

Chapter Four

Thomas Becket: Martyr and Model

The murder of Thomas Becket at the hands of four knights in Canterbury Cathedral on 29 December 1170 was a key turning point for English bishops, because it changed both the terms of their independence from the crown and the requirements expected of a bishop who wished to attain sainthood.¹ However, it is useful to consider how Becket embodied the other three models of sanctity too, primarily because many of the *vitae* of other bishops, and even laypeople, make reference to Becket and his ideals, and follow the same model as the Becket biographers did.² According to Michael Staunton, ‘in writing about Thomas, [Edward] Grim and the other biographers had in mind, both consciously and unconsciously, notions of what a saint’s life should be’,³ and they were clever enough to use the traditional biblical iconography and symbolism such as the ‘colours of the lily and the rose, the virgin and mother, and the life and death of the confessor and martyr’,⁴ to make this clear.

Becket was the son of a wealthy London merchant and rose to prominence in the court of Henry II, becoming his closest friend and even Chancellor, with all observers

¹ See above, pp. 18-20.

² As seen above, Thomas of Lancaster was compared to Becket: see pp. 18-19; Matthew Paris and other biographers of Edmund of Canterbury exaggerated his relations with the king in order to emphasise his sanctity and compare him directly to Becket and his relations with Henry II; for example, *Dum enim adhuc viveret, videns se de hoc mundo cito migraturum, causam suam Deo et beato Thomae commendando, qui ibidem ob similem causam exulans invenit refugium* (For while he yet lived, observing that he would move on quickly from this world, he commended his cause to God and to the blessed Thomas, who, being made an exile, found a refuge there for a similar reason), Matthew Paris, *Chronica Majora IV*, 74. (My Translation); Thomas de Cantilupe has been compared to Thomas Becket due to many of his actions throughout his episcopate as we shall see below.

³ M. Staunton, *Thomas Becket and his Biographers* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2006), p. 30.

⁴ *Lives*, p. 203; Edward Grim, *Vita S. Thomae, Cantuariensis Acheπισcopi et Martyris*, in *M.H.T.B. II* [online]. Available at: <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/Grim-becket.asp> (Accessed: 16/12/2013).

being ‘impressed by the grandeur, ostentation and apparent worldliness of Thomas’s life once he had fully established himself at the royal court and become the king’s best friend’.⁵ For all intents and purposes ‘the king and his chancellor [were] boon companions, in and out of each other’s apartments, gaming, fowling and hunting together, as close off duty as on’.⁶ To live as both a cleric and courtier was a precarious position,⁷ but it was exactly this which made Becket such a capable and effective member of Henry’s court. Royal courts were often a breeding ground for difficulty, and friendships could often be a double edged sword. In fact, it was such a common problem that chroniclers warned of its effect on relationships:

Pacis habent vultus odii secreta, venenum
Fraudis amicitiam tenui mentitur amictu.
Occulit immanes animos clemencia vultus.
Pectoris asperitas, risu pretexta sereno,
Interius fervens laqueos innodat et hamos,
Curvat in insidias.

The placid face conceals secret hate, the poison of deceit cloaks itself in the tender embraces of friendship. Behind the benevolent countenance lurks the soul of a monster. Masked in a serene smile, a fierceness raging within the breast lays its traps and hangs out its hooks as snares.⁸

For the clerks within the *curia regis* the sword was sharper still. They had to balance the teachings of the Church and the wish of the papacy to exhibit *contemptus mundi*, with their loyalty to, and often friendship with, the king. Jaeger comments that ‘the temptation must have been strong to regard his presence at court as a form of pious fraud’.⁹ But even so, this double life has its roots in scripture for Christ himself said,

⁵ Barlow, *Thomas Becket*, p. 44.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 44.

⁷ Jaeger, *The Origins of Courtliness*, p. 62.

⁸ Johannes de Hauvilla, *Architrenius*, ed. P. Schmidt (Munich: Fink, 1974), 4.325 ff., cited in *Ibid*, p. 62; see also Johannes de Hauvilla, *Architrenius*, trans. and ed. W. Wetherbee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 106.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 62.

