

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, September 13, 2026
Holy Cross Day

Solemn Evensong & Convocation
4:00 pm

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Dr. Alison Turner

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The Chorister's Prayer

A homily for the new school year

As we gather as a school and as a parish for this special Evensong, we reenter the rhythm of worship as a choir school. And so, as it is also Convocation, we too gather with a sense of purpose and commitment to the year ahead.

A convocation is after all quite literally a calling or coming together as the body of Christ in this place. Just as we sang *Ora Labora, Come Labor On*, at the beginning of this service with the same words that we concluded the past school year; we know the new school year has well and truly begun.

There are many bridges between what has gone and what is to come. And this service, this gathering with those here and those online, signposts us all to the year ahead.

In preparation for the year ahead, I have been doing lots of sorting. Just as you boys with your families have been preparing your uniform kits and other supplies, I have been going through my desk and all sorts of other things as part of my 'back to school' annual ritual.

And I discovered a box. It was a box given by my parents of things collected from even before I was born:

Cards from my baptism. There was even the mask that my dad wore when I was born, to have a dad present at a birth was something quite unheard of in those days. There were reminders of swimming prizes, memorabilia, and things that would mean nothing to any of you here and yet they certainly mean something to me. These little notes, these little mementos speak of a formative time of my childhood not only about what I did, but also who I was. And they say something about who I am now.

Today as we launch this school year, we all reminded that whatever age we are, whatever grade we are, whether we are new or returning, God holds *all* of what is important to us.

Not just what we do, but who we are.

Another treasure in this box was something that I have in common with all of you.

Can you guess what it is? It was something that I have in common with all of you and certainly some in the back row and some in the congregation.

It was a certificate. Any ideas?

It was a certificate from when I joined a choir. I happened to be a seven-year-old probationer, and then I was admitted to the choir when I was eight or so. That was a while ago. And along with all of you and many of you out here in the congregation and online as well, I learned very early on a prayer written in 1934, the RSCM Choristers Prayer.

I did not know as a young child what being in a choir would even mean. I did not even know where I would be in years to come. But God did. And God knows for each one of you. He calls you– as it says in that prayer for all of you choristers– who are called to be servants who minister in God's temple.

To sing in this choir is to answer God's call for each one of you– on the days where you are a boy that loves to sing, or rather a boy that would rather stay in bed.

This prayer founded on a Latin prayer from back in the 4th century gives us all a pattern for life as a chorister now as much as in the past. It is a prayer that has formed me and I am sure will form many of you. It is in a sense missional because it reminds us not only what we sing, who we sing for and how we sing. And Mr. Spoletini, knows all about that. That singing is not just something we do. It is something physical that engages our whole being.

In the Episcopal tradition, we understand the power of outward symbols. We love the poetry. We cherish the Anglican chant. We vest. We sometimes dress up with funny hats, like this one. We vest our ministers, with our choirs in cassocks and surplices. And even some of them now have medals. Our outward liturgy is beautiful.

However, the Chorister's prayer gently warns us that words can simply be empty if we are not careful. The liturgical life is as much part of our musical life. Yes, we might be able to sing a high A as a child, or we might be able to recite our communal prayers on autopilot, as I am sure many of us can. And sometimes our minds might drift off to tomorrow's schedule or even what's fatigue.

The prayer, the Choristers prayer starts with reference to our lips because our outward speech and music are the first offerings we bring to God in this place. Our lips are a gateway because they connect what we say aloud with what is in our heart.

The prayer, as we all know, pivots from the mechanics of the mouth to the sanctuary of the soul. 'Grant that what we sing with our lips, we may believe in our hearts.'

And in the biblical sense, the heart is the seat of our conviction, our identity of even who we are. And moving our worship from our lips to our hearts means letting our faith, the words of our hymns reside within us and shape who we are.

When we stand and sing Mary's radical anthem, her Yes, her magnificent and proclaim that God has cast down the mighty from their seat, exalted the humble and meek. Take a moment to think. Do we believe it? When we chant the psalms and sing them so often, those of comfort or even of distress, do we generally and genuinely trust God to be our stronghold when our ambitions or families or other things falter?

For this convocation to be more than just a meeting and a nice 'hymn sandwich', the words we utter must sink into our very souls and mirror the words of the gospel.

‘What we believe in our hearts, we may show forth’, and as many of us say ‘practice, in our lives’. And that’s the difficult bit. The bridge that spans the beauty of our singing on a Sunday to the messy reality of schedules and all the getting ready for Monday morning.

Our liturgy is never meant to be an escape from the world, but something that connects us to it. It is meant to be the fuel that drives us into it.

Something that connects us with our whole world, our whole selves, our families and communities that we have yet to meet.

I once heard the true test of an Episcopal community does not lie within the acoustics of our naves, but in the environment of our neighborhoods.

I know some of you already are talking about being part of Neighbor to Neighbor, once again.

Our lives are called to be hymns sung in practice. The harmony we achieve together in this sacred space must become the template for our witness to justice, healing, reconciliation in a broken world.

The RSCM prayer calls us all to combine our hearts and minds, and hands and voices, in melody and harmony. And as we conclude this service this day, blessed on our way, May our lips offer praise to Jesus Christ. May our hearts find an anchor in his gospel. May all of you here know you are loved. And may your life be a song that is not hidden away but shared and lived.

And for those here who do not know this prayer, I invite the boys and anyone else who does know it to say the Choristers prayer with me, as we enter this new year together,

Alan, please will you begin?

‘Bless, oh Lord, us thy servants who minister in thy temple. Grant of what we sing with our lips, we may believe in our hearts, and what we believe in our hearts, we may show and show forth in our lives. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.’
