

# Christ the King

Daniel 7.9-10, 13, 14

Revelation 1.4b-8

John 18.33-37

Philip Pullman's brilliant His Dark Materials trilogy ends with the words 'and then we'll build . . . The republic of heaven.' This is the vision that Lyra holds out to us after all she has learned and suffered — that human beings must and can learn to live wisely and unselfishly and build worlds that help others to do the same. There is no place for God in Lyra's picture, because a concept of God would, according to what Lyra has seen, automatically undermine her vision of a human republic of heaven. Throughout the trilogy it has become clear that 'God' is a cipher that power-hungry people use to justify violence and to impose their will on others. 'God's' followers never have to give an account of themselves, or answer to others for their actions, because they are all justified in the name of their service to God, the ruler.

This is a critique that all Christians should take seriously. Do we, indeed, use the notion of God's rule actually to impose our own? Do we demand, in God's name, the power and respect that we long for ourselves? Do we impose our understanding of the world on those weaker than ourselves, and tell them that it is God's understanding? I'm afraid that in the past the answer has often been 'Yes', and still is. The readings for today focus on Christ as King, and they are a severe challenge, to Christians first and foremost. They suggest that this most vital and central fact about Jesus, whom we believe to be 'the image of the invisible God', is one that we have not taken into our hearts and minds at all. It is the most counter-intuitive thing about the Christian concept of God, and our systems of belief and behaviour and organization barely reflect it in any way.

The reading from Daniel starts off with a picture of power that is reasonably in line with our undisturbed non-Christian understanding of power. Perhaps, nowadays, we would prefer our ruler not to be called 'the Ancient One', but at least there are thrones and fire and innumerable bowing servants. But then what happens? An ordinary human being, who looks very like the rest of us, comes to the awesome throne, and instantly the fire and throne and bowing crowds fade, and we wait to see how they will be manifested in this unprepossessing human figure.

So then the reading from Revelation takes up the story. Now we have seen how this human figure was to exercise dominion. He came to love us and die for us. His dying, Revelation says, has made us free people, who can exercise our freedom to act as he did, in service.

The reading from St John's Gospel makes the point even more graphically, because it has two pictures of power face to face. Pilate's power we recognize. Pilate exercises power over these squabbling people, whom he really can't be bothered to understand. They have brought a man to him and, although Pilate knows the charges are trumped up, that is not his concern. He goes straight to the only point that is of interest to him: 'Are you challenging my power?' And he reads Jesus's answer — rightly — as a 'Yes'. He is too impatient to hear exactly why, but he is surely right to pounce on that central word, 'King'. If Jesus is King, then Pilate is not.

If Pilate had really listened to the nuances of what Jesus was saying, would it have changed his mind? Jesus's kingship, after all, has left Pilate's kind apparently largely untouched. Jesus himself points out that his followers are hardly acting like revolutionaries, bent on setting up their own king. But when Jesus offers to explain to Pilate exactly what his kingship is, Pilate doesn't care. He is obsessed with the one word, 'King'. To him, it means only one thing, and that is a thing that he longs for and would commit any perjury and injustice for — power.

But what Jesus is offering as a description of his own kingship is truth — reality, you might say. Revelation calls it 'the Alpha and Omega, who was and is and is to come'. If the actual reality of the world, from its creation to its end, is like Jesus, then this strange human obsession with power is an aberration. It has no ability to create, to redeem or to sanctify. Jesus's challenge to Pilate's kind of power is too slow and subtle for many of us, who long to use the weapons of worldly power to force victory for God. But if Jesus is the truth, then any other way is falsehood, and will fail. Reality, as it was and is and is to come, is shaped by a different kingship.

*Jane Williams  
from "Lectionary Reflections"*

### Prayer

Eternal Father,  
whose Son Jesus Christ ascended to the throne of heaven  
that he might rule over all things as Lord and King:  
keep the Church in the unity of the Spirit  
and in the bond of peace,  
and bring the whole created order to worship at his feet;  
who is alive and reigns with you,  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and for ever.  
Amen