‘Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves’.¹⁰ As Barlow writes, the biographers used this motif as an attempt to ‘explain the appearances away. Most considered that he had done his best for the church in very difficult circumstances; some averred that he had the good of the kingdom at heart and had influenced the king to act justly’.¹¹ It is clear that Becket’s biographers used the same ideas; John of Salisbury described Becket’s cunning and guile at length in his *Entheticus de dogmate philosophorum*:¹²

Tristior haec cernit juris defensor et artem,
Qua ferat auxilium consiliumque, parat.
Ut furor illorum mitescat, dissimulare
Multa solet, simulate, quod sit et ipse furens;
Omnibus omnia fit, specie tenus induit hostem,
Ut paribus studiis discat amare Deum.
Ille dolus bonus est, qui proficit utilitati,
Quo procurantur gaudia, vita, salus.

The sadder defender of right sees these things and makes ready the skill with which he may bring help and advice. So that the madness of those men might be tempered he is accustomed to feign many things; under pretence he becomes all things to all people, he endows the enemy with his appearance so that by equal appreciation he may learn to love God. This is a good deceit which is very useful, it brings joys, life and salvation.¹³

So like the people to whom Christ was preaching, we are led to believe that Becket was also a sheep amongst wolves; hoping to preach mercy, kindness and reason to the king and his counsellors, whilst acting as the king’s closest friend and confidant on important matters of state. Not quite yet the model administrator-bishop, Becket was nonetheless an important administrator as Chancellor of the Realm.

¹⁰ Matthew, 10:16.

¹¹ Barlow, *Thomas Becket*, p. 45.

¹² John of Salisbury, *Johannis Saresberiensis Entheticus de Dogmate Philosophorum*, ed. J. C. Petersen (Hamburg: Apud J. A. Meissnerum, 1843) [online]. Available at: <https://archive.org/stream/johannissaresbe00johngoog#page/n6/mode/2up> (Accessed: 16/12/2013).

¹³ *Ibid*, pp. 80-1. (My Translation).

Becket, therefore, seems to have been a man of quiet contradictions. Under the king he had been happy to spend money, dress lavishly, and even lead Henry's armies, showing very little in the way of holiness at times. Barlow makes note that 'with powerful military forces he had wiped out towns and fortresses; without mercy he had burned down farms and properties; resolutely he had been an enemy to all enemies of the king, in whatever quarter they had arisen'.¹⁴ Yet Knowles follows Herbert of Bosham's comments:

I will return to speak of his magnificence ... for he was generous beyond the demands of his high office, expansive to all, magnificent to all and beyond all, great of heart, great of stature and great in display. With him nothing would do but what was great in scale and magnificent in appearance.¹⁵

What is clear, is that Becket was all things to all men,¹⁶ and did not do things by halves. To the king and barons he was a friend and equal, spending, hunting, and practising the arts of war. Yet to the men of the church, it was clear that he was rehearsing for his next role. Thomas the clerk had remained such, continuing to follow his policies of chastity and private devotion, even if they were obscured somewhat by his actions at war. By 1161 there could have been no doubt amongst any at court that Thomas Becket was the favourite of both Archbishop Theobald and Henry II, and so, when asked by his old friend Ansketil, Prior of Leicester, about the rumours surrounding him and the archbishopric after Theobald had died, Becket made his feelings clear: 'For if it should come about that I am promoted, I know the king so well, indeed inside out, that I would either have to lose his favour or, God forbid!, neglect my

¹⁴ Barlow, *Thomas Becket*, p. 62.

¹⁵ Knowles, *Thomas Becket*, p. 40.

¹⁶ John of Salisbury, *Johannis Saresberiensis Entheticus de Dogmate Philosophorum*, pp. 81-2.

duty to the Almighty'.¹⁷ But Becket's double act had led him thus far, and would lead him further yet.

