

The Murder of St Thomas Becket

Vanessa

Thomas Becket was the chancellor of England between 1155 and 1162. During his career as chancellor he proved himself to be a loyal and supportive subject of the king, and it was probably for this reason that he was elected archbishop of Canterbury in 1162. His subsequent change from faithful chancellor to defiant archbishop amazed the clergy and the king alike and eventually led to his death at the hands of four knights. The murder of Thomas Becket in the December of 1170 is one of the most famous and well documented events in English history. Becket's death was a direct result of his refusal to let the king gain a tighter control of the Church by limiting its powers. Although he provoked the king on a number of occasions by going against his wishes, it appears that Henry was most at fault and was indeed responsible for the murder of Thomas Becket, the archbishop of Canterbury.

Before becoming the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1162, Thomas Becket had been working in the king's service as chancellor for seven years. As chancellor, Becket had been a trustworthy subject who supported King Henry in everything, even when it went against the Church. In fact it is generally agreed by modern writers such as Richard Barber and Elizabeth Hallam that it was for this reason that Thomas was elected archbishop. According to Roger of Pontigny (who knew Becket personally during part of his exile in France),

"....the king designed to make Thomas his (Theobald's) successor.....trusted that he would be fully prepared to do his will and consult his interests in everything." (Hill, p113)

Other than the State itself, the Church was the most important institution in England during the 12th century. For Henry to have the unfailing support of the most senior religious personage in the country, namely the archbishop of Canterbury, meant that the king would have a greater degree of control over the English Church. Alfred Duggan points out in his biography *Thomas Becket of Canterbury* that if the archbishop was also the chancellor, then "there would be no danger of a conflict between Church and State" The support of the archbishop of Canterbury would also reduce the risks of excommunication and interdict. That was Henry's first mistake--he assumed that Thomas would remain his loyal supporter in his position as archbishop, although according to Roger of Pontigny, Thomas originally declined the position of archbishop as he knew that he would, sooner or later, "offend either God or the king". However Thomas Becket was elected to the see of Canterbury, where he resigned the chancery and devoted his life to the Church. William FitzStephen wrote that on Becket's election to the primacy that he

".....so utterly abandoned the world and so suddenly experienced that conversion, which is God's handiwork, that all men marvelled thereat." (Hallam, p109)

Becket's sudden change from trusted Chancellor to devoted Archbishop marked a shift in loyalties--his duty was no longer to the king, but to God, and thus to the Church. With this new-found allegiance to the Church, Thomas began to disagree with Henry on Church related matters, the most famous of these conflicts being over the Constitutions of Clarendon.

In October of 1163, Henry II suggested the idea that clerks found guilty of a crime should be stripped of their orders and given to a lay court for punishment (probably death). Since the reign of King Stephen the English Church had punished its own felons, and their justice was often light (even in the case of murder). Becket opposed the idea and would not agree to it.

The following January the issue was broached again at a meeting at Clarendon. Eventually Becket, according to Alfred Duggan, "swore to observe the ancient customs of the realm"--but then he was presented with the Constitutions of Clarendon. The Constitutions contained 16 chapters, each one restricting a certain power of the Church. Excommunication could now only be carried out after consultation with the king, and communication with the Pope was prohibited, unless by royal leave. It was apparently for these reasons that Becket refused to agree to the Constitutions. His refusal to recognise the Constitutions revealed to the king that Thomas Becket was no longer willing to support him in his conquests against the Church, although Duggan states that the other bishops did agree to the Constitutions and that they became law. However, when the Pope saw the Constitutions he disagreed, as:

"...he saw that if appeals to the Curia were forbidden there would be no discipline in the English Church. He formally condemned the Constitutions, and forbade any clerk to observe them." (Duggan, p109)

This is Duggan's opinion--of the three available contemporary sources (Roger of Pontigny, William FitzStephen and Ralph of Diceto), only Diceto even mentions the Constitutions, and then only briefly. One event that is mentioned in detail is the Council of Northampton.

