

## DOCTOR WHO?

He is a household name, and yet remains a mystery. Brought into being not by birth but by incarnation, he is outside time, and yet enters into our human history. He has knowledge and power far beyond our understanding, and yet seeks out mere human beings to be his companions and friends. He has a passion for justice and goodness, fighting against the powers of evil. We call him Lord, and rightly so, and yet he freely gives up his life to save others... and yet, at the point when it seems that death has defeated him, he bursts into new life, bringing hope to each new generation. Over the years, people have imagined him with many different faces and images, but to true believers, everyone knows that Peter Davison is the real one.

Yes, Doctor Who has been on our screens for 50 years, flying around in his tardis and saving the world. There are few programmes which have made such an impact on British culture; it's sometimes said that you can guess somebody's age simply by asking them who is the definitive Doctor.

Being an Anglo-Catholic, I don't cope well with change, so I must confess that I haven't watched the programme ever since the fateful day when Peter Davison succumbed to alien bat poison back in 1984. But true fans will tell you that in fifty years, more and more of the Doctor's character and history has been revealed, turning him from a rather starchy disciplinarian to a real flesh-and-blood human being... well, Gallifreyan.

And, like just about every interesting and complex character in literature, TV or film, there is something a bit Messianic about the Doctor: he is like us, and yet different; he is powerful, yet vulnerable; he is a saviour, yet at the cost of his own life.

Today, we celebrate the Solemnity of Christ the King, but the Feast Day has done a little time travelling of its own. It used to be celebrated at the end of October, just before All Saints Day. There are still some traditional Roman Catholics who utter howls of protest about the move, a bit like those of us who've never been able to cope with the Doctor's regenerations. The ultra-traditionalists claim that it is was better in October, because it formed a liturgical pattern to reflect the hierarchy of heaven: Jesus on his throne, then the Saints in glory, then the faithful departed. They argue that plonking the festival on the last Sunday before Advent detracts from Christ's Kingship, because we're already thinking about his coming in glory, rather than the glory he already has.

I'm not so sure. For a start, God and heaven are, like the Time Lords, outside of time. We have a linear perception of time: first the Battle of Hastings, then the Victorians, then today, then tomorrow. But from God's perspective, all those things are happening at once, and eternally. It's a little bit like Midnight Mass, when we worship Christ in the manger, on the Cross, on his throne in glory, and in the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar. Or, as the Seventh Doctor would say:

"You're going. You've been here for ages. You're already gone.

You're still here. You've just arrived. I haven't even met you yet.

Strange business, time - it all depends on who you are and how you look at it."

Well, if you're anything like me, all this stuff about time probably makes your brain hurt. But maybe it does give us an insight into today's Gospel Reading. It is, after all, quite a peculiar story to be reading if we're supposed to be celebrating Christ the King. Yeah, we all know that Christ's kingship is not like the world's idea of kingship, that it involves pain and self-sacrifice and apparent defeat; but really, do we have to dwell on it today? Jesus has been through that, and yes it was terrible, but it's over now, so let's have something happy about heaven and angels and crowns and stuff.

But that's precisely where the Lectionary takes our view of time and turns it on its head. The story of the Crucifixion and Resurrection is not supposed to be some cosmic cliffhanger, where Jesus comes back to life just in time for the final credits to roll. Christ is already King on the Cross - he has already won the victory, even in the midst of his very real pain and despair. How else could he pray for forgiveness for his murderers, even as they are torturing him? How else could he promise the criminal a place in his Kingdom, unless that Kingdom was already his?

And that's why the Bible does such a good line in dissolving the time vortex. Paul writes to the Colossians, telling them in the same breath both to endure persecution with patience and to give thanks to God with joy. Our natural reaction might be to give joyful thanks *once* we're out of danger, but no: Christ is before all things, and yet he holds all things together; there may be persecution, but Christ has already made peace; you may be suffering, and yet you are already rescued. And so it is that the Psalmist can say, truthfully, both that the nations are at war and that God has made all wars cease; both that the whole earth is shaken, and that God is a firm foundation.

So maybe today is a good day to celebrate Christ the King after all. This is the last Sunday of the Church's year, and it's also the last Sunday of the three year Lectionary Cycle. Next week, we go back to the beginning: Year A, the first Sunday of Advent, waiting for Christ to be born. We are on the cusp of a time shift, a new liturgical year, a regeneration: everything is about to change, and yet everything will stay the same. We mark our year out with feasts and fasts, calendars and diaries, and yet Christ is always constant - always new, and yet always the same. Whatever we are going through - joy and celebration, or heartbreak and loss, Christ is always King: the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. We do not need to be caught up in the past, or fear the present, or worry about the future, because Christ is the same, yesterday, today and forever.

So maybe I should stop being so het up about change. Maybe I will go back to watching Doctor Who in its 50<sup>th</sup> year, give joyful thanks for Peter Davison as the Fifth Doctor, give thanks for Colin Baker as the Sixth (even though he was horrible), and embrace Peter Capaldi as the Twelfth.

Because, as the Tenth Doctor once famously said:

"The past is another country.

1987 - that's just the Isle of Wight."