



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue  
in the City of New York

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[www.SaintThomasChurch.org](http://www.SaintThomasChurch.org)

**Friday, March 29, 2013**  
*Good Friday*

*The Solemn Liturgy of Good Friday*  
*at 5:30pm*

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A Sermon by  
The Reverend Joel C. Daniels

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### *CRUCIFIXION AND CLARITY*

“Crucify, crucify him.”

A good deal of clarity comes with the passion of Christ. In the course of the gospel narratives, there is a certain amount of dramatic tension, with questions unanswered, results yet to be revealed. Reading through the stories of Jesus’ life before tonight, we might have asked: what will the scribes and Pharisees do, with their trick questions and attempts at Jesus self-implication? The crowds seem to wax and wane—sometimes proclaiming Jesus king, sometimes threatening him with death—where will they come down? What will become of this ministry? What will become of this man?

Tonight there is a resolution, finally, and conclusively: “Crucify, crucify him.”

Such a clarity serves as a revelation of sorts; two revelations, in fact. One revelation is about us; you and me, this community, this world. We can see it at work in our own lives. For example: what would we do, were we to meet a person who embodies both perfect mercy and perfect justice? How would we react if—on our way home this evening, say—we were to meet a man who not only loves, but seems to be love itself? How would we respond to making the acquaintance of a person who transparently reveals the God of heaven?

Now we know the answers to these questions. Were we to meet love itself, were we to meet God himself, we would kill him. Not right away, perhaps. At first there might be excitement, the attraction of disciples, the sense of something new, of something breaking into our everyday world with great possibilities. But, eventually, Good Friday shows us that we would murder him. We would do so legally, deliberately, according to our standards of justice and the perceived needs of our community. The Gospel of Luke tells us that “That same day [Good Friday] [King] Herod and [Pontius] Pilate became friends,” though they had not been friends before. (Luke 23:12) Church and State, we might say, cooperate to do the will of the people. On this, we have clarity: “Crucify, crucify him.”

At least “they” would. I wouldn’t, of course. I know better. I am a disciple of Christ, and I have been my whole life. I worship him, here in this place, almost every day. I can truly say that I am a friend of Jesus. And what did his friends, his best friends, say that night? “I do not know the man.” While the shouts echoed around them, “crucify, crucify,” “I do not know the man.” “But aren’t you...?” “I do not know the man.” Friends of Jesus.

Such is the nearly unbearable truth about who we are; now we know. In that dark night of orgiastic violence and gratuitous cruelty, the crowd cried with one voice, “May his blood be on us and on our children!” As a result, the life of Jesus of Nazareth is not the only thing that was taken away on Good Friday. Another fatality of that day is the destruction of any religious illusion that promises the perfection of the human being under his own power. We might say that the darkness of Good Friday is God’s attack on our attempts at an adequate religion, the destruction of misconceptions of ourselves. There is a loss of innocence that day; or, better, we might say, a sudden, sharp awareness of the absence of innocence. On this we have clarity: “Crucify, crucify.”

But there are two revelations, not just one. The staggering weight of self-knowledge would be paralyzing otherwise. Something else is made clear, however. The second revelation is that God so loved the world—the world that shouted in one voice, “Crucify him!”— that he would give his only Son. The second revelation is that he would give nothing less than himself. To them! Not in order to justify his terrible wrath, but in order to save the world from itself, by taking onto himself the destructive consequences of their sin, forgiving the actual perpetrators of that sin, and bringing them into the fullness of what human life can be: reconciliation with God, the abundant source of all life.

As a result, he accomplishes what is nearly incomprehensible: he transforms the people’s rejection of him into his acceptance of them. The painful failure of their faithfulness is overcome by his abundant mercy. “On the night he was betrayed,” we say, he took bread and, when he did so, he instituted the sacrament of reconciliation; he turns betrayal into communion. What transformation could be more miraculous than that? He takes the raw material of betrayal and murder and turns it into a sign, and not a sign of condemnation, but a sign of redemption. This worst of all possible days becomes Good Friday.

The destruction of these self-illusions is still painful, however, and our desire to hide from the grim implications of it are perennial; think of the recurrent anti-Jewish rhetoric around Good Friday that can turn intensely violent, something as reprehensible as it is predictable. We don’t want this to be true about us. We are friends of Jesus! But the inability to accept our own participation in Christ’s death also implies a lack of acceptance of our own forgiveness. His blood is on us, and on our precious children. But instead of being only a symbol of our guilt, the blood of Christ—shockingly, outrageously—purifies that which it touches; his blood becomes the communion wine poured out for our salvation.

After the destruction of our religious illusions on Good Friday, which leaves us without false comforts, we are immersed in the life-saving awareness that the creator of heaven and earth has committed everything to the salvation of the world. This has all been given for us. Even as “crucify, crucify!” was being chanted, God was at work drawing the world to himself.

This is the clarity that comes on Good Friday: the awareness that the love of God cannot be killed, no matter how hard we try.