

Thomas Becket

In February, before we were hit by the Covid-19 pandemic, I wrote about 2020 being the Year of Cathedrals: The Year of Pilgrimage. That celebration has now been extended to 2021. But what initially generated the idea of having a special year was that in 2020 several cathedrals have major anniversaries. The greatest of these is the 850th anniversary of the martyrdom of Thomas Becket on 29 December 1170. His feast-day is of course the date of his death. But Common Worship gives 7 July as an alternative, which is why I am writing about him now. This was the date when, in 1220, Becket's body was translated from his original tomb to that wonderful space at the east end of Canterbury Cathedral where his amazingly rich shrine remained until it was destroyed under Henry VIII in 1538. Throughout these centuries Canterbury was one of the principal pilgrimage centres of western Christendom.

Thomas was born in Cheapside in c. 1118 of parents who were of Norman descent, although not of particularly high rank. However, thanks to patronage, in his early twenties he joined the household of Theobald, Archbishop of Canterbury, and was sent abroad by the Archbishop to study law. On his return Theobald ordained him deacon and appointed him Archdeacon of Canterbury in 1154. By the next year, Henry II had made him his Chancellor. In this role Becket, who greatly appreciated courtly living, was generally a loyal supporter of the king, even when some of the king's policies were against the church. So it's perhaps not too surprising that in 1162, when Theobald died, the king pushed hard for Thomas to become Archbishop of Canterbury. First, however, he had to be ordained priest! This took place on 2 June 1162, the day before his consecration as Archbishop.

No doubt Henry hoped that Becket would continue to support him, even if this sometimes meant taking a stand against the church. But that was not to be. Thomas immediately adopted a notably ascetic life-style and became the church's staunch defender. Matters quickly came to a head when Henry wanted to transfer to the jurisdiction of the secular courts cases concerning criminous clerics, which had until then been a matter for the ecclesiastical courts. This new set-up was enshrined in the Constitutions of Clarendon (1164), but Thomas resolutely refused to sign them. Reprisals followed, including a demand for a large sum of money supposedly in settlement of accounts when he was Chancellor. He still refused to sign, and although a council called by the king passed sentence on Thomas, he escaped to France. Eventually, after Thomas had excommunicated two bishops who had sided with the king and had threatened England with an interdict, the Pope brought about a reconciliation (of sorts), and Thomas returned to England on 30 November 1170. However, he remained as obdurate as ever, refusing to absolve the bishops he had excommunicated, and he was martyred in his own cathedral less than a month later.

The confrontation between archbishop and king was part of a power struggle that was played out for centuries throughout Western Christendom. It is this context that explains the extreme speed with which the church stepped in to capitalise on Thomas's murder by canonising him in 1173. The pilgrimage associated with his cult inspired Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, while the personal tensions between king and archbishop, together with Thomas's dramatic change of life, have led to works in modern times by T.S. Eliot in England and by Jean Anouilh in France.