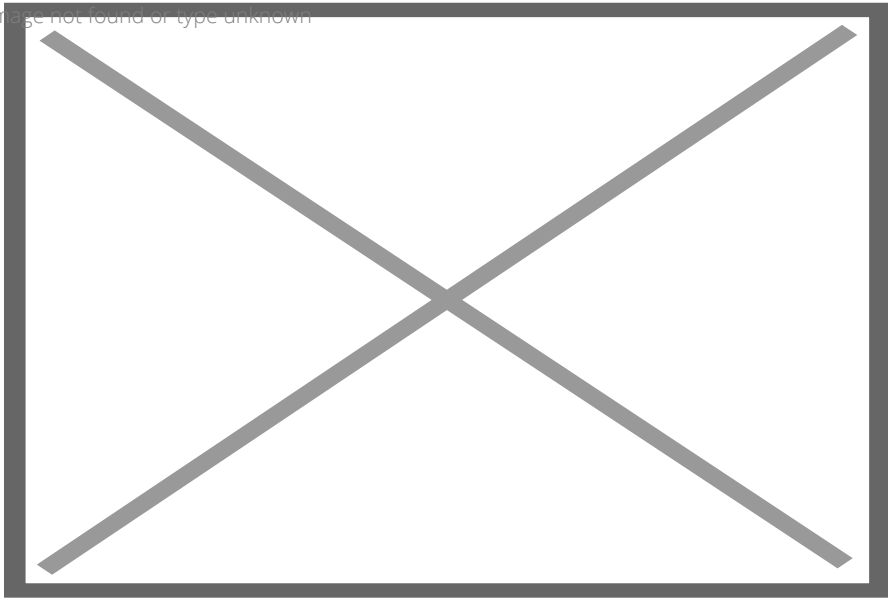




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Archbishop Justin Welby addresses a symposium on Thomas Becket, Lambeth Palace, 27 May 2016. (Photograph: Lambeth Palace)

The Archbishop of Canterbury gave a personal reflection on the continuing significance of Thomas Becket during a symposium on the martyred Archbishop held at Lambeth Palace this morning.

Speakers at the symposium included the Ambassador of Hungary, His Excellency Péter Szabadhegy; the Minister of State of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Hungary, István Mikola; and Professor Eamon Duffy of the University of Cambridge, among other leading experts.

In his reflection Archbishop Justin Welby noted the ecumenical significance of Becket, who he said "has become one of the symbols within Europe for the whole church, a sign to the whole church; he calls us together."

Becket is "a figure who brings us together and enables us to reflect on the task and call of the church in the light of the challenges we face in modern Europe."

Within the church, he added, Becket is "a sign of eternal hope", and someone who calls the church to political awareness.

Noting Becket's significance for him personally as the current Archbishop of Canterbury, Archbishop Justin said: "For me Becket is challenge and reassurance, inspiration, but ultimately a fellow receiver of the grace of God."

Read the text of Archbishop Justin's address:

It's a great privilege to have this gathering today, and particularly to have so many scholars and people who have studied the period and the impact of Becket, and I think we will learn a great deal. I've been asked to spend about ten minutes on a personal reflection, really.

I want to pick three or four particular aspects.

First of all, within the church: the ecumenical aspect. It is very noticeable that drawn together today is an ecumenical gathering. But that in itself, historically, would have been very odd. The ownership of Thomas of Canterbury was claimed by Rome and was then resisted by Henry VIII – it was rejected at the Reformation by Henry VIII. He [Becket] was held up as a model in the Counter-Reformation. But as time has gone he has become one of the symbols within Europe for the whole church, a sign to the whole church; he calls us together.

