

HOMILY St Thomas More 6/7 July 2019 OMHRSTM

Those of you who are familiar with this church and its surrounds will be familiar with three different artistic representations of our patron saint, St Thomas More, whose feast we celebrate today.

First we have this statue standing by the pulpit. Originally sculpted as an entry in the competition to choose a statue to be placed on the Embankment, it was presented to this church by the artist, when it failed to win. As you can see it shows a youthful, energetic Thomas More. Striding forth he looks very much the young man on the way to the top. At this stage of his career, as well as filling important roles in the administration of the country, he travelled abroad on diplomatic missions on behalf of the king. Indeed, after the king, Henry VIII, he was probably the best known Englishman in Europe. An author as well as an accomplished lawyer, his book "Utopia" won him wide recognition among his contemporaries in the intellectual world of the time, as well as giving a word to the English language. Mind you, not just a word, but a concept, a way of talking about society, values and government. Yet he remained always a modest man, a man of faith, a family man. We might remember at this point that Thomas educated his daughters as well as his son, instructing them in Greek, Latin and all that was expected of an educated person. It was one of these girls who was to be his chosen companion to accompany him to his execution, the only family member to do so.

More famous is the classic portrait by Holbein. Now, Holbein was an artist who made a living out of painting the most important and powerful. That he painted Thomas, places our hero among the great and good in a very special way. Here we see Sir Thomas More, Lord High Chancellor. Around his shoulders the splendid golden collar, the Chain of Esses. This was a mark of distinction given by the King himself to those who had done him some special service. Notice the Tudor rose, badge of the royal family, and the portcullis, badge of the Palace of Westminster. Look at the coat he is wearing, that fabulous fur, probably imported from Russia or some other country that traded into the Port of London, just down the river from Sir Thomas's manor here in Chelsea. Here is a man at the height of his powers. He had risen up the very greasy pole of political life in England at this time, but still he was the family man, the man of faith. Not only did he go to Mass every day, he prayed at length and went on retreats. He was as at home in a monastery as he was at the King's table.

Let us now look outside this church, at the statue that was erected to his memory on the Embankment, in sight of the Thames which took him to imprisonment in the Tower of London, and eventual execution. Here we see the golden collar of Esses, undone, laid across his knees. It will be taken back by the King who gave it, if Thomas does not first give it back. His hands are clasped in prayer, his expression is serious. The matter is grave, the consequences will be disaster, not only for him but also for his family. The loss of everything will be the outcome when his private dilemma becomes a drama played out in public. Oh, he knows full well what they will do, the King's new friends. Thomas knows the law and he has been very careful not to say a word against the king. No, he would not give his accusers half a chance to misconstrue, to twist his words. Of course, that will not stop them, they will find some so-called witness, perhaps even a colleague or someone to whom he had shown kindness, or given hospitality. There must somewhere be a man of weaker will who would speak against him, hoping thus to curry favour with the king.

Look at the coat, it looks like the one in the Holbein portrait, yes, it is the same. But here the coat is open, we see at his neck there hangs a crucifix. The figure of the Christ is clear for us to see. Yet this is no piece of jewellery for public display, no decoration from the king, This was the choice he had made: for Christ, not for the King. His mind was made up. From here they would take him, they would charge him and try him. Soon the executioner's axe would chop asunder that neck. But before then he would show he was no traitor, yes, to the end he would declare himself, in his own words: "The King's good servant, but God's first!"

So where does that leave us, today, as we celebrate his martyrdom, the final and lasting witness of this great Englishman and loyal Catholic. Well, may I suggest that we think of the men and women of our own time who are in such positions of power as once was held by our saint. It is all too easy to read of their scandals, their mistakes and sometimes other very petty details of their lives. Are we to judge them? No, we are not their judges. So, let us pray for them. Let us commend them and all the responsibilities they bear to God. They may, like us have human failings,

but Grace can guide and sustain them as God did the same for Thomas More. And as for ourselves; what are our values? Who or what guides us as we make our decisions? Do we find false comfort in telling ourselves: “It’s what everybody does”? We may not be as famous as was St Thomas More, but in our own times we too may face dilemmas that are far from easy to resolve. The choices we make may be little compromises, or bigger betrayals of ourselves and our values. That this may not be so, and there is no more reason why it should be so for us, than it was for St Thomas More, let us pray for clarity of thought and courage. So may we have reason to hope that when “that day” of which the gospel speaks (Lk 10.12) comes, and we stand before our king, the King of Kings, he will recognize and reward us, and say: “Well done, good and faithful servant!”

Canon Paschal Ryan

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