

“King of Hearts”

Years ago when I was being trained for Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, a Christian formation program for children, I learned a song about the liturgical seasons and the colors we use in church to represent those seasons. The song goes:

“Purple and green, red and white are the colors of the year
Purple and green, red and white remind us of the light.
Purple’s for preparation, white is for celebration
Green is for growing time, red is for Pentecost.
Purple and green, red and white are the colors of the year
Purple and green, red and white remind us of the light.”

Today is a hinge day in the liturgical or church year. Today is the last Sunday after Pentecost and next Sunday we begin Advent, the first Sunday of the church year. The season after Pentecost is the long period from the Day of Pentecost (fifty days after Easter) until Advent. There are few major feasts days during that period, unlike the time from Advent to Easter, so the church has taken to calling it Ordinary Time; the period when we live out our daily lives. It is also the period when we get to hear about Jesus’ daily life. We get to hear the readings about Jesus’ ministry that are not focused on the birth, Passion, Crucifixion, Resurrection and Ascension. Jesus’ ordinary days may not seem so ordinary to us, but they do allow us to focus on the interactions that Jesus has with ordinary people as he preaches and teaches, walks and eats, and interacts with his disciples. This “ordinary” Jesus is more approachable for us ordinary folks.

But on this hinge day, where the door swings closed on the green of Ordinary Time and prepares to swing open on the blueish purple of Advent, we pause and contemplate what Jesus means to us, the world and all of creation. The Church calls this Sunday Christ the King or the Reign of Christ Sunday. Our hangings are neither green nor purple. They are white, which according to the song I just sang is the color of celebration. But it seems strange for us to celebrate a king.

In Jesus’ day kings and queens and emperors were the norm as heads of governments. Nowadays we are more likely to have presidents, prime ministers, chancellors, and other sorts of democratically elected rulers. The heads of governments do not serve for life or have their rule extend beyond their lifetime through their progeny. While this is our current ideal, I cannot imagine a Christ the President Sunday or Christ the Prime Minister Sunday. It sounds both temporal and temporary.

If Christ is the King, what exactly is Christ the King of? In theological terms Christ is the King of all things in the universe. According to the first verses of the Gospel of John “all things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.”¹ We acknowledge that all was created by the Son part of the Trinity. If the Son is the creator of all then we can recognize then the Son as

¹ John 1:3 NRSV

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the ruler of all. This concept of Christ the King often shows up in images where Christ is seated on a throne holding in his hand the world like a regal orb, and crowned with a multi-tiered gold crown. This theology and the art that stems from it, is very concrete and anthropomorphic in its understanding of the kingship of Christ.

This concept is very different from the Jesus we read about in the Gospels; the poor itinerant preacher and healer. It is also an image of Jesus that is very different from the life that he lived amongst us. This Christ is also very distant from humanity and our ordinary daily lives. This king is also very other from the Jesus that we are about to anticipate as a babe in a manger.

But we are fascinated by royalty. Americans, who threw out a monarchy and could be responsible for the beginning of the era of revolutions and the rise of democracies, love a good royal wedding. We will rise hours earlier than usual to tune into the pomp and circumstance of the wedding of an English royal. I recall how when Charles and Diana were married all work stopped in my agency so that staff could watch the festivities, hear the vows, and listen to the music. Similarly, Diana's funeral and her sons' weddings were major television events for Americans. Despite our fascination royalty is not what Jesus was about. His kingship is something altogether different.

What is it that rules our hearts? Is it fox hunting, cars, art, literature, or hobbies? Is it work, meetings, money, and prestige from our vocation? Perhaps what rules our hearts are vices—that is good things misused? The world provides many distractions most of which are not bad in and of themselves. It is only when they become the ruler of our heart that they become a problem. The way we know they have become a problem is by examining the space they take up in our lives. If your hobby, work, or passions come between you and God you have a problem. If we cannot seem to find time for God, church, prayer, or spiritual practice because anything we have a problem.

For all of the theological talk and art that show a regal and omnipotent Christ on a throne like a human king, the kingship of Christ is the reign of Christ in our hearts. It is our decision (after all we do have free will) to place Jesus Christ at the center of our being. By doing so we allow Christ to infuse all the other parts of our life with the holiness that only comes from our love of God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Go fox hunting, be dedicated to your work, enjoy a glass of wine, or any of the other good things that are part of our creation but do it with and through the Jesus who loves you.

Those same children who sang the song about the colors of year will tell you that while Jesus rose into heaven at the Ascension he still lives on in the hearts of each of us who love him and who want to love him more. The Christ on the throne may make theologians happy, and certainly can make for some compelling art. But what Christ wants is to be the king of each of our hearts for all time whether it is green, red, purple or white. In times of growth, preparation and celebration we will find Jesus there to enrich it all. That is what it means for Christ to be the King of your heart and mine on special days and in the ordinary days of our life.