

Sermon preached at Wymondham Abbey

December 29th 2024 Thomas a Becket

Although today by date is the Feast of Thomas a Becket, such a feast day would normally be shunted aside by it being a Sunday – especially a Sunday in the Christmas season. It usually takes a very big saint to displace a Sunday observation. But for us of course Thomas a Becket *is* a big saint! He's one of ours, and that makes today one of our patronal festivals. It's also a chance for us to hear the story of the martyrdom of St Stephen, whose day falls on Boxing Day: an even harder day to celebrate a saint, even one as important as him.

I see from our history that we were originally dedicated to Mary – as now – and St Alban, which made sense as a daughter house to St Alban's Abbey. It's a sign of quite how gripped people were by the story of Thomas a Becket's martyrdom that only a few years after the event he replaced St Alban as our patron (and when the Becket Chapel was built here too). St Alban was not only the patron of the mother house, but the first British Christian martyr, so a major saint. But even in the 12th C, some while before television and social media, the story of St Thomas really seized the imagination of people in England. I also rather enjoy the coincidence that Thomas a Becket's mother is thought to have hailed from Caen in France, where the stone of this place was quarried.

Even if you are interested by all this history, let alone if you're not, you might be wondering what we can take from his feast day now, today. It's only really worth celebrating and preaching about if it says something to us about what we believe and how we live our lives.

Two things spring to mind. One is about the national church; the other about the local, ie us here in Wymondham.

The relationship between Thomas a Becket and King Henry II was a crucial faultline in the government of the country. Thomas went from close confidant in his secular incarnation to infuriating obstacle once he was Archbishop. His resistance to Henry when he thought the Church's dignity or privilege were under threat so exasperated the king that he paid the ultimate price.

Traditionally we've seen Thomas as the hero in this story, defending piety against royal assertion. You can see why another Henry, Henry VIII, erased him from the Church of England's pious traditions, given that king's vandalistic and self-serving way with both church and the monasteries (this one included). It's an added irony that his closest confidant was another Thomas, Thomas Cromwell; who then also fell fatally from favour.

There have been times in recent years when the Archbishop of Canterbury has taken a position against the government of the day, on the basis of Christian ethics. Justin Welby and – more especially – Rowan Williams have done this with strongly-argued moral courage. It's not the courage required to face actual execution, of course, although they faced crucifixion in some of the popular newspapers.

But in the last few months we have seen that moral authority seriously compromised by the stories of mishandled abuse cases; and, sad to say, compromised by some of the public pronouncements we've witnessed.

It's really tough for us to witness all this happening.

It's sadly true that much of the culpable mishandling of abuse cases has been motivated by fear for the Church's reputation. That's when ethics gives way to image. It's not simple, because the Church is not just another human institution: we believe it to be the body of Christ on earth. But that puts a

great obligation on us. We are after all living as Christ's hands and feet and indeed mouths on earth. What we do and say really matters.

I'm not going to say more about the national church situation, and you'll remember that I preached about this the Sunday after Archbishop Justin resigned. But I do want to urge us not to let our disappointment or anger morph into cynicism. We do better to pray, earnestly.

What about the local then, what about our lives here as a church dedicated to Thomas a Becket? I don't think it's about acting out some Murder in the Cathedral fantasy of piously resisting worldly values. But it could be about having a bit of Becket-style confidence in our faith, and in our expression of it to the people around us.

This day and age couldn't be much more different from the Middle Ages! So our methods and our style and way of talking about our faith will be very different too. Our faith needs to be expressed with humility and hope, not assertiveness and *complacent* confidence. I know I'm up here talking now, but the rest of the time I think we do better to listen seriously to people's questions and fears and doubts. And we should do that in a culture of hospitality, openness and generosity.

One of the things which made me so keen to come to this church was the sense I got that this is your style already. And I hope we can build it up more and more as we go along.

One way we can do that is with eye-catching projects. One of my favourites is a really good patronal festival. Today is one, but I don't think we'd get much traction having such a celebration so soon after Christmas! At least, not on the scale I have in mind. The glint in my eye, and the glow on the horizon, is around September 8th. That's the birthday of Mary, and I hope we're going to celebrate that in real style! Watch this space...