

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



The Celebration of Christ the King, Sunday before Advent

26 November 2023

St Edmundsbury Cathedral

Sermon by the Reverend Canon Philip Banks

Doctor Who has returned. The 60th anniversary year of its first episode. Russel T Davies and David Tennant and Catherine Tate have returned too. I wonder if any of you watched it. I'm in my 60s and so the nostalgia in me couldn't resist a little look last night.

What a lot of fun time travel could be – certainly it has fascinated physicists and TV and film makers. Personally I'd love one of Hermione Granger's Time Turners in *Harry Potter*: I might actually tick off all the things on my 'to do' list. Then there's *The Time Traveller's Wife* – you may have seen or read it – a beautiful story about relationships and commitment, about love, about bereavement and the end of things.

Some may be *Hoovians*, 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 grow older but hopefully in maturity – that there will be an end.

We start to see our life more and more in perspective: as the years roll by, and bereavements touch us, we start to realise that time isn't limitless. We cannot yet see the end of our time (I think that's a good thing), but we can look back at what and how we have spent time. The Psalmist says “so teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts to wisdom” (Ps 90:12).

Time rolls on and today is the last Sunday in the Christian calendar. The church's year and the telling of the Christian story, with its rhythms and celebrations, concludes today: the proper title for today is “Christ the King” – sometimes called “The Sunday next before Advent” (that's because it is) or (because of the Collect we'll say together at the end of today's Mass) “Stir up Sunday”. The title Christ the King is because we celebrate all that Jesus has done and continues to do for us: shown to us as we travel, hearts and minds, through the Christian story during the year. The whole of that is almost summed up in our second reading – that “God raised Jesus from the dead, and has given him authority” – when we give him room in our hearts and lives.

Our story of faith touches the deepest parts of our life: birth, growing up, falling in love, daring to give oneself to others, searching for meaning, becoming adult, coping with suffering and failure, and eventually death.

It is a faith which might surprise some people in our circle of friends or work colleagues – and make them wonder who we are: this Christian faith which brings a strange joy, a puzzling freedom, hope, courage to speak truth to power, deep peace. It relies on us giving space to Jesus in our hearts.

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



The Celebration of Christ the King, Sunday before Advent

26 November 2023

St Edmundsbury Cathedral

Sermon by the Reverend Canon Philip Banks

So today, firstly is a thanksgiving for this gift of faith which we've reflected on in the past year through our liturgy, our preaching, our music – light and life in our lives – and the prayer that the values of Jesus – compassion, justice, mercy, love – would be king in our hearts.

And second, today gives us an invitation. A call to reflect on what we mean, in our hearts, when we think of the kingship of Christ.

With time travel in mind, it seems to me that one of the things about our Christian journey of faith is that it should invite us to 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 an apocalyptic vision. We don't always clock when reading this ("when was it that I saw you hungry?") that the story begins with Jesus the King in judgement at the end of time, with all the nations before him.

In this vision, if a *Doctor Who* alien came from another place or time, and asked us where our Jesus lived, we would have to take the alien, as one writer puts it, to "strange sanctuaries: refugee camps, railway arches and tents, hospitals, prison cells: and tell the alien that the King is to be found in these places".

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

I wrote in this week's bulletin reflection about our cathedral's great west window depicting Christ in enthroned glory. In particular one panel which shows an angel holding Jesus's crown – not of gold and jewels, but the crown of thorns. For this king in our hearts is the one who suffers with us in our suffering, sits alongside, suffering with us when we're in tears or bereavement or pain. Stretches out his arms on the cross for us, offering hope and strength and peace.

The most powerful moment when Jesus speaks of his kingship is from the Cross: the thief next to him 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, by 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".

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



The Celebration of Christ the King, Sunday before Advent

26 November 2023

St Edmundsbury Cathedral

Sermon by the Reverend Canon Philip Banks

What a relief, then, for us to hear at least a slightly more measured tone, with a change of minister, about the treatment of refugees escaping war, famine, persecution, natural disaster – isn't 'Christ our King' in refugee camp? Isn't 'Christ our King' in Gaza and Ukraine? And aren't we called to be there too ("when was it that I saw you hungry") – if not physically then at least playing whatever part we can in binding up wounds and offering hospitality.

The first reading today: powerful and beautiful words of the prophet Ezekiel – 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

And Jesus looks in love at you and me, and says 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 that something really is of the Spirit of Jesus 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. And brings us back to where I began:

I don't just mean just Doctor Who.

God, who created time and space and the universe, gently encourages us to think about the end times, and how we use time, what do we do with our time as we respond to God's heart of love.

The test of us who seek to make space for Christ to dwell in our hearts, be king in our hearts, is not whether I'm successful or if you've made it into the final of Bake Off or Strictly. Christ our King calls us to follow him in attending to all people, regardless of who they are, and being prepared to speak 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.