The Council of Northampton was an unfortunate event for Thomas. Becket was summoned to answer for his contempt of the case of John the Marshal. However, the Council soon turned into a trial for Becket's actions while Chancellor. Some secondary sources such as Barber and Duggan imply that the Council was essentially an attempt by Henry to rid himself of Becket, who by now had become quite a nuisance, refusing to assent to the king's wishes. During the course of the Council, Becket was confiscated of all of his property, excepting only that land belonging to the see of Canterbury. According to William FitzStephen (who Hill says is considered the most reliable of Becket's biographers), on the final day of the Council, Becket was approached by the earl of Leicester and told that he must hear his sentence (on exactly what charge is not clear), to which he replied:

"...Judgement is a sentence given after trial. This day I have said nothing in the way of pleading. For no suit have I been summoned hither save only at the suit of John, who has not come to prove his charge. With respect to this you cannot give sentence." (Hill, p120)

Becket then left the castle before the king could have him arrested, and within weeks had escaped to France where he remained in exile for six years, until he agreed to meet Henry at Freteval in 1170.

The meeting at Freteval was a successful attempt at reconciliation after a number of failures. Earlier that year, in June of 1170, Henry II had had his eldest son Henry (known as the Young King) crowned by Roger Archbishop of York. Both Thomas and the Pope were offended at this act as it was the traditional right of the archbishop of Canterbury to crown a king. As a result Thomas began excommunicating and suspending all that were involved in the coronation. Fearing further action by the Pope, possibly an interdict, Henry agreed to meet Thomas at Freteval, where it was agreed that Thomas would return to England. It was in England that he made his final mistake--he refused to lift the suspension of Roger of York and the Bishop of London, Gilbert Foliot. Becket also continued to excommunicate more of the king's servants. Becket's death followed soon after. The common idea running through the contemporary sources is that Henry became angry at Becket's actions on his return to England and made a comment that was overheard by four knights. The knights took the

comment literally and made their way to Canterbury where they threatened Thomas and told him to lift the suspension on York and Foliot. When Thomas refused, he was murdered in the Cathedral, and his last words, recorded by the witness Edward Grim, were:

"For the Name of Jesus and the protection of the Church I am ready to embrace death." (Hill, p136)

Thus Becket was murdered in defence of the Church, and in such a way that his death was laid at the feet of Henry II. During his career as the most important prelate in England, Thomas Becket ran into a number of troubles in his protection of the Church against the wishes of King Henry II. By standing up for what he believed in and refusing to recognise the Constitutions of Clarendon, Becket became an exile in France for six years and eventually lost his life. While Henry's actions were made in an attempt to gain a tighter control of the English Church, Becket's own actions were made in defence of it, and thus it cannot rightly be said that he made his death inevitable. Although he often angered the king by his behaviour, it was ultimately the king's own actions that caused the murder of Thomas Becket.

Bibliography

Barber, Richard, 1964, *Henry Plantagenet*, Barrie and Rockliff Ltd, London.

Duggan, Alfred 1967, *Thomas Becket of Canterbury*, Faber and Faber Limited, London.

Hallam, Elizabeth 1986, *The Plantagenet Chronicles*, George Weidenfield & Nicolson Ltd, London.

Hill, Bennet D. (Ed) 1970, *Church and State in the Middle Ages*, John Wiley & Sons, New York.

Maurois, Andre 1963, *Illustrated History of England*, The Bodley Head, London.

Encyclopedia Britannica (Macropedia) 1980, Vol 2 Arizona-Bolivar, pp 786-788, Chicane.

Relevant Contemporary Sources:

Ralph of Diceto, *Images of History* quoted in Hallam, E.

William FitzStephen, *Life of Becket*, quoted in Hallam, E.

Roger of Pontigny, *Becket's Election to the Primacy* quoted in Hill, Bennet D.

The Constitutions of Clarendon as found in Hill, Bennet D.

William FitzStephen?, *The Council of Northampton* quoted in Hill, Bennet D.

Edward Grim, *The Murder of Thomas Becket*, quoted in Hill, Bennet D.