

Readings for England: *Colossians 1: 24 – 29; Psalm 22 (23); Luke 22: 24 – 30.*

Thomas Becket was born in London in AD 1118 into a wealthy merchant family, but his parents died when he was young, and he had to earn a living as a clerk. At twenty-four he entered the household of the archbishop of Canterbury, and in 1154, aged thirty-two, became archdeacon of Canterbury. In the same year, after a long period of civil war, the twenty-one-year-old Henry II became king. In the following year, on the advice of the archbishop, he appointed Thomas as Chancellor of England. Although he maintained his life of prayer, Thomas took up a lavish lifestyle, living more like a secular lord than an ordained cleric. He and the king became close friends. In 1161 Theodore, archbishop of Canterbury, died, and the king, wishing to bring the English Church more under his control, decided to make Thomas archbishop as well as chancellor. Thomas advised King Henry not to do so as it would lead to conflict between them over the king's infringements of the rights of the Church. The king did not accept that advice and on Trinity Sunday 1162 Thomas was consecrated in Canterbury Cathedral. Very soon there were considerable changes in his way of life. He adopted a strict timetable of prayer and study, gave generous alms, wore a hair shirt and ate moderately.

Conflicts arose between king and archbishop, particularly over the claims of royal courts to impose penalties on clerics who had already been tried in ecclesiastical courts. In 1164 the king published a code of law (Constitutions of Clarendon), based on the practice of his grandfather, Henry I. Thomas at first accepted the Code but soon decided not to accept it as he believed it would lead to double punishment for guilty clerics. The king summoned him to a Council to answer charges of wrongs committed while he was chancellor. Thomas escaped to France and resigned his see to the Pope who reinstated him. He remained in exile for six years, but by December 1170 a compromise allowed him to return to Canterbury. However, Thomas then excommunicated some bishops who had supported the king against him. This led to angry words from the king which were taken by four knights as licence to kill the archbishop. This they did, murdering him in his cathedral on the afternoon of 29 December 1170. The world-wide outcry led to his canonization in 1172, and his translation to a shrine on 7 July 1220. He is the patron saint of the English clergy.

1229 SAINT THOMAS OF CANTERBURY

[29TH DECEMBER 2021]

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