

Tuesday Reflection 29 December 2020 (Feast of St Thomas of Canterbury)

THOMAS

A name that has accompanied me throughout my life. It was my father's middle name, and its tradition is carried on in the family through the name of my firstborn.

After my reception into the Church, I became very interested in two Thomases (Becket and More) and their fraught relationships with the two Henrys (Henry II and Henry VIII) and the literary works to which their rivalries gave rise.

Today we commemorate the 850th anniversary of the death of Thomas Becket - who was named after the Apostle Thomas (another controversial character), on whose feast-day he was born (in 1119 or 1120).

The Church venerates Thomas Becket as a martyr and celebrates him as a champion of the rights of the Church against the temporal power, a relationship which still exercises us today, and which can perhaps be traced back to the Roman Emperor Constantine in the 4th century.

Thomas Becket had been Chancellor under Henry II (as Thomas More was later to be Chancellor under Henry VIII) when Henry decided he wanted Thomas as Archbishop of Canterbury - even though, at that time, Becket had not yet been ordained as a priest. It appears that on his elevation to the See of Canterbury, Thomas underwent some form of conversion. Henry's hope that Thomas would be a compliant Archbishop was soon to be dashed, as Becket set himself up as a militant defender of the rights of the Church and of his office, and the relationship between the two headstrong men turned sour, with Thomas for a time being forced into exile in France.

The immediate cause of the breakdown between the two, which ultimately led to Thomas's death, seems to have been a controversy about the treatment of 'criminous clerics' i.e. clergy who had committed crimes which normally would have been dealt with by the King's courts. The Church argued that they should be tried by ecclesiastical courts, which were more lenient in the penalties they could impose.

This was all over 800 years ago, so what is its relevance for us today? Echoes of it are to be found in the recent and ongoing clerical abuse scandal. For many years, clergy suspected of sexually abusing minors were effectively protected by the Church authorities rather than being reported to the civil authorities for their cases to be examined under criminal law and, if required, brought to trial.

So, nothing new under the sun?

The relationship between Church and civil society will probably always remain fraught as long as the Church tries to behave and organise itself as a quasi-state and is more concerned with protecting its reputation than upholding the values of justice and truth.

Michael Townson