So, if Becket's biographers are to be believed, he continued to lead this double life at court; outwardly a friend to the barons, the magnates and the king, whilst secretly saintly and devoted to God in private. So, 'with evidence for great ecclesiastical zeal in short supply, and faced with a few awkward matters, most biographers took the line that the outward show was a necessary camouflage for the continuing integrity of his private life. He did good works secretly and remained chaste. He was a second Joseph at the court of Pharaoh'.¹⁸ Eventually, as with most administrator-bishops, Becket underwent a conversion when he was consecrated archbishop of Canterbury. William FitzStephen reported that 'in his consecration he was anointed with the visible unction of God's mercy; putting off the secular man, he now put on Jesus Christ',¹⁹ immediately relinquishing the chancellorship in order 'to fulfil the functions of a good archbishop'.²⁰ Many of his biographers make use of Becket's adoption of the ascetic way of life immediately after his conversion and consecration; FitzStephen wrote that when he became archbishop, Becket was:

Clad in a hair-shirt of the roughest kind, which reached his knees and swarmed with vermin, he mortified his flesh with the sparest diet, and his accustomed drink was water used for the cooking of hay [...] He would eat some of the meat placed before him, but fed chiefly on bread [...] Frequently he exposed his naked back to the lash of discipline. Immediately over his hair-shirt he wore the habit of a monk, as being abbot of the monks of Canterbury.²¹

¹⁷ Barlow, *Thomas Becket*, p. 63.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 45.

¹⁹ William FitzStephen, *The Life and Death of Thomas Becket Chancellor of England and Archbishop of Canterbury based on the account of William FitzStephen his clerk with additions from other contemporary sources translated and edited by George Greenaway*, trans. ed. G. Greenaway, Folio Society (London: William Clowes and Sons Ltd, 1961), p. 55.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 55.

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 56.

John of Salisbury explained how he ‘put off the old man, and put on the hair shirt of a monk’,²² and William of Canterbury wrote that:

As if transformed into another man, he became more restrained, more watchful, more frequent in prayer, more attentive in preaching [...] he subjected his body to servitude, teaching it to be subservient, and taught the spirit to rule.²³

Becket was no longer a pious fraud in court, but could now outwardly exhibit his inherent holiness in the vestments of episcopal office. Gone was the double life of the courtier and holy man, replaced by a complex threefold appearance: the bishop, devoted to his cause and flock; the monk and hermit, serving the Lord in private; and the inward ascetic, his saintly virtues ‘suffering the desert without being in the desert’.²⁴ William of Canterbury wrote that Becket was, ‘Happy because on the outside he deceived the world [...] Happy on the outside because he exposed the canon, beneath he hid the hermit, and within he satisfied the Lord’s mandate’.²⁵

Becket’s biographers consistently labour this point in order to highlight his ‘white’ martyrdom; suffering and experience of a living martyrdom before he suffered his violent red martyrdom. The *Candidus et Rubicundus* finally became a central motif of his sanctity and any remaining questions as to the ascetic quality of Becket’s life were answered on the altar steps at Canterbury on 29 December 1170. According to one anonymous author the monks discovered that Becket was wearing a hair shirt underneath his vestments and vociferated *Ecce vere monachum et vere heremitam! Ecce vere martyrem, qui non solum in morte sed et in vita tormenta passus est!* (Behold! He is truly a monk and truly a hermit. Here truly is a martyr who suffered torments not

²² *Lives*, p. 67.

²³ *Ibid*, p. 67.

²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 67.

²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 67.

only in death, but also in life).²⁶ Indeed, the eyewitness Edward Grim recounted that Becket's hair shirt had become part of his body and was crawling with so many creatures that *ut levius isto pristinae diei fuisse martyrium quivis judicaret, et hostes majores minoribus minus nocuisse* (It could be judged that the martyrdom was less of a punishment than the injuries inflicted on him by these small enemies).²⁷ His double life had been finally revealed, causing William FitzStephen to exclaim that *Omnes accurrunt, visuri illum in cilicio, quem cancellarium viderant in purpura et bysso* (All would gather to see him in poor cloth, when as Chancellor they had seen him in purple and fine linen).²⁸ Along with this analogue of Becket as the monk and hermit living in a veritable desert like the desert fathers, his biographers consciously shaped his image to resemble the early church martyrs. John of Salisbury wrote that:

