

# St. Thomas of Canterbury Anniversary 2020

Martyrdom □ 29 December 1170 (850 years)  
Translation of relics to shrine □ 7 July 1220 (800 years)

## Thomas Becket: Chancellor, Archbishop and Saint

*7 July: feast day commemorating the translation of his remains from the crypt to Trinity Chapel shrine in the cathedral, 800 years ago, in 1220.*

*29 December: St. Thomas's Becket's feast day, commemorating his martyrdom in Canterbury Cathedral, 850 years ago, in 1170.*

*An extensive programme of events to mark these anniversaries was planned by the cathedral at Canterbury, but because of the Covid-19 pandemic, all have been postponed until 29 December at the earliest. A pilgrimage along the medieval Pilgrim's Way from Southwark to Canterbury has been cancelled. Holy Trinity Church's commemorations, centred on our own medieval Becket chantry chapel, have likewise had to be postponed, but the Becket exhibition in the church celebrates these significant 2020 dual anniversaries.*

Thomas Becket was born c. 1118, in Cheapside, London, son of a Norman merchant father. He rose from these modest beginnings to become a powerful adversary of his king, Henry II, and one of the most venerated medieval Christian saints. Educated first at the Augustinian Merton Priory, then in London and Paris, he started his career serving the city sheriffs as a clerk and accountant; he then became a member of the illustrious household of Archbishop Theobald, who appointed Becket as his agent, and sent by him to study civil and canon law at Bologna and Auxerre.

In 1154, Theobald made him Archdeacon of Canterbury, an important and lucrative post, and less than three months later he recommended him to Henry II as Lord Chancellor. In this post, Becket had the opportunity to distinguish himself in initiatives no longer associated with Chancellor; he razed castles, repaired the Tower of London, conducted embassies, mustered and led troops in battle, and was trusted completely by Henry, becoming his close companion and intimate friend, both at court and in the hunting field. Most importantly, he assisted the king in his policy of concentrating all power into the hands of the monarchy, even when that policy went against the claims of the church. Becket was now occupying a rank of society far above that into which he had been born. For Henry's part, he valued his friend's efficiency and intelligence, qualities lacked by the uneducated, and often troublesome, barons surrounding the king.



1. Henry II (ruled 1154-89)

Having risen to such prominence, Becket dressed extravagantly and travelled with the trappings of wealth and power. As envoy to Paris in 1158, he was accompanied by a procession of men, beasts, and carriages laden with luxury goods. This customary ostentatious display was, however, out of keeping with his clerical status as archdeacon. He also offended his contemporaries by refusing to surrender his archdeaconry, while neglecting his duties and extracting payment in lieu of military service (scutage) at a high rate from his ecclesiastical estates. Perhaps most shocking was his failure to visit the dying Theobald in 1161 when he had been summoned to his side.



2. Archbishop Thomas

At this juncture, there can be no doubt that that in public affairs Thomas was the king's man. Upon Theobald's death, Henry therefore began a campaign to appoint Becket Archbishop of Canterbury, aiming at a return to the strict control over the church imposed by his predecessor, Henry I. He had begun to assert this control before Theobald's death and in this Becket had aided him. The prospect of becoming Archbishop, on the other hand, was a different matter, and Becket held out against the appointment for almost a year, during which time the see of Canterbury remained vacant. Once consecrated, however, there was a dramatic transformation both in Becket's outlook and his way of life. He became devout and austere and fully embraced the supremacy of the papacy and its canon law over royal authority. The explanation for this astonishing change remains unclear, but he appears to have accepted the spiritual obligations he had ignored as Chancellor, applying his undoubted energy, force of character, impetuosity and love of ostentation to his new and very influential role. Greatly to the king's displeasure, he immediately resigned the chancellorship but refused to relinquish the archdeaconry until Henry forced him to resign.

In January 1163, Henry returned from Normandy, where he had been since August 1158, and on his arrival, Becket began to challenge the king's power. Most provocative was his attitude to "criminous clerks". In western Europe, accused clerics had long enjoyed the privilege of standing trial before the bishop, rather than in secular courts, and usually received milder punishments. Becket's view that a guilty clerk could be leniently sentenced by the bishop, but should not be punished again by lay authority — "not twice for the same fault" — ultimately prevailed against Henry's contention that clerical crime was rife and that it was encouraged by the absence of drastic penalties.



