

Reflection Friday Christmas Week St Thomas Becket 2023

St Thomas Becket (1118 - 1170) was born in London and became a close friend of King Henry II. He was only a deacon when he was appointed chancellor of England. When he was ordained as archbishop of Canterbury, he underwent an abrupt conversion of life and began to defend the Church's rights against the king. He had to take refuge in a French monastery for six years, and when he returned to his diocese four knights, inspired by careless words from the king, assassinated him in his cathedral on 29th December 1170. He was immediately acknowledged as a martyr and the king later did penance and endowed his shrine. He is remembered for his courage in defence of the rights of the Church.

Cardinal Vincent Nichols writes: Martyrdom is a much-used word. But be clear: no Christian ever seeks martyrdom. The Christian's purpose is the faithful following of the Master in works of truth and love. Martyrdom is not sought. For the Christian it is always a death imposed by others. Yet the same Christian never shirks death if that is what is required.

For some Thomas died a traitor, betraying the loyalty they believe he owed to the King. For others he died a martyr, put to death for his defence of the honour and rights of the Church. The role and powers of the state and the role and commitment of the Church is always a point of tension, a daily struggle in conscience and in public debate. Thomas' martyrdom reminds us of what can happen when the state seeks to dominate religious belief and reshape it to its own ends. When observance of those particular values becomes an absolute requirement, we end up with confrontation. Thomas Becket stands as a reminder to every age that the point may come where there is no longer any space left for that religious freedom, such a basic human right, which permits the holding and expressing of religious belief in word and action in the public forum. We ask God's blessing on the Church and on our government through Thomas Becket's intercession.