Through all the martyr's spirit was unconquered, his steadfastness marvellous to observe; he spoke not a word, uttered no cry, let slip no groan, raised no arm nor garment to protect himself from an assailant, but bent his head, which he had laid bare to their swords with wonderful courage, until all might be fulfilled.²⁹

This silence in the face of death and the acceptance of his final martyrdom was found as part of the patristic tradition of the martyrs with the Acts of the Christian Martyrs commending:³⁰

For even when they were torn by whips until the very structure of their bodies was laid bare down to the inner veins and arteries, they endured it, making even the bystanders weep for pity. Some indeed attained to such courage that they would utter not a sound or a cry, showing to all of us that in the hour of their torment these noblest of Christ's witnesses were not present in the flesh, or rather that the Lord was there present holding converse with them.³¹

²⁶ Anonymous I, *M.H.T.B. IV*, 79 (My Translation).

²⁷ Edward Grim, *M.H.T.B. II*, 442 (My Translation).

²⁸ William FitzStephen, *M.H.T.B. III*, 148 (My Translation).

²⁹ John of Salisbury, *M.H.T.B. II*, 320, trans in Staunton, *Becket and his Biographers*, p. 197.

³⁰ Staunton, *Becket and his Biographers*, p. 197.

³¹ *Ibid*, p. 197.

Whilst Becket's biographers focussed on his courtly and ascetic lives, they spent little time on his pastoral role. John of Salisbury mentions in passing that 'he freed the poor from the powerful, as he who was in fact given by the Lord as a father of paupers and consoler of the deserving',³² and he practised the virtues of hospitality and good counsel, giving alms and visiting the poor.³³ Herbert of Bosham also documented that upon Becket's return to England from self-imposed exile at Pontigny, he landed at Sandwich where 'a crowd of poor people gathered to meet him, some striving to be the first to receive blessing from their father as he landed, others humbly prostrating themselves on the ground, some wailing, some weeping for joy, and all crying out together, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, father of orphans and judge of widows!'³⁴ The use of scripture, such as Matthew 21:9 and Psalm 118:26,³⁵ in Herbert of Bosham's writing is repeated in Edward Grim's account and the Offices associated with Becket, which specifically use John 10:11 and 10:14-16.³⁶ All of these contemporary writings focus upon 'the shepherd of the sheep and the sacrificial lamb, priest and victim, the body offered to preserve the head, the one who abandoned the world exalted by the world – recall descriptions of Christ's passion',³⁷ and thus Becket could be seen as a perfect example of Christ's work.

³² *Lives*, p. 69.

³³ Staunton, *Thomas Becket*, p. 90.

³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 183.

³⁵ 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!'; 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. From the house of the Lord we bless you'.

³⁶ 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep'; 'I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me – just as the Father knows me and I know the Father – and I lay down my life for the sheep'.

³⁷ Staunton, *Thomas Becket*, p. 197.

Whilst Becket exhibited these saintly qualities throughout his life, it can perhaps be argued that these qualities alone were not quite enough to guarantee his canonization; especially since he never performed any *in vita* miracles. What made Becket an engaging candidate for sainthood was that, during his tenure as archbishop, he had embodied the exact words that the papacy had been preaching since the Gregorian Reform movement in the eleventh century and the Second Lateran council at the start of the twelfth century – *libertas ecclesiae*.³⁸ Throughout his episcopate Becket had increasingly exhibited *contemptus mundi*, fighting constantly against his old friend for the rights and freedoms of his church in England, especially at the Council of Clarendon in January 1164.³⁹ However, there was precedent in England for archbishops to fight for the *libertas ecclesia* and strain their relations with the king, often resulting in temporary exile: ‘Anselm had taken leave of William Rufus in 1097 and Henry I in 1103. Thurstan of York had gone abroad in 1116. In 1148 Stephen had banished both archbishops from England, and in 1152 had driven Theobald out’.⁴⁰ Each of these bishops had fought against someone they saw as a despot, seeking to extend his power over lands and rights that did not belong to him, and ‘in most cases there had also been personal and political differences between archbishop and the king’.⁴¹ The suffering Becket endured, and the other three models of sanctity he exhibited, were still not

³⁸ R. W. Southern, *St Anselm: A Portrait in a Landscape*, new edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 278.