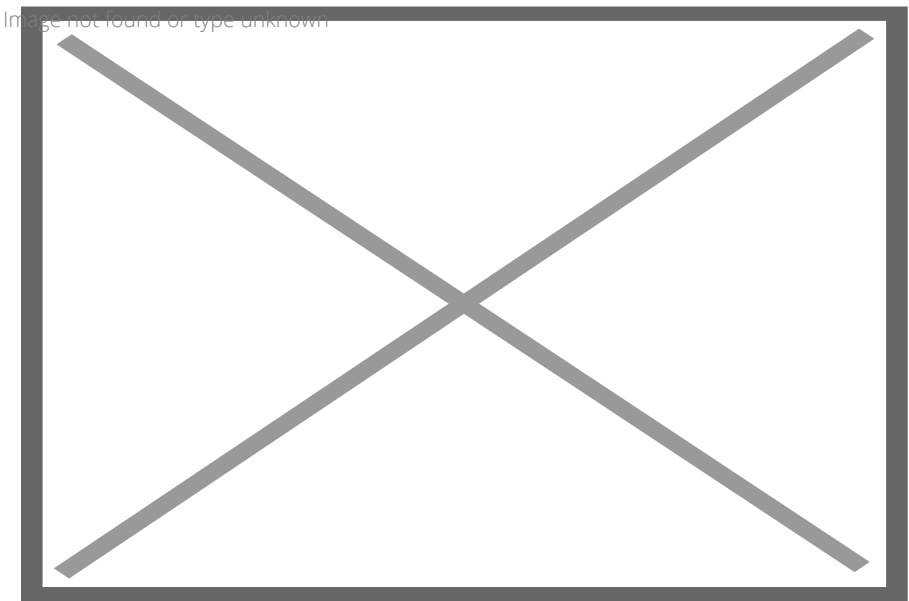
On December 29th at Canterbury, huge numbers of people gather, we think quite often well over a thousand, sometimes almost two thousand, for a service in which the murder of Becket is, not quite re-enacted, but is recalled vividly in drama, through a sung Latin vespers, and then the Archbishop of the time goes and stands on the very spot where Becket was killed, and the account of the murder is acted out.

For the current Archbishop, whoever that may be, it is a very remarkable feeling. But people come from all over, from Catholics and people from across Europe, to be at the cathedral at that service; it's one of the great services of the year at Canterbury.

Becket is a figure who brings us together and enables us to reflect on the task and call of the church in the light of the challenges we face in modern Europe.

Secondly, within the church, he is a sign of eternal hope. During dinner last night Professor [Eamon] Duffy was saying, as we discussed different views of relics, that it seems, to me, they point to two essential parts of what it is to be a Christian. The church is to be visible, flesh and bone, incarnated, and real. The church is to live as a body that trusts in the resurrection of the body in which all that we are in our lives is put into the hands of God.

Today, so living as we are meant to be, we are meant to be a people of the resurrection, not simply of the incarnate. To quote a churchwarden of mine from my parish: "We must not be Rotary with a pointed roof." We are not to be quietist and detached from life. Rotary does much good, but we are not to be the Rotary with the appendage of buildings and strange ceremonies.



Archbishop Justin Welby addresses a symposium on Thomas Becket, Lambeth Palace, 27 May 2016. (Photograph: Lambeth Palace)

Without the resurrection, to use Pope Francis' words, we can become functionally atheist, when we become too locked into the incarnational ministry; where, although we are deeply committed to neighbour, God is merely a useful excuse for what we do. To live in the resurrection, so that like Thomas all other things become secondary, requires a deepening spiritual life – adoration, the sacrament, participation with the apparent fragility and actual presence in overwhelming strength of the Eucharist, immersion in prayer, commitment to holiness, engagement with scripture – that draws us into the presence of God.

But at the same time, we are flesh and bone as Thomas was. We are to love neighbour, to interfere in politics on behalf of the poor and the lost, to question sinful structures, to resist the encompassing power of the world around us. We are to be immersed in schools, in hospitals, in prisons, in the love and care of refugee and stranger. We are physically to be both a blessing to the poor and weak, and an irritation to the strong and determined.

