradoxes abound. I once heard that modern and most professional master of the outrageous, David Starkey, denounce Becket to the listeners to Radio 4. Becket, so Starkey declared, should henceforth be recognized not as the patron saint of liberty but of clerical child abuse, since it was Becket who sought to set church and clergy apart from the ordinary moral standards of the world. Certainly, if one believes that church and state best

operate in harmony and that the clergy should be obedient to the same basic laws that govern laymen, then Becket's cause was controversial, both then and now. Certainly, in the eyes of the Protestant reformers of the sixteenth century, including the founder of this great college, it was a cause that threatened to replace royal with papal tyranny, subjecting the church in England to a degree of direction from Rome that not even the most ultramontane of Becket's fellow English bishops found easy to accept. Henry VIII no less than his ancestor, Henry II, considered Becket a thorn in the flesh; a potential hindrance to the proper functioning of the English church. Hence the deliberate burning of Becket's relics, and the destruction of his shrine at Canterbury in 1538 (8 years before King Henry re-founded this college). Hence, no doubt, the fact that ever since, Becket's cult and even his very name have been struck out of Anglican worship or service books.

In the 19th century, when large numbers of Catholic churches, both in England and Ireland, were being dedicated to St Thomas of Canterbury, not a single new Anglican church was built in his honour, save for a private chapel at Teignmouth in Devon 'dedicated and formally opened' in 1892 by the archdeacon of Zanzibar acting under license from the Bishop of the Universities Mission to Central Africa. Universities, academics and the Anglican church facing threats and violent hostility beyond these islands of Great Britain, let it be noted, have always shared a curiosity about the English martyrs denied to those of more robustly Protestant or insular persuasion. Even today, if you wish to see St Thomas portrayed in stained glass or plaster in Cambridge, you will find them in no college chapel but in the church of Our Lady of the English Martyrs, out there in the penumbrous no-man's-land of the Hills Road. Ireland abounds in such images, not least because the martyrdom of Becket by Henry II, in December 1170, was followed less than a year later by Henry's martyrdom of Ireland itself, in his invasion of October 1171.

Becket as instrument of papal tyranny, a European interloper, the foe of true-born Englishness. Yet, if the liberty of the Church was Becket's ambition, how was it that his death brought not liberty but an ever greater degree of royal supervision of ecclesiastical affairs? It was only in the aftermath of Becket's martyrdom, and the subsequent settlement of relations between King and papacy, that jurisdiction over the right of patronage to individual parish churches ('advowson') was definitively deputed to royal rather than ecclesiastical courts. Long into the nineteenth, and beyond, such rights of advowson were bought and sold as so much real property (to the very obvious advantage of colleges such as this, whose ecclesiastical patronage long remained crucial both to their economic and their political prosperity).

And here another paradox: Becket, a Londoner, an Englishman, not only dying for a papal cause with the name of a French bishop, Saint-Denis, on his lips, but dying as the one-time servant of the French-born and French-speaking king, Henry II: the King who did most to bring England into relation with a continental empire stretching from the Channel southwards to the Pyrenees. It was Henry II who raised Becket from obscurity precisely so that he might, as royal chancellor and archbishop, combine the government of Anglo-French church and state in a single pair of highly competent hands. No wonder that to the King and his supporters Becket's sudden conversion, from royal lick-spittle to open defiance of meddling royalty, was regarded as tantamount to treason: in the words of Lord Lyttelton, King Henry's first modern biographer (writing in 1767) all this exposing Becket as 'excessively passionate, haughty, and vainglorious ... guilty of a wilful and premeditated perjury ... in the highest degree

ungrateful to a very kind master'. For Lyttelton, a one time Chancellor of the Exchequer (by no means the last holder of that office famed for his inability to master simple arithmetic), Becket was both hypocrite and fraud, or as Becket's later biographers (including David Knowles, professor here in Cambridge) have suggested, above all a consummate actor. Determined as chancellor to play the part of loyal royal servant, as archbishop Becket entirely effaced this performance, becoming the most passionate defender of ecclesiastical over royal right.

