

**Sunday 14 September 2025**  
**The Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity**  
**Holy Cross Day**

**Liverpool Parish Church**

**OT: Numbers 21:4-9**  
**NT: Philippians 2:6-11**  
**Gp: John 3:13-17**

“For God so loved the world” is one of the texts that has echoed through my life since early childhood, I recall that I first saw it on a text card. Anyone who attended Sunday School in the 1950s and 1960s may recall the text cards that Sunday School teachers gave out. In my case, our faithful Sunday School teacher Mr Armstrong would hand out to us small cards with pictures of cars and airplanes. I can remember a Morris Minor featured on one and I still have a picture of a BOAC Stratocruiser with 1 Corinthians 16.13 on it. I keep it with other memories of my childhood journey to faith in my King James bible given to me in 1968. The text is one often favoured by street evangelists and has been put to music by many, from Hillsong to more famously John Stainer’s Crucifixion.

It is our Gospel reading today, on this day, as we celebrate Holy Cross Day, because as the bronze serpent held aloft was the way to life in the Old Testament as depicted in our reading from Numbers, the Cross is the symbol of the eternal life we receive from the death of Christ upon it.

Today, September 14, is Holy Cross Day. It is also known as the Exaltation of the Holy Cross and its old English name is Roodmass. Rood, of course meaning cross from which we also get Rood Screens which would usually have been built across this space to separate the chancel from the nave, and on which would sit a cross. So today we are called to think about and, in fact, to exalt the cross on which Jesus was crucified and, of course, to reflect what the cross means to each of us as a symbol and as a challenge.

But first let me say a little about why we celebrate the Holy Cross today in particular and a little bit of the story behind that.

The reason that the church celebrates September 14 as Holy Cross Day is because of St Helena. St Helena was the mother of the Roman Emperor Constantine whose conversion to Christianity changed the faith from being an underground and persecuted movement into being the official religion of the Roman Empire.

In the year 326, when she was about 80 years old, St Helena went on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and, whilst there, she discovered the remains of the cross on which Jesus was crucified. The legend is that after the events of the first Easter and Pentecost when the seeds of the early church began to take root, the Jewish elders in Jerusalem had hidden the cross in a ditch, together with the crosses of the two men crucified either side of Jesus. They buried them under rubble in order to prevent it becoming an object of veneration for the new and dangerously heretical sect called The Way.

Jerusalem was then almost destroyed in 70 AD but later rebuilt by the Emperor Hadrian and a Roman temple was built over the site where the crosses were buried. But it is said, that the knowledge of the cross’ whereabouts was handed down amongst certain Jewish families and a descendent of one of those families told St Helena where to look.

St Helena had the pagan temple demolished and down amongst its foundations she discovered three buried crosses but could not tell which was which. So, a dying woman was brought to the scene and was laid upon each of the crosses in turn and when she laid upon the third cross she immediately recovered, and this was declared to be the True Cross.

St Helena and the Emperor Constantine then had the Church of the Holy Sepulcher built on the site of the discovery and the church was dedicated on the 14 September 335. Unfortunately, although the Church of the Holy Sepulcher is still in Jerusalem, the cross is not. This is because Jerusalem has continued to be invaded and captured by different armies over the centuries and, as such, an important symbol the cross was removed and then returned more than once before finally disappearing following the capture of Jerusalem by Saladin. Although there are still a number of churches which claim to have a relic of the cross and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church claims to have a large piece of the cross rescued from Jerusalem.

In this day and age, it is very easy to adopt a certain scepticism towards such stories, which is helped by the fact that Calvin said famously that there were enough remnants of the true cross in circulation to build a battleship. Interestingly that statement is itself very far from true and it has been estimated that if all the known fragments of the cross were added together, they would only constitute about half a cross of three metres high. And it should always be borne in mind that the cross was a substantial and real physical object that existed within Jerusalem, and that less than 300 years had passed between it being hidden and St Helena finding it. But, of course, the veracity of the True Cross is much less important for us in the here and now than the meaning of the cross which, of course, does not depend on whether or not the physical cross was ever discovered.

Although the sign of the fish, the Ichthys was and is still used as a symbol of Christianity there can be little doubt that the sign of the cross is a ubiquitous symbol of our faith. If one thinks about it only for a moment it is actually quite odd that the cross should have become the symbol of the faith – after all the cross was a terrible instrument of torture and death that the Romans used to execute undesirables.

I want to make an imaginative leap for a moment so please bear with me – imagine for a moment that the incarnation of Christ took place not in first century Roman-occupied Judea, but in 18<sup>th</sup> century Paris or 20<sup>th</sup> century Nazi-occupied Poland. Then instead of a cross we, as the early church, may be using the symbol of the guillotine the gallows, or the gas chamber as a sign of our faith.

Now I apologise if anyone finds that offensive or shocking, but the fact is that the cross itself is a shocking symbol. In Galatians 5:11, St Paul refers to the “offence” of the cross and in Hebrews 12:2 the writer talks about the “shame” of the cross. This morning’s epistle reading from Philippians talks about Jesus being obedient to death – even death upon a cross. The fact is that to die on a cross was not to die the death of a martyr or a hero, but it was to die the death of a criminal, the lowest and meanest form of death, and that was both offensive and shocking to decent society.

So why is this offensive and shameful symbol, of the means of Jesus’ execution, to be exalted today or any other day? Of course, it is because the crucifixion was not the end. It was not the end of Jesus Christ nor of God’s purpose for his Son or the world. The death, darkness,

shame and offence of the first Good Friday was transformed into triumph and joy by the resurrection on Easter Sunday. It was and is God's purpose of salvation demonstrated in the resurrection of Christ that changes the cross from a symbol of death into a symbol of everlasting life.

To those who cannot accept the possibility of the risen Christ the cross can only ever be a place of a foolish early death – however if one believes that Christ rose on Easter morning then the message of the cross becomes the power of God because we know that if we believe in the risen Christ, if we look on him who was sent and lifted up for us, then we too can join ourselves to Christ's resurrection and be washed clean of everything that separates us from God.

Having referred to the "offence" of the cross in chapter five of his letter to the Galatians, that I mentioned a moment ago, in the next chapter of that same letter, St Paul puts the cross in the correct place of the life of all Christians: "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world." And that makes it clear that the cross is a symbol of our faith, not just because of the way in which Jesus died, but because it is also a symbol of the way in which we are called to live. We are called not just to admire Jesus and think of his sacrifice but we are called time and again to pick up our own crosses and to follow him and, here, to crucify our worldly nature. We are called to put to death on the cross that within us which is not Christ-like in the faith that that which is resurrected will be truly Christ-like.

You will doubtless have noticed that I and many others here cross ourselves in a number of places throughout the liturgy and that is not some affectation or reflex action, it is a conscious reminder to myself that I am under the symbol and the power of the cross and that faith is not just a decision of the mind but involves the whole of us, body and mind. If you have been wary about making the sign of the cross over yourself because you are worried that it is too Catholic or too showy, I would commend it to you as a spiritual exercise not in showiness but in subjugation to the cross of Christ.

Sadly, even today some Christians have been called to follow Christ to a literal cross for their faith, and we should never forget those nameless modern martyrs when thinking about our own struggles. So, whenever we look at the cross, we should recall that it is a symbol of the power of God and that Christ died the death of a criminal in order to bring us eternal life.

**Fr Bill Addy**