³⁹ For information on the council and the Constitutions laid down there see, A. L. Poole, *From Domesday Book to Magna Carta: 1087-1216*, second edn. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 205-219; W. L. Warren, *Henry II* (Totton: Hobbs the Printers Ltd, 2000), pp. 468-480; Barlow, *Thomas Becket*, pp. 98-105; Knowles, *Thomas Becket*, pp. 87-93.

⁴⁰ Barlow, *Thomas Becket*, p. 117; on Thurstan see, D. Nicholl, *Thurstan: Archbishop of York, 1114-1140* (York: Stonegate Press, 1964).

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 117.

enough for the canonization; *Martyrem non facit poena, sed causa*,⁴² ‘it was the cause, not the suffering, which made a martyr’.⁴³ This is a point made clear by St Augustine:

He showed also that death itself, although the punishment of sin, was submitted to by Him for our sakes without sin, and must not be evaded by sin on our part, but rather, if opportunity serves, be borne for righteousness’ sake.⁴⁴

As mentioned above, Edward Grim and the Offices for Becket both focussed on the fact that Becket had been a good shepherd and had given his life for his sheep.⁴⁵ He had died in his Cathedral in order to protect the rights of his friends, and more importantly his church, against the king and his secular power. In Becket, the papacy had canonized the pinnacle of perfection for bishops everywhere; the exact model of sanctity that they wished bishops to follow. He combined the elements from each of the three main models we understand today, but also included political opposition; exhibiting *contemptus mundi* for the sake of the *libertas ecclesia*. For the papacy, Becket represented an opportunity; the *poena* and *causa* that he had undergone and fought for so valiantly in the eyes of his contemporaries lent themselves directly to the papal case that England and her bishops should be allowed to appeal directly to Rome. The previous centuries of Norman and Angevin interference were over. Under interdict, Henry had to come to terms with the *Carta reconciliationis* produced by the papacy in order to receive reconciliation. Clause three stated directly that:

You [Henry II] shall neither impede appeals in ecclesiastical causes to the Roman Church nor allow them to be impeded, but they are to be made freely, in good faith, without fraud and trickery, so that the Roman pontiff may consider and terminate such

⁴² St Augustine of Hippo, Ep. 89 quoted in A. Duggan, ‘The Cult of St Thomas Becket in the Thirteenth Century’, in *St Thomas Cantilupe: Bishop of Hereford*, 21-44 (p. 33, n. 76).

⁴³ Jensen, *Martyrdom and Identity*, p. 88.

⁴⁴ St Augustine, *City of God*, Book X, Chapter 24 [online]. Available at: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/120110.htm> (Accessed: 10/2/2014).

⁴⁵ John 10: 11-16.

cases; but in such a way that if any [appellants] are suspect to you, they shall give security that they are not seeking injury to you or to your realm.⁴⁶

On the other hand, for the English clergy and laity, Becket became an important saint. Someone willing to fight for the populace against the king and his barons, offering miraculous cures for those who believed and went on pilgrimage. Arguably Becket's *vita* fell by the wayside for the laity, with his *signa* and miracles taking precedence. However, for the episcopacy of England, his *vita* was now a touchstone. The entire situation surrounding Becket's death bolstered the very nature of the English episcopate – 'for the image of the martyr exercised a pervasive influence on the mentality of the thirteenth-century church. Becket became a figure of epic quality, the hero of reformers, and one of England's patron saints'.⁴⁷

⁴⁶A. Duggan, 'Henry II, the English Church and the Papacy, 1154-76', *Henry II: New Interpretations*, ed. C. Harper-Bill and N. Vincent (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2007), 154-183 (p. 176); see also A. Duggan, 'Ne in dubium: The Official Record of Henry II's Reconciliation at Avranches, 21 May 1172', *The English Historical Review*, 115, no. 462 (2000), 643-658 (p. 658).

⁴⁷ Duggan, 'The Cult of St Thomas Becket in the Thirteenth Century', p. 22.