

Sermon preached by Canon Philip Banks  
at St Edmundsbury Cathedral  
**The Festival of Christ the King**  
Sunday 26 November 2017

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Some of you will know that Janet and I are at that stage in life with two teenage boys – Ben on a gap year before university and tasting independence (and probably rather a lot of beer) in Portsmouth; Sam doing GCSEs this year and wondering about A-Level courses or not. So there's plenty to make us anxious – and plenty to excite us too.

All that's made me feel quite nostalgic for my own teenage and university years where life and time seemed an endless commodity, and that wonderful feeling of long holidays stretching beautifully before you. But as we get older (I was born in 1961) we start to see our life more and more in perspective: as the years roll by, and bereavements befall us, we start to realise that time isn't as limitless as we thought. We cannot yet see the end of our time (that's a good thing!), but we can begin to measure what we have spent. The words of the Psalmist ring in our ears “so teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts to wisdom” (Ps 90:12).

Time travel may well be a fascinating thing for physicists and for TV and film makers (I've just seen the film of *The Time Traveller's Wife* – a beautiful story about relationships and commitment, about love, about bereavement and the end of things) – but we're not time travellers, and our own time moves in one direction, and we understand more and more as we grow, not just older but in Christian maturity, that there will be an end.

Today is the last Sunday in the Christian calendar. The church's year and the Christian story with its rhythms and celebrations reaches a climax and

conclusion: the proper title for today is the celebration of “Christ the King” – sometimes called “The Sunday next before Advent” or (because of the Collect) “Stir up Sunday” – but the proper title is Christ the King because we celebrate all that Christ has done and continues to do for us through the Christian story – and the whole message of the New Testament is almost summed up in our second reading – that “God raised Jesus from the dead, and has given him supreme authority in the church and the world”.

So today, firstly is a thanksgiving for the gift of Christ our light and life, and the prayer that Christ would be king of our hearts and lives. And second, today presents us with a challenge. A call to reflect and consider seriously what do we mean (in our hearts, in here) when we think of the kingship of Christ.

It seems to me that one of the most important things about Christian teaching is that it should make us think about

- the end of time
- the end of our own time
- how we use time

For it is the end of time that Jesus presents in today's gospel: it's actually an apocalyptic vision. People don't always remember that when reading this passage (“when was it that I saw you hungry?”).

It begins with Jesus the King in judgement at the end of time, with all the nations before him.

According to this vision in the gospel, if an alien came from another place and asked us where our Jesus the King lived, we would have to take the alien, as one writer puts it, to “strange sanctuaries: refugee camps, back alleys, hospitals, prison cells: and tell him that Jesus is to be found in these places”.

AND – that the ‘blessed of God (Christians, you and me?) are to be found there also: feeding, welcoming, clothing, visiting, paying attention to those on the edge.

It makes me think of the Rohingya refugees, and the welcome and safety they are being given in neighbouring countries. Isn't ‘Christ our King’ there? Shouldn't those who criticize Angela Merkel for opening the doors to those fleeing horror – shouldn't they pause for a moment – isn't ‘Christ our King’ there?

The most powerful moment when Jesus speaks of his kingship is in fact from the Cross: the good thief simply asks “Remember me” – and Jesus replies that being remembered by God is paradise. The Jesuit writer, Richard Leonard, puts it like this:

“The power of Christ the King is seen in his memory in holding every person in the world close in calling each one of us by name, and in challenging us to lead lives of sacrificial love. The power of Christ the King is seen where simplicity is valued, where there's a right relationship with the earth and where the poor are recognised as a part of God's revelation to the world”. *[quoted in The Tablet, 24 Nov 17]*

Think back to the first reading today: powerful and beautiful words of the prophet Ezekiel – he has the firm authority of God speaking: “I am the Lord”. God speaking of how he will

- strengthen the weak
- bring the weary to a place of peace
- feed the hungry by watercourses in places of plenty

The challenge is to see that those things will only happen through us – we will only serve and truly

‘worship the king, all glorious above’

when we take to heart Jesus's words:

- I was sick and you took care of me
- I was in prison and you visited me
- I was a stranger and you welcomed me

Thomas Merton wrote that “one of the signs of a Spiritual Revival that really is spiritual is the way it

affects every kind of life and activity around it

inspires new kinds of art

awakens new poetry and music

makes lovers speak to each other with a new kind of respect”.

Sounds very lyrical. But brings us back to where I began: that Christian teaching points us to the end times, and how we use time, what do we do with our time as we respond to God's gift of life.. The test of those who live out the reign of the Kingship of Christ is not whether I'm successful or if I've made it into Who's Who. Christ our King calls us to follow him in attending to all people, regardless of who they are, and being prepared to stand up for the dignity of each and every human life.

Do we look for a reward for seeking the values of Christ's Kingship? Surely it will be that Christ remembers us when we come into his Kingdom.

Philip Banks, November 2017

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