Thomas could easily have done two things that would have been failures. He could have stayed abroad, in a monastery, immersed in prayer. Or he could have come back and gone along with King Henry, taken the patriotic high ground against papal claims of European government. Either course of action would have saved his life; neither course of action would have opened the way to the immense renewal of the church across Europe caused by his death, a renewal that came as a second surge to spiritual reform already underway.

Of course we question his motives. We question his actions, we bring anachronistic judgements to bear on what he stood for. And so we should, in one sense. But the relics of Thomas do not call us to political calculation as our first response, but to renewal of life with Christ and to renewal of love for the poor.

And yet, and yet, Thomas does call us to political awareness. St Gregory the Great spoke eloquently of the church's need to be politically conscious. In a homily on Ezekiel, he wrote this:

“Note that a man whom the Lord sends forth as a preacher is called a watchman. A watchman always stands on a height so that he can see from afar what is coming. Anyone appointed to be a watchman for the people must stand on a height for all his life to help them by his foresight.

“I am forced to consider the affairs of the Church and of the monasteries. I must weigh the lives and acts of individuals. I am responsible for the concerns of our citizens. I must worry about the invasions of roving bands of barbarians, and beware of the wolves who lie in wait for my flock. I must become an administrator lest the religious go in want. I must put up with certain robbers without losing patience and at times I must deal with them in all charity.” [From a homily on Ezekiel by Saint Gregory the Great (Lib 1, 11, 4-6: CCL 142, 170-172)]

Gregory said that, and Becket, who very probably knew that passage, may have felt the same. He was a politician to his fingertips, or perhaps I should say to his elbows! And so he had to be, and so must the church be. His physicality reminds me of the need to be a watchman, politically aware, each time I walk past the martyrdom in Canterbury; and each time I walk past, I stop and I think and I pray.

The church must be in a place of seeing what is happening around us – and Becket did – and it must be in a place of standing for what is right. Thomas did, and sometime his motives will be misjudged, sometimes the church's motives will be misjudged, sometimes it will not even know its own motives. That complexity of political judgement becomes worse when a country or a continent is uncertain and feels threatened, as is true today.

In the late 12th century, shortly before the Third Crusade, there was a sense, justifiably, of threat. The result of being threatened is always a greater call by a state or states to be on side for the church; you must be with us, you must be on message. The state seeks control of all agencies, especially when it feels threatened, and it especially wants control of those who may have a different view, and whose view, which is always true of the church, may be seen as overriding the state itself. Becket may have acted wrongly or rightly, but he acted to keep the church, as he understood it, faithful to its call. That faithfulness is our challenge today. Threat cannot be answered in our society with violence, nor fear with aggression.

TS Eliot's 'Murder in the Cathedral' is a profound meditation on weakness and strength, not only with the famous words, which we would all know – "The last temptation is the greatest treason/ To do the right thing for the wrong reason" – but more for the dialogue as the knights seek to break in, the words read every year, taken and adjusted by Eliot from contemporary accounts. As the knights seek to break in, Becket calls out: "Unbar the doors! Throw open the doors! I will not have the house of prayer, the church of Christ, the sanctuary, turned into a fortress. The Church shall protect her own, in her own way, not as oak and stone; stone and oak decay, give no stay, but the Church shall endure. The church shall be open, even to our enemies. Open the door!"

And in Canterbury each year, on December 29th, the door behind the Archbishop crashes open, the cold air sweeps in.

Today the church must also be faithful in its own way. Minister [of State for Foreign Affairs and Trade of Hungary, *István Mikola*], you spoke eloquently of the pillars of Europe, you reminded us perfectly of them. Hungary has known so much suffering over the centuries, through till 1989. And Hungary knows why Europe matters, Hungary knows why those pillars matter. And Thomas', as I understand it, has been essential as part of that witness to what it is to be free. May his inspiration continue, may his example be translated into right action in our time, amidst much threat, amidst much fear, but with the same God and Saviour, our Lord Jesus Christ, raised from the dead.

For me Becket is challenge and reassurance, inspiration, but ultimately a fellow receiver of the grace of God.

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