

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, March 29, 2026

Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday

Solemn Evensong

4:00 pm

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A Sermon by

Professor Sarah Coakley

on

Isaiah 5:1-7; Matthew 21:33-46

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Address 1: Invitation

From 'The Journey of Desire: Passion, Temptation and Transformation'

'Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard' (Isaiah 5. 1) In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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There is in a sense only one thing that matters as we stand on this eve of Holy Week: it is a question of invitation, an invitation to a great journey of desire – of passion, temptation and transformation. All of us are invited; no-one is excluded.

Think of it first, perhaps, as an invitation to a drama: shall I this year attend this drama of love and betrayal, that starts with Isaiah in a primeval vineyard of erotic delight and moves into another garden of agony and testing? Shall I bring to this drama all the anguish and ecstasy of my own loves and betrayals, or shall I choose to stand at a distance, protecting myself awhile? Perhaps I can just be part of the chorus and – as in an ancient Greek drama – do some suitable garment[1]rending and ululating for the purposes of a nice bit of 'purgation of pity and fear'? Or is it that something deeper than this that is required, something that may cost me not less than everything? I hover at the edge, uncertain at the alternatives set before me.

For let us admit that for some of us, in some years, this invitation actually offers no choice: we are already at a place of such political or personal anxiety, such pain, grief, or loss, as to make talk of an 'invitation' to Passion fatuous: we are already in the vineyard of love and violence, the garden of betrayal and testing, where life and death contend, and meaning itself seems threatened with obliteration. We don't need to be invited, because this is a place to which we have already been consigned. The problem is that we would much rather get out of it. An apparent contradiction here of divine love and divine judgement has become unbearable to us. There is seemingly no escape from the stuckness of despair that we already know too well. We are deep in the agony of the Passion already, whether we like it or not; but we do not know, even as faithful Christians, how to deal with it.

But in other years, and for others amongst us, the vineyard, the garden, has been contaminated in contrast by a sort of banality, a loss of meaning in a different sense. The story has become too familiar, the sight of bombed and tortured dead bodies a pornographic regularity of the evening news which does not

even put us off our TV dinner. Our Christian meaning system has lost both its power and its glory: we subscribe to it with our lips, but when asked to go up again to Jerusalem we find ourselves, this year, too tired, too busy and – underlyingly – too fearful to face it. It is all too much. There is indeed an escape via aversion – and we can choose to take it.

But then, finally, there are the years – perhaps it is this year? – when we sense that we stand at the edge of some new discovery, either because Jesus beckons us for the first time into the deeper, mystical meaning of his death, or because our scriptural and liturgical repetitions have over time broken down even our most resistant inertia. We step in, this time ('well in' as Lewis Carroll once put it, in *Alice and Wonderland*, as a joke, but with profundity); and now the waters of that well close over our heads, and we stand with and in the biblical narrative of the mystery of redemption over these coming days in all the darkness and hopelessness of those first disciples who loved Jesus just as much as they also betrayed him. In this third way the pulsing chronology of despair and new hope are already vitally related because they press us inexorably forward: the unbearable contradiction of divine judgement and divine love that we already see in the Isaianic garden is to be resolved, not by clever argument, not by falsely- 4 anticipated theological resolution, but by entering, waiting, enduring, undergoing, these coming days of Passion and salvation.

To all these conditions – and all these are our conditions, the conditions of the human race in the face of death, and of Life – the invitation to re-enter the vineyard of divine longing and love comes again. Shall we find a way back in this year?

Consider this evening's biblical testimony, in this regard. 'Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard'. So the prophet Isaiah describes the primal erotic intensity of the drama of God's love for his people, Israel. Here is a God who creates all the lush conditions of fulfilment that one might ever desire, and even sets up a tower of defence in the vineyard against the intruding enemy. But the people repeatedly rebel in a terrible amnesia about this primary truth of love: the divine love-song falls on deaf ears, and the prophets such as Isaiah recall and excoriate the people in vain. Then Jesus of Nazareth, approaching his own Passion, explicitly recalls these lessons of Isaiah, but with a new twist: it is not only the prophets who have been ignored in the primal vineyard, he tells the crowds and the gathered religious leaders, but the very son of the vineyard-owner who has been beaten and killed by its own tenants. Here is the final betrayal: God has seemingly run out of options. Or has He?

Only in Matthew's account of the parable, read tonight, does Jesus turn to the crowds themselves and ask them what should be done to resolve this new vineyard crisis of the cruel murder of the Son. It drives home to us, in Matthew – the most consciously-Jewish of the gospel writers – that this dilemma, the opening of our Passion drama, is every bit an intra-Jewish one as it is an intra-Christian one, and a perennial one – no mere matter of a flip supersessionism of Christianity over Judaism. No, the key question of this drama, about love and punishment, love and betrayal, brings Jewish and Christian traditions painfully together, and not apart; for it is the same issues with which we perennially struggle as duteous religious people – how to deal with love and betrayal. Thus the answer from the crowd to Jesus's question is unambiguous, and what we might well expect: 'He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and let out the vineyard to other tenants ...'. Judgement must follow from disobedience to love's commands; the books must be kept, the economy of order and calculation respected. Love and justice must be seen to be in alliance. The vineyard of love, surely, belongs only to the righteous?

How significant it is that Jesus, in Matthew's account of all people's, does nothing to endorse this response. And this is but the start of the unravelling of the Passion, in which, as Jesus himself says,

quoting the Psalms, everything is going to be turned upside down: the very stone which the builders rejected, is to become the chief cornerstone. What we are going to discover is that this love story, this journey of desire, this Passion, is not even now the one we were expecting.

Think of this entry into Holy Week, then, to repeat, as an invitation: perhaps not to a mere drama after all (even a fine Greek one), but to a Passion to end all dramas; not to a satisfying story of justice and deserts, but to a story of divine love so exquisite as to exceed and upturn all justice as we know it; not to a theological conundrum to be solved, but to a dangerous and life-threatening journey: a journey of desire, pain, death, discovery and new life. For this is the journey that has to be undergone, not theorized in advance. Each day matters this week, each unfolding event brings its surprises and changes of consciousness; since this, we dare to claim as Christians, is the ultimate story of divine desire and its human transformations in Christ, and through it we too have to pass.

‘Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his beloved’. The invitation lies before us: come, this year, this most disturbing and challenging year, into the vineyard of love and betrayal, and discover afresh over these sacred days the full mystery of divine love revealed in Jesus’s Passion. Amen.
