

THOMAS BECKET et la Normandie

The idea for this talk came from a book called 'Thomas Becket et la Normandie' by M. Yves Petit, lent to me by Vladimir. When I finished it, I thought, "Normandy does not seem to have been of any real significance in the life of the saint". Certainly he spent a lot of time here when he was Chancellor of the Exchequer under King Henry II. Henry, great grandson of William the Conqueror, was not only King of England, but also Duke of Normandy and ruler of Anjou and Aquitaine through his marriage to Eleanor, the ex-wife of King Louis VII of France. All this explains why Henry and his court were very often this side of the Channel. But the more I found out about Thomas Becket, the more I realised that it was not his life but his death, in the year 1170, or rather the impact of his murder that loomed so large in the minds of the Normans, and indeed all over Europe.

However. Thomas Becket was an extraordinary man, and his life, which is extremely well documented, is well worth studying. He was born in London in 1120 to French immigrants. His father Gilbert was in the cloth trade, and had come from Normandy, probably from Thierville, a town near Rouen. Trade was flourishing between Rouen and London. Gilbert was not only enterprising: he rose to become one of the four sheriffs, or chief officers, of London. The post of mayor did not yet exist.

At the age of ten Thomas was sent to school as a boarder to an Augustinian priory, and then to a grammar school in London. He grew to be unusually tall, six foot two, or not far short of two meters. He was also handsome, with strong features. In his late teens he became friends with a young Norman aristocrat who lodged at his parents' house when in London. The two young men went hunting and hawking together, and Thomas learned the ways of the aristocracy. Perhaps this was not to the liking of his parents, for they sent him to Paris to continue his studies. Not yet a university, Paris was a centre of learning that attracted students from all over Western Christendom. But Becket did not take to the life of a student, and after two years he returned to London. It is said that at this time he took a vow of chastity which was never known to be broken.

In 1145 he joined the household of Archbishop Theobald, or Thibaud in French, of Canterbury. Theobald had previously been prior of the Abbey Bec Hellouin, and was a Norman from Thierville, Becket's father's birthplace. This must surely have had a bearing on Becket's employment in his service. He became one of ten clerks, and would find within himself the capacity for rigorous hard work. He became the archbishop's spokesman because of his easy manner and quick reactions. Visits to the court of King Stephen, Henry's predecessor, were frequent, and over the next nine years Becket would see and partly shape a fundamental change

in the relationship between king and archbishop that would influence him for the rest of his life. He would come to see Theobald's resistance to the king's demands as a shining example of an honest churchman's refusal to be bullied by a tyrant. He even helped to save the archbishop from being murdered, for which he was generously rewarded. You could say that now, through education and experience, and through values inherited from his parents, he was fully prepared to embark on his career as one of the most important men in England.

In 1154 King Stephen died, and Henry II became King of England. He and Queen Eleanor were in Rouen when they heard the news. They raced to Barfleur to await a favourable wind, took ship, and were crowned a month later in Westminster Abbey by Theobald the Archbishop with Becket in attendance. The new king clearly took to Becket and sought his friendship. Possibly at the suggestion of the Archbishop, who no doubt saw many advantages in the arrangement, Becket was appointed six weeks later as Chancellor of the Exchequer, the King's right-hand man.

Becket's lifestyle grew to match his position. His retinue is thought to have consisted of 150 knights and their servants. He kept six ships on stand-by for crossing the Channel, and he kept open house for the King and his friends who might drop in at any time. Rumour had it that he purchased a dish of eels at a market near Paris for the sum of £100, enough to keep whole families of labourers in comfort for a lifetime. However, he took his duties seriously. In the courts of law he appears more as a peacemaker rather than one seeking prosecution and punishment. He was also extremely devout, retaining two priests for confession and penance, and lived a chaste life in a milieu where fornication was the norm. His relationship with the King at this time has been seen as one of perfect friendship, but in fact Becket must have played his cards very carefully. Henry was autocratic and capricious. He was a ruler with an innate appreciation of his awesome powers as a king by divine right, and would often humiliate his courtiers and officials. Becket was a product of the middle classes and was certainly not allowed to forget it.

