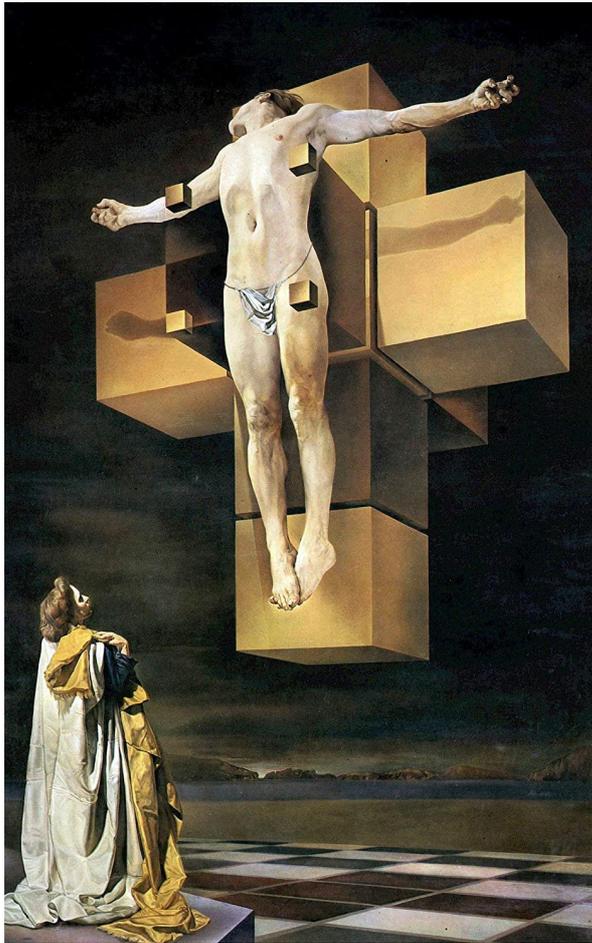


“The breadth, length, height, and depth of Christ”

Week 8: Salvador Dalí, *Crucifixion (Corpus Hypercubus)*, 1954

This week, as we continue our study of scripture and images of Christ, we turn to the work of Spanish painter Salvador Dalí (1904-1989), encountering one of his later works titled, *Crucifixion*. Painted in 1954, the work was originally titled *Corpus Hypercubus*, and has been in the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City since 1955. Well-known as a Surrealist painter, Dalí’s works after 1946 began what has become known as his “classical”



period, and signaled a change in his self-understanding as a painter. From 1948 onward his paintings, such as *Vision of an Atomic Age*, increasingly displayed a deepening interest in the intersection of nuclear physics and the mystic dimension of Christianity.

In 1951 Dalí published an essay titled *Mystical Manifesto (Manifeste mystique)* in Paris, in which he compared himself with Spanish Christian mystics, St. Theresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross. Dalí’s painting *Christ of St. John of the Cross* (1951) was inspired by a sketch made by St. John of the Cross depicting the crucifixion (c.1550).

In 1951 Dalí declared himself “the first painter of the Atomic Age,” placing himself within, a then, emerging postwar discourse about nuclear physics, war and atomic bombing that sought to understand the meaning of a new atomic age through art, philosophy, theology, literary writing, and film. Dalí wrote in *Mystical Manifesto*, “I want my next Christ to be a painting

containing more beauty and joy than anything that will have been painted up to the present. I want to paint a Christ that will be the absolute contrary in every respect to the materialist and savagely antimystical Christ of Grünewald.” Dalí was of course referring to the *Crucifixion* paintings by Matthias Grünewald (1470-1528), depicting the utter suffering and pain of the crucified Christ. Looking back on this postwar period Dalí said in 1976, “The atomic explosion of August 6, 1945, shook me seismically. Thenceforth, the atom was my favorite food for thought. Many of the landscapes painted in this period express the great fear inspired in me by the announcement of that explosion.”

Crucifixion (Corpus Hypercubus) is an oil on canvas painting (76.5”x48.7”) in which Christ is shown crucified is a cross in the shape of a tesseract or a octahedral hypercube, a four

dimensional unfolded representation of a cube shown in exploded form as eight cubes. Though the painting represents four-dimensional space, it is also suggestive of a fusion of three dimensions of space with the fourth dimension of time. The cross seems to extend into an infinite horizon, sea and darkness. Mary, the mother of Jesus, is depicted in adoration beneath the cross, which is suspended above the infinite horizon of the world and even the cosmos.

Dalí's hypercube cross is an unfolding of a basic cube, and as such can be said to represent the unfolding of the messianic event at the center of the cross. Using Dalí's own interest in the atom, the painting suggests Christ present in the center of the atomic structure of the cosmos across space and time. John's gospel (1:1, 3), "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being,*" certainly suggests the cosmological dimension of Christ the Word. At the center of the cross, the Word become flesh suffered in the fullness of humanity. John also challenges us to see the Word as the source of the atomic structure of the cosmos, the human body, and its particles (oxygen, hydrogen, carbon and nitrogen), which have existed since the "Big Bang" of creation. Dalí's painting compellingly suggests that Christ is at the center of that from which we are made, and is the one who gives meaning to faith, reason and existence.

In Ephesians (3:18-19) Paul writes, "*I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.*" Width (breadth), length, height, and depth are also the dimensions of the octahedral hypercube that Dalí painted. The fourth dimension of time is also suggested in the "depth" of the painting receding into the background, an infinite vision of atomic time seen in the checkered ground, sea and sky. Depth is the one thing that changes over time; our faith unfolds and our understanding deepens as we experience more of Christ in every dimension of our lives.

The cross is the place where the God whom we cannot see is revealed in plain sight. Martin Luther wrote of "the love of the cross" as what Christ does for humanity by transforming sinful, weak and evil people into righteous, strong and good people (*The Heidelberg Disputation*, 1518). This love of Christ and the cross are the breadth, length, height and depth that Paul sought to express – the dimensions of the indwelling Word within the atoms of the cosmos and within our very humanity.

In one of the most intensely personal passages Paul ever wrote about what the cross means for him, Paul wrote (Galatians 2:19-21), "*I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*" Dalí's *Crucifixion* suggests the infinite and eternal Word who was crucified for humanity and who lives in all of us. It is faith that opens our eyes to the reality of God's gift of grace *pro me*, "for me." Paul's hope, "*to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge,*" is a mystical theological statement. The cross allows us to know the unknowable: the hope of life in God beyond the suffering of death.

As we seek knowledge for a cure to COVID-19 and for the healing of human conflict, perhaps we should trust more deeply in the dimensions of Christ's love already within the atomic fabric our humanity. Solutions for our challenges and divisions must be found within ourselves, and that is where God in Christ is already present. May Christ give us the courage to open our eyes and look within ourselves allowing us to see the love of the cross unfolding with depth and strength in our lives. As we "*live in the flesh*" Christ's love unfolds allowing us to open our hearts and unfold our hands toward God's unlimited horizon of love. Amen.