

St Thomas of Canterbury, 29th December 2019

*“Who will rid me of this troublesome priest?” – We all know what this rather unfortunate Christmas outburst by King Henry II eventually led to, but how often do we actually think of St Thomas Becket, St Thomas of Canterbury, specifically as a “priest”? Today’s Epistle, from the Epistle to the Hebrews, for his feast indeed focused our attention upon the priesthood and concluded with a quote from Psalm 109: “*Tu es sacerdos in aeternum, secundum ordinem Melchisedech* (Thou art a priest for ever, according to the order of Melchisedech)” (Heb 5:6).*

St Thomas was a priest, and indeed a bishop, though he had been ordained a priest only the day before he was consecrated Archbishop of Canterbury, just eight and a half years before his martyrdom in his cathedral on this day, 29th December, in the year 1170, in the very same place in which he had been ordained. Thomas of course had previously had a political career as Chancellor of England before becoming Archbishop, which famously changed his whole character and relationship with the king, whom he now resisted in the interests of the Church. Things came to a head, and knights acting on the outburst of the king confronted the archbishop and, when he went into the cathedral for Vespers (at this time in afternoon in fact, before it got dark), they pursued him inside.

The most significant account of St Thomas’ subsequent martyrdom is that of Edward Grim, who was not just an eyewitness but very nearly had his arm cut off as he stood by. His account speaks of the archbishop’s death in explicitly sacrificial language: “At the third blow he fell on his knees and elbows, offering himself a living victim, and saying in a low voice, ‘For the Name of Jesus and the protection of the

Church I am ready to embrace death” – the next blow being in fact the fourth and fatal one. Such language therefore perhaps led to St Thomas sometimes being depicted in priestly vestments in the middle of offering the sacrifice of the Mass: a priest offering himself as the “victim”.



And yet Thomas had entered the cathedral not to celebrate Mass as such but rather to attend Vespers with the Benedictine monks of the cathedral priory – I had to make sure they got a mention! Anyway, during the Middle Ages, Mass was not celebrated at this time of day, as it is today,

indeed this afternoon. Nevertheless, the image of him as priest and victim was to remain somewhat iconic through the ages. Apart from this liturgical side to his priesthood, the pastoral side was emphasised in today's Gospel, which opened with: "I am the good shepherd (*Ego sum pastor bonus*). The good shepherd giveth his life for his sheep (*Bonus pastor animam suam dat pro ovibus suis*)" (Jn 10:11). Every side of the priesthood is therefore, in a sense, sacrificial: here it is the shepherd giving "his life for his sheep"; and indeed St Thomas gave "his life for" his flock, the Church.

If, in sacrificial language, we can pair 'priest' with 'victim'; in the case of 'shepherd', it would be 'lamb'. Grim, in his eyewitness account, in fact refers to St Thomas the pastor, the shepherd, as a sacrificial lamb, in reference to the first blow of that fatal attack, when one of the knights "leapt upon him suddenly and wounded this lamb who was sacrificed to God on the head". All this talk of violence and sacrifice might seem a far cry from the imagined domestic bliss of Christmas - and yet the Christ born at Christmas is himself a "lamb". If you tuned in last Tuesday to the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols from King's College, Cambridge, you would have heard that rather haunting carol, *The Lamb*, William Blake's poem set to music by John Tavener, and the words: "he calls himself a Lamb. He is meek, and he is mild, He became a little child".

Today's feast of St Thomas of Canterbury replaces, in England and Wales, the celebration of the Sunday within the Christmas Octave, though it is being commemorated with its own Collect, Secret and Postcommunion prayers during Mass. The Gospel for this Sunday is the last part of the episode of the Presentation of Christ Child in the Temple, an episode in which Our Lady and St Joseph "carried him to Jerusalem, to present him to the Lord [...] And to offer a

sacrifice, according as it is written in the law of the Lord, a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons” (Lk 2:22, 24). St Luke does not however explain, perhaps he did not feel he had to, that this was the offering of those who could not afford a lamb; the book of Leviticus stipulating that if the mother “is not able to offer a lamb, she shall take two turtles, or two young pigeons” (Lv 12:8).

It was not just because Our Lady and St Joseph were so poor that they did not need to “offer a lamb”; they of course already had one in their arms: the Lamb of God himself. The Mass repeatedly calls Christ the “Lamb of God (*Agnus Dei*)”. In the *Gloria*: “*Agnus Dei, Filius Patris* (Lamb of God, Son of the Father). *Qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis* (Who takest away the sins of the world, have mercy on us)”; in the *Agnus Dei* (rather unsurprisingly), repeating what was said or sung in the *Gloria*, except for that third and final petition: “*Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi* (Lamb of God, who takest away the sins of the world): *dona nobis pacem* (grant us peace)”; and then, finally, in the invitation to Holy Communion: “*Ecce Agnus Dei* (Behold the Lamb of God), *ecce qui tollit peccata mundi* (behold him who takes away the sins of the world)”.

There is one guarantee about the “Lamb of God” at Mass: he is always the one “who takes away the sins of the world”; he is always the lamb of sacrifice, who himself makes present this same sacrifice as the shepherd and priest at every Mass. St Thomas of Canterbury, who shared in this priesthood of Christ, experienced its culmination at the close of his life through the offering of himself in death, on this very day, just one year short of eight hundred and fifty years ago.

He was certainly a “priest”, whether he was “troublesome” or not.