Becket had the impossible task of reconciling his loyalty to two men – the King and his friend and mentor the Archbishop. Theobald was disappointed when Becket did not come to see him as he lay dying. But Henry was keeping him in Normandy and secretly planning to have Becket as both his chancellor and his archbishop. When Becket found out he refused, saying he could not serve both God and the King, as he knew through experience that it would be too difficult. Henry cunningly told him that he had the Pope's approval – almost certainly not true – and Becket gave in. Not surprisingly there was widespread resentment at his appointment among both members of the church and the nobility ... a low-born, high-living man who, although a deacon, had not even been ordained.

Becket gave up his life of luxury, and would later spend much time reading and acquiring a library. Four months after his consecration he resigned as Chancellor. The King was in France, was given no warning, and was furious. Next Becket set about recovering lands or castles pillaged by marauding barons from the church of Canterbury, which he was legally entitled to do, but which created many enemies. Another quarrel over a new system of taxation emerged, Becket asserting that if the money ended up in the King's pocket he would refuse to pay it. Henry and Becket then began arguing over the Church's claims for the immunity of the clergy from secular jurisdiction, and this would turn into a major clash. Where an offending priest was found guilty of a serious crime the church courts would spare his life, while the royal courts would not. For Becket the only issue at stake was the liberty of the church. But Henry was spoiling for a fight, and he chose this argument with which to oppose his former ally and strengthen his own power. For Becket, rulers who seek to subordinate the Church to the secular power are tyrants whom the Church must resist. Becket was put on trial in 1164, and after heated clashes of will between him, Henry and the bishops, he escaped from the castle where the trial was being held, fearful for his life, and took ship for France. In the town of Sens he met Pope Alexander and offered his resignation as Archbishop of Canterbury, but this was rejected. The Pope forbade him to return to England until the dispute with Henry had been settled. Meanwhile, he was to live at the Abbey of Pontigny in Northern Burgundy, there it is said that he lived simply, eating only vegetables and wearing a hair shirt.

He returned to England six years later, after many attempts at reconciliation involving Henry, the Pope and King Louis of France. A shaky truce had been agreed by the wily Henry whose lands were under threat. But there had been no change of heart on either side.

Becket was cheered by the people as he rode back to Canterbury, but it was back to square one with the Knights of the realm. They brought exaggerated accusations to Henry of Becket's attempts to restore church lands. Henry convened a great council at Bur-le-Roi near Caen, at which Becket was condemned as an evil man and dangerous enemy. The famous words "who will rid me of this turbulent priest?" are apocryphal, being first used 600 years later in a history written in 1764. But Henry certainly felt betrayed by his former friend, and let it be known. He sent two knights to arrest Becket. Four other knights, wishing to gain favour, also set out for Canterbury, and got there first. On December 29th 1170 these four murdered the Archbishop in his cathedral and fled.

Immediately monks and clerks and a crowd of weeping citizens gathered round the body, aware that a truly awesome event had occurred. As much of the blood as could be recovered was put into bottles to be used as relics to perform miracles. Even diluted with water it was still precious. Becket's

outer garments, stained with blood, were given to the poor who sold them for high prices. Three hundred years later, and fifty years before Henry VIII broke away from the Catholic Church, a bloodstained tunic ended up in the hands of King Henry VII who gave it to the Pope.

The body was buried in the crypt of the cathedral, which immediately became a place of pilgrimage for thousands of pilgrims, including many from Normandy. Today you can still walk the Pilgrims' Way across the English countryside. A hundred years later a magnificent, jewel-encrusted shrine was built in the east end of the cathedral, but this was later destroyed by Henry VIII.

