

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, September 14, 2025

Holy Cross Day

Solemn Evensong

4:00 pm

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Canon Carl Turner

on

Genesis 3:1-15

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The eternal Freshness of the Wounds of Love.

At the beginning of his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes, *“The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God”* (1 Cor 1:18)

‘The power of God’; the God who brought everything into existence – who, in Jesus Christ, experienced all that it was to be human – including betrayal, anger, pain and death – turns what we see as weak into strength. This great paradox is at the heart of the Christian Faith – God turns things upside down.

In our Old Testament lesson we heard the story of the fall of humankind – a story we have heard many, many times and it is a story that sometimes can distort the message of the cross. It is very easy to get fixated with sin and dirt and why things go wrong. After all, the existence of disease, natural disaster and why evil people often seem to do well in life when good people die young is often thrown at us as proof that God could not possibly exist or, if he does, that he is more twisted monster than a loving Creator. But the existence of all these things is not proof of anything except that these things are part of our created order and, yes, sometimes they are really, really bad.

As a parish priest for many years in the East end of London I would meet people who had made no time for God in their lives and yet, when death affected them or a loved one, they would ask why God had allowed such a thing. Most priests know that, really, there is no answer and what they have to do is stand there at the funeral and hold the questions and the doubt and try and reveal something of the love and the hope. And, I think, nothing does this more powerfully than when the priest stands on the edge of the graveside. This is something that happens less and less in Europe and, probably, in the United States too but there is a kind of wonderful irony that the family with all their doubts and questions and with all their assumptions that the priest has all the answers will never really understand. For the priest, standing on the graveside, stands on the edge of one world and the next – between the living and the dead – standing between the grief of the loved ones and the stark reality that the one they loved they will never see again. But the irony is the fact that the priest stands on a wooden plank that, no matter how well the grave-diggers have fixed it, always wobbles dangerously when the priest steps on it. And there we have it – the family don’t notice but every priest feels under his or her feet how insecure and vulnerable he or she really is. And I think it gives power to the liturgical words, to the sentences and the prayers – for the presence of a possible disaster, of falling into the grave, reminds the priest of their own mortality and, ironically, of their priesthood which is to hold the pain and the questions and the doubts.

Some Christian communities seem fixated by the cross – everything is about Christ bearing our sins – about punishment and about divine judgment. Still other Christian Communities *hide* the cross – they want to live only with the Resurrected Jesus. We Anglicans, of course, are bound by the liturgical year which, through the cycle of the seasons and feasts and fasts, allows us to enter more deeply into the story of Jesus who is God incarnate yet wounded for love of us.

Whenever the Resurrected Jesus appeared to his disciples and friends, he often showed them his hands and his side – as he did to Thomas in the upper room and depicted on our great reredos behind the High Altar. This is so that they could recognize the real Jesus and not some imposter or ghost. Even when Jesus ascends to his Father, he lifts up his hands in blessing and the apostles see the wounds taken into heaven – to consecrate all times and space. For it is the eternal freshness of the wounds of love that are the key to understanding the mystery of God's love.

Dame Julian of Norwich, the great mystic from the late 14th century, gives us an insight into how we can enter into the mystery of the cross. In one of her visions, Jesus invites her to enter into his wounded side –

“Then with a glad cheer our Lord looked unto His Side and beheld, rejoicing. With His sweet looking He led forth the understanding of His creature by the same wound into His Side within. And then he shewed a fair, delectable place, and large enough for all mankind that shall be saved to rest in peace and in love.” (revelation of Divine Love Chapter 24)

Now, this is no Steven King nightmare or horror movie – there is no description here of the pain that Jesus suffered or the guilt he might have borne for us – her vision is quite extraordinary; by entering into the wounds she finds a place *fair and delectable...large enough for all mankind*. Isn't that a wonderful image – that through the woundedness of God Julian of Norwich discovers that the cross is not an end but a beginning.

When our own fragile nature becomes apparent through sickness or frailty; or when the church gets it wrong and seems distant from the values of the kingdom; or when natural disaster makes us question our faith...we are reminded that the glory of God is emptied into creation and is still wounded until the time when all is consummated in God's love.
