

Christ who holds all things (Revelation 1:4b-8)

## **We need a Christ who manifests his power, not just a Pantocrator of the gaps.**

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In the epistolary greeting at the beginning of John's prophecy, God declares: "I am the Alpha and the Omega...who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty." The word translated "Almighty" is *pantocrator* in Greek, and images of Christ Pantocrator—Christ Almighty, the stern savior and judge, grasping the book of the Gospels in his left hand and imparting a blessing with his right—are some of the oldest and most popular icons of the ancient church. Christ Pantocrator was often painted or laid in mosaic tiles in the central dome of ancient churches, gazing down beneficently and powerfully upon the gathered worshipers.

What's our image of Christ? A lot of us might prefer Christ the teacher, Christ the gentle shepherd, Christ the resurrected one, taken for a gardener and startling Mary outside the empty tomb. The early church, however, foregrounded Christ Pantocrator. They needed a Christ who manifested his power.

So do we, though we might not always be so sure. Many of us have a well-developed sense of agency. We control our futures. Our Pantocrator of the gaps fills in only at the places where our power peters out.

Perhaps we need to recover a more vivid sense of God's power. After all, God is named The Almighty, and God's power is something of a leitmotif throughout the scriptures. The book of Revelation begins with God's power. It's God's power that

undergirds the whole prophecy. And the book resolves into God's power. Despite all the indicators to the contrary—the emperors with their wars and executions, the beast (that villainous sock puppet) pushing its head into human history, animated by the dragon—still “the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings” (17:14). The message of Revelation could be summed up like this: nevertheless, the Lamb wins.

Which is fine for the end of history. I have a sufficiently apocalyptic imagination to be able to believe in Christ's ultimate victory. But where my faith slips a gear is in the archipelago of everyday evils: the barbed-wire viciousness confronted by refugee families and barrel bombs and those crumpling, you-had-better-sit-down-for-this diagnoses. I need my Christ Pantocrator in those everyday places.

Of course, the image of Christ in the book of Revelation is not of a God waiting till the end of the world to enter the flow of history, some watch-breaker God sitting just offstage. His power is exercised in the here and now, in love, in the fact that he has freed us from our sins by his blood, in that he made us to be a priestly kingdom. It's concrete power, set to work in our lives so that we might grow into maturity in him, might know life and godliness, might experience the occasional immovable object tossed like a gnarly mulberry tree into the sea. “All things work together for good for those who love God” is a statement which is as true as it is audacious because Jesus really is the Pantocrator, the one who in his love has set the “exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe,” as the old pronoun-bending King James Version puts it (Romans 8:28; Ephesians 1:19).

Do we believe in the us-ward power of Christ Pantocrator? Do we expect it, watching for God's power to open doors, move mountains, challenge structures of sin in our lives and communities?

Honestly, not always. It could be that we doubt God's power for the usual reasons: the theodical roughage churned up by the world. But there's also the fact of the subtleness of God's power. Things happen, and, well, was that God? Or was it a scruffy coincidence?

Though all things work together for our good, not all things will go our direction. It's a vexing little paradox, and nowhere is it more true and pressing than in the church.

[In talking to pastors serving rural congregations around the country](#), I've heard remarkable stories of revitalization. But sometimes these resurrection stories are

preceded by death. I think of Brenda Henson, an Assemblies of God pastor who launched a congregation and community-focused ministry reaching out to folks dealing with addiction, generational poverty, and incarceration in her small, rural town. One key piece that allowed their congregation to thrive was the gift of a building—with a new roof—from a church that had dwindled and died a few years earlier. No doubt those last, lingering saints in the previous congregation had prayed their hearts out, wondering why God didn't make all things work for their good and turn that church around. And no doubt they would be overjoyed to see how God was able to accomplish abundantly far more than all they could ask or imagine.

The title Pantocrator is loaned from the Septuagint as the usual translation of "The Almighty." But, especially in the New Testament, *kratos* can also mean "hold" or "grasp." In that sense, Christ Pantocrator could be rendered "Christ who holds all things." That includes us. And maybe that's the starting point for us to renew our image of Christ's power. Christ All-Holder enfolds us in his almighty hands.