

Sermon preached by Canon Philip Banks  
at St Edmundsbury Cathedral  
**The Festival of Christ the King**  
Sunday 24 November 2019

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*“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” [Luke 23]*

“His Dark Materials”: I wonder if you’ve been watching it on TV, the beautifully made BBC adaptation of Philip Pullman’s best-selling trilogy<sup>1</sup>. If you’ve read “His Dark Materials” you’ll know that the trilogy ends with these words – “then we’ll build the Republic of Heaven” – spoken by the heroine, the young girl Lyra, her vision that humans can and must learn to live wisely and unselfishly, and build worlds that help others do the same.

You may know that Philip Pullman describes himself as an atheist, and in the books, paints God as the ‘excuse’ that power-hungry people use to justify violence and impose their will on others. God’s followers – the Magesterium – in the world of Philip Pullman’s books, never have to account for themselves or answer for their actions because all is justified in service to God – the ruler and creator of the universe.

Well, on this day in the church’s calendar which we celebrate ‘Christ the King’ – praying that Jesus might rule our hearts and lives – it occurs to me that this kind of critique of faith is one which all Christians should take seriously: we can’t ignore this or the Richard Dawkins best-sellers flying the flag for secularist humanism. His latest book is called “Outgrowing God”<sup>2</sup>. As an aside, wonderful Rupert Shortt, who has been one of our Lent lecturers, has just had

published his latest book, an antidote – “Outgrowing Dawkins”<sup>3</sup>. He suggests that Dawkins treats scripture too crudely, taking passages out of context, and uses the analogy of trying to pluck a leaf from a tree and imagining that it can represent the glories and nuances of an entire landscape or forest.

Nonetheless, it is good to ask – do we use the notion of Christ’s rule or Kingship to impose our own thoughts. Do we impose our own limited understanding of the world and tell others that it is God’s understanding? Sadly, the answer has sometimes been ‘yes’ – there are some poor moments in Christian theology – the inquisition, the justifications for slavery or homophobia or apartheid to name a few: people using their standards and dressing them up as God’s.

So I really do love this very last Sunday of the Church’s year, before Advent dawns, and starts a new Church year from next week. ‘Christ the King’ helps me do three things. Let me explain what I mean.

It seems to me that today being the last of the many Sundays after Trinity calls us to look back a bit. Trinity Sunday was on 16<sup>th</sup> June, almost six months ago. How have you grown in faith and love and understanding over that time? What events have happened to you? Where have I fallen short? What or who has been helpful or unhelpful in my spiritual life? You’ve heard plenty of sermons and scripture since then – do any stand out for you? What have you learnt, how have you changed? Henry Newman (now Saint Henry Newman<sup>4</sup>) said that “To change is to grow”. It’s good to pause and think.

So that’s the first thing: look back and do a little ‘spiritual review’ – to see if you can detect trends, and think about what I should try to change or do differently, so that I can be the person God would have me be.

Then today being the 'Sunday next before Advent' as the old 1662 Prayer Book has it – should help us look forward: thinking about how this year we might really catch something of the power and truth of the Advent and Christmas mystery: that God came among us, and still dwells among us and will come again at the end of time. The great mysteries of Incarnation, Salvation and Judgement at the end of time – we should take seriously, for they point us to the deep, deep love that God has for you and for me, and who calls us to be his people of love, who we pray will one day hear the words in today's gospel spoken to us: "truly, today you will be with me in Paradise". Will you make headspace this Advent and Christmastide to hear the love-song of the angels calling you in love, ultimately calling you home at the last.

And that brings me to the third thing. This feast of Christ the King challenges me again to think about what really my image of God is. Do I really believe inside that God loves me through and through and that he loves everyone and everything that he has made? You see the image of the King of the universe presented in the gospel today is very different, isn't it, from what most people expect a ruler to be like. Yet here are the values of the Kingdom of God – Jesus's passion and death turning upside down human defences and desires and concerns, replacing them with values of humility and service; justice and mercy; raising up the lowly and meek; putting self last. In today's gospel Jesus "does not come down and save himself: instead he saves others, beginning with the penitent criminal – the beginning of a reign of love which extends to you and me and across all time and place"<sup>5</sup>.

Christ our King gently bids us, his followers: unlike the distorted version of God's followers in Philip Pullman's world which Lyra has to contend with, we're called to bring in the values of Christ's

Kingdom through our lives of love, offering hope in his glorious kingdom, both in this world and the next.

As we come to the end of the Church Year today, having had the story of Jesus told for us again over the past year in word and sacrament, we do well to reflect on what image of God we have, and what image of God we want to project in our lives. In the language of Lyra, what sort of "Republic of Heaven" are you building? And how do we use time, what do you do with your time as you respond to God's gift of life and love? The test of those who live out the reign of the Kingship of Christ is not whether I'm successful or if you've made it into Who's Who. Christ our King calls us to follow him in humility and love.

And do I look for a reward for seeking the values of Jesus's Kingship? Surely it will be that Jesus "remembers us when we come into his Kingdom".

May we make Christ the King of our Hearts and Ruler of our Lives, the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, now and forever.

Philip Banks, November 2019

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<sup>1</sup> *His Dark Materials* trilogy, Scholastic, 2012

<sup>2</sup> *Outgrowing God – a beginner's guide*, Penguin, 2019

<sup>3</sup> *Outgrowing Dawkins – God for grown-ups*, SPCK, 2019

<sup>4</sup> [www.newmancanonisation.com](http://www.newmancanonisation.com)

<sup>5</sup> Angus Ritchie, Church Times, 22/11/19