The murder of Thomas Becket

Murder scene:

Canterbury Cathedral, 29th December 1170

Thomas Becket, aged 52, killed by a sword blow to the top of the head.

Background information:

A powerful man

Thomas Becket was the Archbishop of Canterbury. This meant that he was the most important religious person in England. He controlled the English church, and he had to answer to both the King and the Pope in Rome. This sometimes made King Henry II angry when he decided to follow the Pope’s orders, rather than the follow the will of the King. He was also unpopular with other powerful members of the church such as the Archbishop of York, who was Becket’s main rival in the Church. He disliked Becket because he felt he had become too powerful too quickly, and defied the King too often.

Henry and Becket

King Henry and Becket were great friends, but occasionally they fell out because both were rich and powerful. Henry was a person who got angry easily and liked people to do what they were told. For example, one of his powers as king was to appoint bishops, but Becket had started to do this himself without being asked! Some of Henry’s friends and advisers thought that Becket was getting too powerful and so did the King.

The power of the church

As Archbishop, Becket was very rich and powerful. The church had lots of money because it was a massive organisation. It was responsible for all hospitals, schools, and for every single person in England. The Church took 10% of what everybody earned, charged for services, and controlled the sites of pilgrimages as well. Some people thought the church was simply too rich. Becket also worked hard to keep the Church courts powerful. This meant that any person who worked for the Church would be tried in these special courts which were usually very lenient, letting monks and priest get off lightly for serious crimes, and even murder! The families of those murdered by members of the Church, such as the knight murdered by Philip de Brois, canon of Bedford, were very angry as they felt they could not get proper justice. A lot of people thought this was unfair, especially the nobles who in turn had been excommunicated by Becket for things like disobeying an official order from the Church.

excommunicated - thrown out of the Church and condemned to hell!
Suspects and motives:

Using the information above, choose three people (or types of people) who might want Becket dead, and explain their motive (why they you suspect them of murder).

Suspect 1:

Motive:

Suspect 2:

Motive:

Suspect 3:

Motive:

Now decide which of these three suspects is your prime suspect. This is the person or type of person you think has the biggest motive for wanting Becket dead. You also need to carefully explain the reasons for your decision!

My prime suspect for the murder of Thomas Becket is ...