In 1173, after only three years, Pope Alexander made Becket a saint. In the eyes of the people he had already been a saint and martyr since his death. King Henry escaped excommunication, but was forced to do penance. A ceremony of absolution took place on May 21, 1172 outside the cathedral of Avranches, with a second performance at Caen a week later. Among many other promises, Henry had to back down over the King's right to judge priests. He refused to observe many usual customs of repentance, such as walking barefoot from the gates of the town, but he had to swear that he neither ordered nor willed Becket's death, and confess that he had been the principal cause of the murder. Today there is nothing left of Avranches cathedral which was destroyed during the Revolution, but there is a small monument commemorating Henry's penance on the grassy area where the cathedral once stood. The nearby building called today the Doyenné but then The Manoir des Subligny, might have been where the King and his entourage were lodged.

Avranches might seem a curious place to be chosen for such a significant occasion, but it was an important bishopric in the 12th century. Lanfranc of Pavia, a friend of Suppo the abbot of Mont St Michel, and Anselme of Canterbury both taught at the Ecole Episcopale in Avranches, and both became Archbishop of Canterbury before Theobald, giving Avranches an international reputation for learning.

Elsewhere in Normandy the cult of Thomas Becket continued to grow. Several miracles are recorded, especially for lepers, so that hospices for lepers took as their patron St Thomas the Martyr. The fact that Thomas was a Norman by birth gave him favour in the eyes of the people.

One can find a list of all the churches in Normandy either dedicated to or having links in some way to St Thomas Becket on the website persee.fr, and there are fourteen in La Manche. Over the centuries there has been some confusion over whether churches are dedicated to Thomas Becket or St Thomas the Apostle. At Lithaire, near La Haye du Puits, the old church up on the hill, now a ruin, was dedicated to St Thomas. To quote the information board at the site: "Dedicated to Thomas the Apostle, the old

church is more likely to have had as its patron saint originally Thomas Becket, more frequently honoured in Norman churches." I happened to be in Bénodet in Brittany this summer, where the church is very clearly called Saint Thomas Becket. However, the information board states: "one is curious as to the reason for this choice. It should be remembered that at that troubled time when the kings of France and England were fighting over sovereignty of Brittany, the local seigneur must have been on the side of the English and wanted to show where his loyalty lay". I think the author of this text was ignorant of the huge following that Becket had. In Bayeux cathedral, on the south-facing façade above the doorway, there is a sculpture showing Becket's baptism and inside there is a 14th century mural showing his murder, and an altar where he is said to have celebrated mass in 1170. In Coutances cathedral there is a 13th century stained glass window in the North Transept depicting scenes from Becket's life.

In Barfleur there is a Rue Thomas Becket alongside the harbour, with some justification as he must many a time have landed here or taken ship for England. Barfleur was an important port, while Cherbourg at that time, although having a castle where the king stayed, was a village in comparison. A brotherhood, or Confrérie St Thomas Becket was founded in 1346 and existed in Barfleur until the Revolution. It was perhaps not the first, and certainly not the last, as a wedding in Cherbourg was reported in the newspaper recently as having a member of the Fraternité Thomas Becket in attendance.

In 1970, for the 8th centenary of Becket's death, there was a large ecumenical celebration in Canterbury, and a renewed interest in his life. Next year for the 850 anniversary, there will be even more. Among events being organised there is an international conference in Canterbury Cathedral to be held from 11-14 November. You can also join a group tour to include Canterbury, London and the ancient Pilgrims' Way. In a special exhibition the Vatican has agreed to loan the bloodstained tunic given to them by Henry VII. And of course there will be a service attended by Roman Catholics and Anglicans on the day itself.

Finally, one cannot help asking oneself: was Thomas Becket really a saint? He is venerated for standing up for the power of the church against the secular power. But if you use a modern yardstick, he would be told these days to mind his own business! In France you had the Law of 1905 separating the State from the Church. In England we had Henry VIII who finally ended the dispute between King and Pope which had been rumbling on since Becket's time. Today if the Archbishop of Canterbury says anything that could be deemed to be interfering in politics, he is considered to be going beyond his brief. The Chief Rabbi was recently castigated in some quarters for commenting on anti-Semitism in the Labour Party.

Do you think this is right?

Where do you stand?

Should we have more guidance from religious leaders?

Pope Francis is certainly trying. But one thing is certain. Thomas Becket, if not a saint, was a remarkable man.

Lisa Young
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