3. Becket's crest: Argent, three choughs proper

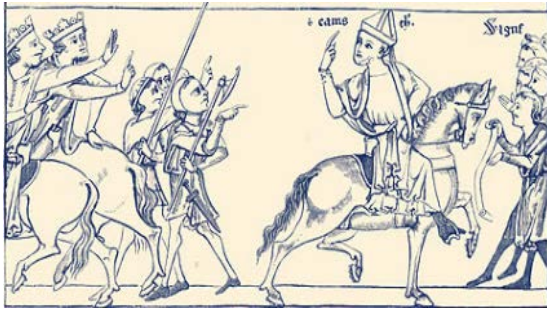


4. Becket denounces the Constitutions

The clash between archbishop and king reached crisis point in January 1164, when the king demanded universal assent to the 'Constitutions of Clarendon', which asserted the king's right to punish criminous clerks, forbade excommunication of royal officials and appeals to Rome, and gave the king the revenues of vacant ecclesiastical sees and the power to influence episcopal appointments. Henry was justified in saying that these rights had been exercised by Henry I, but Becket was also justified in maintaining that they contravened church law. After verbally accepting the Constitutions, Becket withdrew his assent and appealed to the pope. He received papal support but was cautioned against any rash action.

Good relations between Becket and Henry were now at an end and the archbishop was put on trial by the king in October 1164, at the Council of Northampton. Henry was encouraged by some of the bishops to ruin and imprison the archbishop, or to force his resignation. Becket fled in disguise and took refuge with Louis VII of France. Pope Alexander III, also then in France, received him with honour, but hesitated to act decisively in his favour, for fear that Henry might form an alliance with the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick I, who backed the rival antipope, Paschal III.

Becket remained in exile for six years, from 2 November 1164 to 2 December 1170. Although he was joined by many of his distinguished household, he continued to live devoutly and austere. Meanwhile, Henry seized the properties of the archbishop and his supporters and exiled all Becket's close relatives. The bishops were divided in their loyalties, but a majority, led by Foliot, Bishop of London, were either hostile to Becket or hesitant to lend him support. More than once, papal legates endeavoured to mediate, bringing the king and the archbishop together at Montmirail in 1169, only to see them part in anger. Becket distrusted the king and was, in turn, hated by him. That same year, Henry ordered additions to the Constitutions of Clarendon, removing England from papal authority.



5. Becket parting from Henry II & young King Henry

Finally, in 1170, the king had his eldest son, young Henry, crowned as co-king by the archbishop of York, Becket's old rival, Roger of Pont l'Évêque. This was a flagrant breach of papal prohibition and of the immemorial right of Canterbury to crown the king. The pope endorsed Becket's excommunication of all responsible, prompting Henry, who feared a backlash against all England, to meet with the exiled archbishop at Fréteval on 22 July, where it was agreed that Becket should return to Canterbury and receive back all the possessions of his archbishopric. Neither party withdrew from his entrenched position regarding the Constitutions of Clarendon, which on this occasion were not mentioned.

This inexplicable "open-ended" thawing of hostilities was short-lived. Becket received a tumultuous welcome from the gathered crowds when he returned to Canterbury on 2 December, but his continued excommunication of disaffected royal servants, and refusal to lift the excommunication of his rivals, Roger of York and Foliot infuriated Henry in Normandy.

The king's animosity and exasperation erupted in the cry that has reverberated down the centuries: 'Will no-one rid me of this turbulent priest?' – an outburst taken literally by four leading knights of the court, Reginald FitzUrse, William de Tracy, Hugh de Morville and Richard le Bret, who proceeded swiftly to Canterbury. On 29 December, they forced themselves into Archbishop Becket's presence, and, on his refusal to absolve the bishops, followed him into the cathedral. There, at twilight, after a further altercation, they cut him down with their swords, slicing his skull and inflicting mortal wounds. His last words were an acceptance of death in defence of the church of Christ. A visiting cleric from Cambridge, Edward Grimm, witnessed the murder and has left a vivid and detailed account for posterity.



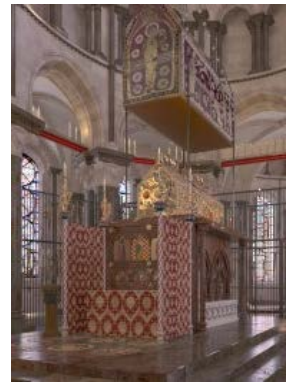
6. Becket's murder



7. C12 lead ampulla

The horrified Canterbury monks rushed to scoop up their Archbishop's spilled blood and brains and, within a few days of Becket's death, were offering this 'Canterbury' or 'St. Thomas's water' to the pilgrims who flocked to the site of his martyrdom. Small vessels such as this one (left) decorated with an image of Becket, flanked by two of his sword-bearing murderers, were filled with some of the saints' miracle-working, watered-down blood. It is inscribed: "Thomas is the best doctor for the worthy sick". Miracles were claimed in his name and within three years, in 1173, he was canonized by Pope Alexander III becoming St. Thomas of Canterbury. The cathedral became a celebrated medieval pilgrimage destination, surpassed in popularity only by Rome and Santiago de Compostela in Galicia. In 1174, Henry himself did penance there and was absolved of his part in the murder of his erstwhile friend, thus endorsing Becket's canonisation.

