

Let's just for a moment recap the history of our own parish in terms of the details of its dedication – and I want to get this right even if some of it may be a bit apocryphal. The original patron of St Thomas was indeed Thomas of Canterbury or Thomas Becket, the 12<sup>th</sup> century martyr. The religious direction of travel of Henry VIII some four hundred years later meant that all saints were a bit suspect, and saints whose memory and culture were as powerful and renowned as Becket in his opposition to royal power, were especially so. So an attempt was made to change the patronage to St Thomas the Apostle. Local people were not happy, but agreed a kind of early Anglican compromise: simply St Thomas, and let the reader/worshipper understand.

Accurate or not, it's a good story, revealing the persistent tensions between powerful forces and how ordinary folk negotiate them. The difference is that Henry VIII, unlike his predecessor of the same name, never repented. So that in the reign of his son and successor Edward VI, the Rector of this Church was executed fairly gruesomely as part of the Prayer Book Rebellion of 1549. Perhaps we should also mark another day of martyrdom of my predecessor Robert Welshe.

A couple of further thoughts: You might think this was all just history, interesting but irrelevant. I would beg to differ, but the picture is also a mixed one. A very difficult and shaming area of Church life recently has concerned the abuse of children. Here the Church believed that it could do its own thing, almost independent of state control. The Church was clearly wrong, and has had to work hard to begin to re-establish trust in this matter. As a national or state church, the Church of England is in a problematic position; so in the first pandemic lockdown, we were ordered to close churches and not even clergy were allowed to pray in them, whereas Roman Catholic clergy continued to say Mass. There was some criticism of the bishops for being far too compliant, not critical enough of state powers. As Angela Tilby wrote in the *Church Times*, we had become “a domestic, members-only Church, with nothing to say to the nation about death, sacrifice or charity ...”

You may also think it unseemly to be talking about these things in the joyous season of Christmas, and if not Thomas this Sunday, we might otherwise have celebrated the Holy Family. But just look at the other saints' days at the end of December – 26<sup>th</sup> not really Boxing Day but St Stephen, the first Christian martyr, and 28<sup>th</sup> the Holy Innocents, the babies killed by Herod in his search for Jesus. Christianity as a truly embodied faith is very realistic about human cruelty and suffering, and does not shy away from them in a Disney-like fairy tale.

The 'happy ending' of our faith is of a different sort. It's a belief ultimately that God loves us, though our births, lives and death, and into eternal life – the same faith that sustained Thomas Becket sustains us as well. And if we want proof of that, it's in person of Jesus, that at this time of year we particularly mark in his birth, and that we mark throughout the year in our Eucharist. Amen