

Homily for St Barnabas and St Thomas's Oxford, 7 July 2020

'The holy blissful martyr for to seke'

*On the 800th anniversary of the Translation of St Thomas Becket
(the 850th of his martyrdom in Canterbury Cathedral)*



I want to begin with words from today's introit chant: 'Rejoice we all in the Lord, keeping holy-day in honour of blessed Thomas the Martyr: in whose passion the angels rejoice and glorify the Son of God.'

Today we celebrate the recognition of a holy life: the raising up of the remains of the body of a martyr into a shrine, commemorating someone who died in an act of savagery in order to defend the idea that the Church isn't a department of government. Like many of the most colourful bits of history, the quarrel wasn't a matter of obvious rights and wrongs; and Thomas Becket – 'the holy blissful martyr', as Chaucer calls him – was perfectly capable of being a thoroughly disagreeable man. But his death spoke for itself. It had taken the holy and prudent King Edward the Confessor nearly a hundred years to be canonized! only to be eclipsed a mere seven years later by the murder of the man who had presided at the translation of his relics in Westminster. Thomas by contrast was canonized as befits a martyr in a mere three years. But English political turbulence before and after Magna Carta meant that it took fifty years for the translation of his relics to a magnificent new chapel behind Canterbury's high altar.

To coin a phrase, the martyrdom of Thomas had captured the imagination. It stood for something that conventional society right across Europe couldn't cope with. And the fact that Thomas's successor, Archbishop Langton, managed to associate the translation on 7 July 1220 with the *jubilee* of the martyrdom itself – and establish international festivities and observances every fifty years thereafter until 1470 – kept the imagination aflame, introducing Becket's colourful story to new generations, and associating his cause with the biblical jubilee themes of release from bonds, cancelling of debts, remission of sins, healing, and the triumph of the Church over all secular concerns. A very powerful mix.

But the fuller truth about Becket's story has some dramatically different tones, and I want to mention but one. Thomas's friendship with the changeable and irascible king, gave way to another friendship – with John of Salisbury who had been secretary and chaplain of Thomas's predecessor. John was a man of great cultural openness, interested in speculative problems, and had a wide love of literature.

He was also a diplomat and envoy: a close friend of the English pope Adrian IV. It was John's reaction to the king's desire to impose his authority on the internal life of the Church, curtailing her freedom, that prompted Becket's resistance and caused their joint exile to France, and to the intellectual environment that had had the greatest impact on John. And then, when reconciliation looked possible, they returned to England together in the fateful year of 1170.

John's friendship, so much closer and consoling to Becket than Henry's, reveals how close Becket was to the intellectual currents of his day. Many martyrs have been unsophisticated or relatively powerless people; so it comes as a bit of a surprise when we find martyrs like Thomas who is not only 'in power', but also mixes in the forefront of the intellectual movements of the age.

What then shall we draw from this fresh light on a rich and familiar story?

A martyr isn't a person who in any simple sense says 'no' to the world: not a kind of religious denier of culture. He or she recognizes in the world a richness, a wealth of mind and culture, and the beauty of the human spirit. And, seeing the whole world in such terms – as being the gift and sign of God – he or she *knows* that the beauty of the Giver is *infinitely more valuable* than the whole world itself.

‘I give my life
To the Law of God above the Law of Man’,

says Thomas in T S Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*.

The witness of a Christian martyr is not the scoring of a point, a kind of trump card, the definitive ending of an argument. ‘The martyr,’ writes one of Becket's successors, Bishop Rowan Williams, ‘dies in the affirmation of God's lordship – the affirmation that *God is the ultimate value* to be loved and served’ (Resurrection, p.57). The martyr's business is celebration, celebration of the sheer attractive beauty of Christ's new creation, and of the cross and resurrection as the means of entering it.

So, when we look towards the future of our society, a future for which who can deny we desperately need light and wisdom, what is the martyr's message? If we want to see a renewal of our society, in both compassion and service, we need to know where – or rather *who* – human beauty and dignity come from, and how they are secured and sustained and celebrated. Thomas became familiar with power through his friend Henry. But through his friendship with John, and the depths of thought and insight he gained as archbishop, he was able to travel deeper: far deeper, into the depths, where according to Jesus the seed dies in darkness (*Jn 12.24*), to find there the wellsprings of renewal that water the Church, and our society, and our world – the renewed creation where injustice and violence and ‘death shall be no more’ (*Rev 21.4*).

We celebrate today the recognition that *that* is the kind of life we lift up, and enshrine, as a *dependable* pointer to the life that is without end – Jesus Christ the Lord.