

St Thomas à Becket, Hamburg, dedication of window, 9 Jan 2019

Matthew 10.28-33

In May 2016 I was invited to be present at a mass in Westminster RC Cathedral in London, presided by Hungarian Cardinal Peter Erdö. The occasion was the visit by a fragment of bone, a relic, believed to come from St Thomas à Becket, now brought back to England for the first time since it was taken to Hungary, probably over 800 years ago. It was astonishing to witness this conjunction: the relics of a very English saint, with a grand Central European celebration and devotion. It brought home to me how the influence and inspiration deriving from St Thomas, murdered in Canterbury Cathedral, in 1170 on the instruction of King Henry II, had far reaching implications.

The inspiration of this saint can now be given even more focus in this Church which is dedicated to him, as this window is blessed this evening. I think that two things that St Thomas à Becket teaches us can be highlighted tonight, and in our onward life in this parish.

He was canonised just 26 months after the martyrdom. This is remarkable enough as it is almost a record in Christian history. And barely a decade after his death, virtually every country in Europe had a shrine or dedication to him. For example, just a little way north of here there is a Danish church (Sønder Nærå, Fyn) where Becket's martyrdom is represented on a wall-painting which is dated to just a couple of years after his death. His story has inspired art and literature. We know of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* of course, and the 20th century TS Eliot's drama *Murder in the Cathedral*. And we all likely know the 1964 film starring Richard Burton as the Archbishop and Peter O'Toole as Henry II. Thomas's cult, spread throughout Europe so very rapidly. In fact he became, in just a few years after his death, one of the most popular saints in Europe.

Dear friends, this testifies to the essential unity that is at the heart of our Europe. We in Europe share a history; we share a story; we share heroes; we share an identity. We are inextricably bound together. Over 800 years ago, what happened in a small provincial city on the off shore island of Great Britain was noticed and had repercussions across the entire continent. And remember this was long before the internet, or newspapers, or any other means of spreading the word, except by word of mouth. Yet there is evidence that as early as a decade after the martyrdom in the 1180s, people from this part of the world, from Scandinavia and further north, even as far as Iceland, were including Canterbury on their pilgrimage agenda along with Santiago de Compostela and Rome.

Thomas the saint of Canterbury teaches us that no country, despite what some proud politicians might say, has ever been alone. Nor indeed, can a European country be alone. That is not the way the world worked in the 12th century, and even less so in the 21st century! As I sat in that solemn mass in London I realised again that English destiny, and European destiny are one. The visit of the relic on 2016 was described by Westminster's Cardinal Nichols as "solidifying that growing sharing of life" that takes place between churches and peoples. St Thomas joins the English community to other European communities. For over 800 years his veneration has been building a bridge between our nations. He reminds us Christians in Europe that even apart from the veneration of some common great saints and martyrs, actually we are essentially one as people, united in proclaiming and living the great values and truths of the Gospel.

There, dear friends, you should be proud of me, for I made this point without mentioning Brexit – Oops! I just did!

The second point is this, and it touches upon something at the heart of our Christian faith. St Thomas teaches us about our overall loyalty to Christ as being the overriding loyalty in our lives. Our loyalty in ultimate terms is not to countries, to governments, to sovereigns, but as Christians it is to Christ. Thomas à Becket is the saint who is a symbol of the resistance of Christians to powerful and unscrupulous rulers. In the middle ages, kings and princes in Europe believed that they ruled by divine right. They believed, therefore, that they could do as they pleased with the Church, as it was unlike

them a mere a human institution! In more recent times, some politicians might not claim “divine right”, but still expect the Church to be compliant and to bless their policies. In this country, we know that this attitude by rulers has led to martyrs such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer who surely was following the same path as Becket. Like Thomas Bonhoeffer insisted and showed in his martyrdom, that the Church was foremost a divine institution in the service of God and God’s people, and not a simple human institution that can be manipulated or controlled, or even silenced by earthly powers. Such martyrs take the Gospel message we have heard tonight to heart “everyone who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father I heaven”.

St Thomas à Becket was martyred for refusing to put the will of the king, the will of the secular leader, before the will of God. It would not be surprising, then, that Henry VIII, in his ransacking of the monasteries and shrines of England, took the greatest delight in completely desecrating Thomas’s great shrine in the Cathedral!

So Saint Thomas à Becket is such a relevant saint for the Church today. He is a saint of great courage and of great integrity. These are inspiring virtues for the Christian community throughout the world today: courage, integrity. Today mass media and perhaps even politicians expect a lot from the Church’s leaders, but these days it seems they mostly seek a blessing on their views and policies, and when we speak out with some other views, we get told off and instructed to keep out of politics! Rather reflecting the words of Henry II about Becket “Will no one rid me of this meddlesome priest?”

But dear friends, we Christians might not always deliver what political leaders and the media might like to hear. St Augustine of Hippo once said: “It is the *cause* and not the *suffering* that makes the martyr”. The cause that unites us and for which we must stand as a Christian community is the Gospel of Christ, his message of unqualified love, acceptance, welcome, tolerance, justice and peace. Our calling is always to look to Christ and to stand up for his message and his truth in our modern society. In the Church we are to be attentive to the challenges, fears and problems of modern men, women and children, but we seek a response that comes from Jesus Christ, not from merely political and societal whims.

Dear sisters and brothers, I want you to take pride in this window. It speaks to our fundamental European solidarity and unity; that we are one family. It reminds us our calling to resist all abuse of power in our world today, and to resist all distortion of the Christian message and Christ’s values of justice, love and peace. As we dedicate this window tonight, it will become a permanent sign to us in this parish of our calling to be bold and filled with integrity as we promote and defend the values of Christ, for the glory of God and the salvation of souls.

May God grant us that strength and inspiration from this his Saint Thomas à Becket, to fulfil our mission of courageous love and truth. Amen.