

There is something of the ‘gamekeeper turned poacher’ about Thomas’ dispute with King Henry II and a world of political and ecclesiastical intrigue which I cannot claim to really understand but which, from our present rural existence here at Turvey, seems distinctly unedifying – an early taste of the Brexit negotiations with all its bluff and counter-bluff and sad mischances. So much is lost in translation. For the EU, read the Papacy, and for the State of Britain, the king, in an embittered argument over who has what power, where. In the end, a few misperceived words settle the matter, but not in a way anyone intended. Jesus seems well aware, at his Last Supper, that such power struggles are the bane of all human endeavours and he warns his immediate apostles against going anywhere near them:

Among pagans it is the kings who lord it over them, and those who have authority over them are given the title Benefactor. This must not happen with you.

By the time of Thomas Becket, this warning had gone largely unheeded and we still have the trappings of it today: outward shows of magnificence being a feature of Church, as much as State, and Thomas himself rather enjoyed wielding such power, and reaping its present rewards. Even after his unexpected elevation to the rank of Archbishop of Canterbury, through the offices of the king, we hear him talking of bishops ‘enjoying the temporal benefits of (our) spiritual labours.’ But his life now took on a course where it was not only his enjoyment of power which causes him to defy the king but a very real sense of responsibility for the spiritual labours now entrusted to him, including saving Henry’s soul as well as his own. There are echoes here of Thomas More and the perennial battle of all of us between doing our own will and the will of another – whether Popes or Kings, God or mammon. It’s salutary to read of such human battles marring the Church’s progress through the world; one can read that in several ways but, in the end, it comes down to a decision about God, and for us here, as mediated through Christ.

The one at table, surely? Yet here among us as the one who serves.

Br John Mayhead
Monastery of Christ Our Saviour