In 1220, Becket's relics were translated from the crypt at Canterbury Cathedral, where he had been hurriedly and unceremoniously buried, to a magnificent shrine in the Trinity Chapel where pilgrims loaded it with offerings of gold, silver and jewellery. For almost four centuries, Becket's shrine was one of the most famous in Europe. Churches were dedicated to him throughout Western Christendom and he was portrayed in stained glass, illuminations, paintings and sculpture. Henry VIII became nervous about this veneration of Becket after he himself broke with the pope in Rome in 1534 and declared himself Head of the Church in England in order to marry Anne Boleyn.



8. Becket shrine



9. Medieval pilgrim badge

Fearing opposition similar to Becket's challenges to Henry II, the king issued an edict in 1538, de-canonising Becket, and ordering all evidence of his existence to be defaced: the opulent shrine at Canterbury was despoiled and it required twenty-six carts to remove the pilgrims' offerings, including three hundredweight of gold, the same amount of silver and many precious stones, all of which were purloined by king Henry. Even the priceless Regale of France ruby, reputed to have belonged to Louis VII of France, was taken from the shrine and incorporated into a huge thumb ring for Henry to wear. He gave orders that Becket's bones were to be destroyed and they were supposedly burned; his name was erased from all service books, and at Stratford's Holy Trinity church the Becket chantry chapel was dismantled. Thereafter, St. Thomas continued to be regarded as a heroic saint by Catholics but was to be considered a traitor by Anglicans. Even today some people believe that Becket's bones were not burned by Henry VIII's commissioners but were buried in the crypt of the cathedral, and lie there still.

Judgment on Becket's character and actions has since then been varied. From his martyrdom until the reign of Henry VIII, he was the "blisful martir" of Chaucer's pilgrims, who had heroically defied a tyrant. Many recent historians, impressed by the legal and administrative reforms of Henry II, have seen Becket as an ambitious and fanatical nuisance. Certainly there is room for debate, for both he and his king were remarkable men with complex characters. Henry may have had moral failings and made private and political miscalculations, and Becket can rightly be accused, at various moments of his life, of worldly behaviour, ostentation, impetuosity, weakness, and violent language. Henry was ill-advised in advertising his claims in the Conventions of Clarendon and in crowning his son; Becket was equally ill-advised in stubbornly opposing the king in 1163 and in wavering between compliance and intransigence, when instead, careful diplomacy might have succeeded.

Becket's courage and sincerity cannot be doubted, and in the quarrel between church and state he gave his life for what he regarded as a sacred cause. The King's penitence and absolution might be viewed as a posthumous resolution of their differences, but ultimately, in 2020, it is Becket who continues, as St. Thomas of Canterbury, to occupy a central role in the history of Western Christianity, and whose feast days are celebrated in both the Roman Catholic and Anglican communions. The site in Canterbury Cathedral which his shrine once occupied is today marked by a single lit candle.



10. Trinity Chapel, Canterbury Cathedral

Sandra MacDonald, September 2020

## Illustrations

1. Henry II (NPG 4980[4] National Portrait Gallery, London)
2. An early representation of Thomas Becket (detail) from Alan of Tewkesbury's collection of letters (British Library, Cotton MS Claudius B II, f. 341r.)
3. Becket's crest, <https://www.theheraldrysociety.com/articles/heraldry-and-the-martyrdom-of-archbishop-thomas-becket>
4. Illustration from the book, *Life of St. Thomas* (c.1210)
5. Scene from *Vie de Saint Thomas*: French manuscript written in England, 1230-1260 (C19 reproduction): Archbishop of Canterbury and Christian saint, c.1118-1170, engaged in conflict with Henry II
6. Thomas Fisher drawing (1806) of Stratford's Guild Chapel wall painting (late C15) of Becket's martyrdom
7. Lead ampulla, c. 1170–1200, England (British Museum Collection)
8. Detail of digital reconstruction from Centre for the Study of Christianity and Culture (University of York)
9. Pewter medieval Becket pilgrim badge (Museum of London)
10. Trinity Chapel, Canterbury Cathedral; the single candle marks the former site of Becket's magnificent shrine (detail from photo in David Clayton blog: <https://www.thewayofbeauty.org/blog/tag/quincunx>)