

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, September 13, 2026

Holy Cross Day

Solemn Eucharist with Holy Baptism and the

Commissioning of Ministers of Music

11:00 am

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Canon Carl Turner

on

Numbers 21:4-9; Galatians 6:14-18; John 3:13-17

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So God loved the world.

“It was the worst of humanity and the best of humanity.” Words of Robbie Giannetta, our Head of Security, and former NYPD officer in 2001.

The horror of that day is forever etched on the hearts and minds of so many people in America and, indeed, across Britain, Australia, and other commonwealth countries who lost loved-ones that day. 25 years on, we have reflected on the evil committed by the hijackers, but the one thing they could not hijack was the indomitable spirit of the American people and her allies; they could not hijack the land of the free and the home of the brave. That bravery may have been tested on September 11 but, as Rabbi Joe Potasnik reminded us on Thursday, September 12 became the day when countless people responded with loving service that brought together peoples regardless of who there were and where they came from. Yes, it was the worst of humanity and the best of humanity. Hope can spring from tragedy – new life in spite of death.

Now, many of you may know that the psalter is divided into sections so that all 150 psalms can be recited over the course of a month. You may also know that the psalms are a collection of liturgical songs that cover every possible subject including cursing. We usually omit most of these, so-called, *imprecatory* verses, especially when children are singing the psalms; verse that wish evil or death upon an enemy or even their babies. There is one whole psalm that is rarely used at all these days – Psalm 58. It is a prayer for vengeance against the wicked who plot evil and cause destruction and uses some very shocking images to describe that vengeance, which is why it is rarely used. The irony of this should not be lost on us, because Psalm 58 is intended to be recited on the morning of the 11th day of the month.

The history of the human race seems filled with so many acts of terror and violence followed by so many acts of revenge. How are we to make sense of this? And what is God’s response?

Let’s begin with our Old Testament lesson. Following the Exodus, the people of Israel, as they journeyed through the wilderness kept forgetting their release from slavery into freedom. They even went after other gods, and they complained and some even gave up hope and wished they were back in Egypt. In response, God sent poisonous snakes into the camp that bit the people and those who were bitten died. Crying out to the Lord on the people’s behalf, Moses was given a strange set of instructions – the crafting of a poisonous serpent in bronze, raised on a pole that would save the person who was bitten by the snake.

As an aside, you sometimes see this image on ambulances and on the uniforms of paramedics). That, in turn, takes us over a thousand years later to John's Gospel, and Jesus remembering this very same event. Only, he says that "as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the *Son of Man* be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have *eternal life*."

When I was a parish priest in East London, where the Franciscan life was restored to the Church of England, my little Victorian Church of St. Martin of Tours in Plaistow had a beautiful Rood Beam – that is, an image of the crucifixion high above the chancel: Christ on the cross, with Mary his Mother on his right, and the Beloved Disciple on his left. Across the beam was painted in large letters, words for all the congregation to see as they looked under the Rood to the altar: '**Sic Deus dilexit mundum.**' So God loved the world.

This is how God responded to the seemingly perpetual cycle of terror, anger, vengeance, and despair: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son." God did not return evil with vengeance – he responded with sacrificial love. God shows humanity the way – hope springing from what should be despair; life from death; light out of darkness.

On the back of the Rood Beam of my little church, there were more words and, significantly, the priest saw them every time he or she turned from the altar to greet the congregation. '**Via crucis: Via lucis.**' The way of the Cross: The way of light.

You see, my friends, what happened on the cross the cross is the opposite of humankind's predilection to destroy or to exact revenge. And in case you think otherwise, this is not some twisted kind of vengeful God punishing his own son rather than us – I find that kind of atonement theology completely misses the point. God *himself*, in Jesus – the incarnate Word – experienced a cruel death in order to bring abundant life. The crucified God shows us the way to eternal life and the ultimate end to all evil and sin.

How significant, therefore, that on this day when we celebrate the exaltation of the Holy Cross we show it forth liturgically through the sacrament of baptism in which Alexander James Ailey dies to sin and rises to new life in Christ. The Way of the Cross is the Way of Light. He will be marked, *branded* (as St. Paul puts it) with the sign of the cross. He will be given a lighted candle – a symbol of the light of Christ that conquers despair, evil, revenge, and even death itself.

'**Via crucis: Via lucis.**' The way of the Cross: The way of light. It is a means to understanding why God so loved the world. As Ken Leech used to say, '*The cross is not a problem to be understood, but a mystery into which we enter.*' Or, as St. Paul puts it in our Epistle reading today, "*May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.*" In the act of crucifixion, we see the worst of humanity; and in Jesus, the Second Adam, we see the best of humanity. This is how God so loved the world: The way of the Cross is the Way of Light, and the pattern of Christian living – not returning evil with vengeance, but with sacrificial love.

Let us pray.

Words of Missionary Bishop Charles Henry Brent:

Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace: So clothe us in your Spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you; for the honor of your Name. *Amen.*

