

November 25, Reign of Christ B (John 18:33-37; Revelation 1:4b-8)

The cross is both foundation and anti-foundation, a disturber of worlds.

by [Brad Roth](#) in the [October 24, 2018](#) issue

I wanted to give our first apartment a cosmopolitan sheen, so shortly after my wife and I rented a little cubbyhole with sinking floors, I procured some framed poster art of famous paintings. Think Van Gogh's *The Starry Night*. One piece stood out from the rest: Salvador Dalí's *Christ of Saint John of the Cross*. I had no critical understanding of the painting. I didn't know that Dalí claimed to have experienced a "cosmic dream" that led him to this jarring imitation of a Spanish mystic's 16th-century sketch. I found the sharp darkness cast by Christ's outstretched arm arresting. Christ crucified contemplates an abyss skeined over with clouds before (or maybe after) a storm. There is something antigravitational about the perspective, how Christ hangs from the cross and the cross hangs in the sky so very un-wood-beam-like. It drew me in.

At the end of John's Gospel, Jesus hangs between heaven and earth. Yes, on the cross, lifted up as Moses' saving bronze serpent of old. But Jesus also hangs between the power of God and the powers that be. "Are you the King of the Jews?" Pilate asks, thinking to work a threadbare revolutionary like a yo-yo. But Jesus knows something about questions. "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" he puts back to Pilate. Everything in the conversation—indeed, everything in the Gospel—has been pointing toward verse 36. "My kingdom is not from this world," says Jesus. If it were, his followers would take the usual steps by the usual means to rescue their king.

Thus it is that we witness the sacrificial regency of Christ, the one who came not to be served but to serve, the one who "did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped" (Philippians 2:6). Christ's glory comes by way of the cross. The polarities of his kingship are reversed. And we, the people drawn to him by his lifting up on the cross, have become a kingdom, "priests serving his God and Father," says Revelation, whose vision of power is reversed as well. The cross of Christ calls power

into question but also serves as the basis for a different sort of power.

We forget this at our peril, the way the genius of the gospel hangs together on the cross: the cross with its power that is not power, the cross that takes shape as the pattern of our lives, the foundation of Christian thought that is always also a kind of antifoundation, the disturber of worlds.

We see the way that Jesus the king who is crucified calls into question the assumptions of power in this scene in John 18. Who stands before who? Who interrogates who? Who is the king? Not the one who commands iron legions but the one who willingly lays down his life for the sheep. “Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice,” says Jesus, speaking of his kingship and more. But brutality and blood have crumpled Pilate’s sense of truth down into irony. “What is truth?” he asks.

For Christians, this means that any exercise of power that does not trace back to the self-sacrificial love of the cross is illegitimate, having lost its proper grounding in the cruciform mandate of God. This may sound like the nub of some cooked-up-behind-the-pulpit political theory—some *cruxpolitik*—but it’s really about how we live day to day, how we want and how we purpose, how we steward influence, money, position, and all the rest toward God’s ends on behalf of the least of these. It’s power set to work with and under and no longer over, at least not over in the same way.

Jesus’ cruciform kingdom is also the basis for a different sort of power. Jesus has trampled down Death by death, and now it’s in the power of his name that the church preaches and heals and teaches and casts out demons. This is not a metaphor. This is real power of a different order that rescues us from the bondage of sin, from the fear of death, from slavery to our own little selves. It’s because of that power that the gates of Hades will never prevail against the church. All power resolves into Jesus, is drawn to his ultimate end: resurrection. “To him be glory and dominion, forever and ever.”

I don’t think most of us have ever been totally convinced that we believe or want this version of power. We’re the crowd, crowing for Barabbas with his base but reliable power, whetted sharp and holstered up. But the church, wended throughout the world, has stumbled when it’s leaned on Barabbas-power but won when it’s played the long game of faithful dependence on the Lamb that was slain. Parades of nuclear-tipped military power snaking through concrete capitals impress, but the

cross in its turnabout mystery wins in the end.

I think what fascinated me about *Christ of Saint John of the Cross* was the way that Dalí somehow managed to paint the mystery of the cross, the way Christ who was crucified is the one in whom all things hold together, the one who we need to know if we're going to know anything else, the one who holds the keys to death and Hades and thus to all the rest. Dalí's picture was my icon, my window-gaze into the life-giving, abyssal mystery of the power of the cross.