Hence no doubt the confusion of the monks of Canterbury who, having elected Becket as a friend of the King likely to bring them favours at court, found themselves instead led by a head of house who was literally at daggers drawn with the secular authorities. Hence, in due course, the further paradox that Becket, who in life had mistrusted the Canterbury monks, failing entirely to persuade them of the justice of cause, in death became their greatest advocate in heaven: his relics the focus of a great bonanza in gift giving that raised Canterbury almost to the status of Rome, Compostela or Jerusalem, as one of the richest pilgrimage churches of the medieval world.

So much for paradox, the vice of academia. But what, meanwhile, of precept? What does the story of Becket's life and martyrdom have to teach those of us living in a later and a very different age? Perhaps one lesson above all others: a lesson already taught us this evening in the words of the Magnificat, that 'He shall put down the mighty from their seats, and shall exalt the humble and meek'. The lesson that consequences are very rarely premeditated and that those who wield power, on either side of any dispute, very seldom succeed in moulding the future precisely as they intend. As Becket himself might have preferred to see things, here echoing St Augustine: that the accidents and strivings of the city of man are very different from those appropriate to the city of God.

Take the case of Henry II. Here was a king determined to bring church and state under unified control, if you like to re-establish English sovereignty, certainly to assert his authority over an institution that had increasingly looked to direction from elsewhere in Europe. To this end, Henry and his propagandists manipulated a series of well-publicized and scandalous instances, of criminal clerks failing to obey English laws, in an attempt to isolate the English Church from papal or foreign influences. Yet the outcome of such striving was not only to create one of England's greatest international celebrities, a martyr whose cult was celebrated from Sicily to Syria, but a cause (the liberty of the Church, here in due course edging over into freedom of worship and belief for all whether Catholic or Protestant, Non-conformist, Hindu, Moslem or Jew) that continues to inspire those, who even today, seek to defend liberty of conscience against mere political expediency.

Think here of the city of Canterbury, and the Catholic church of St Thomas, just outside the cathedral precinct, which today houses relics not only of Becket, its patron saint, but of Óscar Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador, martyred in 1980 as a defender of Christian conscience against the corruption of a state enslaved to greed and social injustice. Romero was officially canonized on 14 October 2018, just three weeks ago: a potent reminder of the extent to which the light of the martyrs still outshines that of their persecutors. Think, if you must, of the lessons of more recent events, in which politicians bent upon local political advantage manipulate particular or notorious instances to produce outrage against non-

insular or European causes. In the process, not unlike Henry II, they risk provoking divisions and debates, not least in the island of Ireland, from which, we must hope, will emerge not a more insular but a more open, a better educated and certainly a more self-consciously British society. Chaos and unintended consequences, with the events of December 1170 as with those of more recent times, are sometimes necessarily cathartic, educating political society in its own potential for error and hence in the wisdom of seeking compromise where confrontation produces only sound, fury and the erosion of public confidence.

We, and particularly those of us who work in the worlds of scholarship and the mind, are so accustomed to paradox and the resolution of seeming opposites that we sometimes forget that it is not always the worst who are filled with passionate intensity, nor the best who lack all conviction. As one so convinced of his own cause that he was prepared to die for it, Thomas Becket should remind us not only that the best are sometimes capable of both intensity and passion, but that such qualities remain essential in a world in which truth continues to be manipulated by the powerful, and the consequences of such manipulation only seldom match what was originally premeditated. Truth is a subtle and fleeting thing. Its defence is something that, even in our fenland world of grey waters and greyer skies, requires continual vigilance. And truth comes in as many shades as fenland mist. Unlike St Thomas, most of us, I hope, will never be required to die for what we believe to be true. Truth and its pursuit may nonetheless be something for which we may both live and speak, particularly in a university like this where conviction and conjecture, wisdom and expediency each exercises a powerful but often contradictory allure. In a place such as this, St Thomas, London-born yet cosmopolitan, English yet European, passionately insecure, insecurely passionate, may supply a rather more appropriate role model than has sometimes been acknowledged. Certainly, the royal founder of this place, proudly defiant in his college gatehouse, may yet have need of the intercession of those such as Thomas of Canterbury, not just England's but medieval Europe's most controversial saint and martyr.