

Thomas Becket 2013 – Our Patronal Festival

We have reason indeed to rejoice with our patronal festival. Many churches are dedicated to Saints of whom we know little. Not so for us in the Cliffe. We know a great deal about Thomas Becket. He is as firmly established in history as this church is grounded in Cliffe High Street, albeit with a slightly moving tower!

For many of us the reality of Thomas Becket was cemented some years ago in our enacting T.S. Eliot's "Murder in the Cathedral. The shock of Thomas Becket being killed here on this chancel step is one that remains with us.

We are thankful for Eliot. We know that he went carefully through a great deal of historical material on Thomas Becket.

His "Murder in the Cathedral" is of course a drama. But the history too is of a dramatic nature – not only in the representation of those last hours of Thomas Becket's life – but throughout his life. It is not without significance that Thomas Becket was canonised as a Saint within a year of his murder – nor was it without significance that the King did public penance at the Cathedral very soon after Becket's death – nor again that miracles were wrought through the archbishop's martyrdom.

Yes, we are thankful for T.S. Eliot. Most of all perhaps because poetry is needful to really know what is come to pass. The right language is necessary to bring us into the drama in a way that a history book cannot. As is the nature of drama we identify ourselves with each character in the drama. But most especially we identify ourselves with the Chorus and Thomas Becket. So it is we are brought time and again to a self-discovery through the power of the word.

It may sound odd. But our calling means not that we imagine, not that we picture, the murder of Thomas Becket in Canterbury Cathedral. To do so is not difficult and maybe the reason that we so indulge subtly being distracted from distraction by distraction – rather than face facts of life and death.

No, our endeavour is the more fruitful if we see ourselves – our behaviour in the 21st century, through what happened at Canterbury, in the 12th century. The issues that brought about Becket's martyrdom are largely the issues that are with us today – issues that mean mankind cannot face too much reality – issues that Eliot brings to our awareness through his cast. The place of the Chorus in his play is inspired, as we hear the Chorus of the women of Canterbury we know ourselves in their place – the place of regret, lamentation, hope almost extinguished: and the unvoiced, "Lord have mercy".

In this event that we consider, He, our Lord, has mercy upon the women of Canterbury – and so, when and if we choose, He has mercy upon us. And this through the Cross – wherein Thomas Becket chooses life through death. Again a choice we may make when we choose.

And so it is time and again in "Murder in the Cathedral" we identify ourselves with the various characters. Chiefly with the Chorus and Thomas the archbishop.

They would have us see not what has taken place but what is taking place through the martyrdom of Thomas.

We learn through Thomas that heaven and earth are joined together.

And with the poor women of Canterbury we are forced to bear witness.

"Blessed Thomas, "Pray for us".

And lowly women of Canterbury, "Pray for us".

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