

## Love Lifted High

Homily for the Holy Cross Day

Readings: Numbers 21.4-9; Philippians 2.6-11; John 3.13-17

14 September 2025

The Cross is not a sign of condemnation, but of love lifted high — and that love changes everything. In the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Some years ago, I visited a woman in the hospital who kept a small wooden cross under her pillow. When I asked her why, she smiled faintly and said: “When I hold this, I know I am not alone.” She didn’t see the cross as a magic charm that would take away her illness. Rather, it reminded her of a relationship — that Christ was with her, carrying her pain and never letting her go.

That is what today’s Gospel tells us. Belief is not just agreeing with a statement; it is trusting in a presence, holding onto a relationship. “Just 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... For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son... not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.”

Jesus gives the meaning of the Cross himself: it is the sign of God’s love for the world, not condemnation but salvation. The Cross is not primarily about punishment but about healing. Not about rejection, but about embrace. This is a radical claim. Many people in Jesus’ time expected a Messiah who would bring judgment against enemies, establish political victory, and display strength. Instead, Jesus speaks of being “lifted up” on the Cross — a place of shame and weakness — and he dares to say that in this lifting up, the world will discover God’s love.

The Cross therefore turns upside down our common ideas of how God should act. We expect God to punish wrongdoers and reward the righteous. Yet in the Cross, God steps into human suffering, carries human sin, and offers reconciliation rather than revenge. The Cross is the great reversal: condemnation replaced by mercy, death turned into life, hatred overcome by love.

The people of Israel once experienced something similar in the wilderness. As we heard from Numbers, they faced the deadly bites of serpents and cried out for help. God’s answer was unusual — not to remove the serpents, but to command Moses to lift up a bronze serpent on a pole. Whoever looked at it lived. The healing came not from their own efforts, but from trusting in the sign God had given.

Now Jesus tells us that he himself will be lifted up in the same way. He becomes the sign of healing and life, not for one tribe in the desert, but for the whole world. Whoever looks upon him in faith — in the midst of fear, despair, and even death — finds life. And here John adds something essential: to believe in the Son of Man lifted up is not just to agree with an idea but to enter into a living relationship. The Greek word *pisteō* carries the sense of trust, love, and deep commitment. John uses this word almost a hundred times in his Gospel — far

more than the other evangelists — because he wants us to see faith not as reciting words, but as entrusting our whole life to God's love revealed in Jesus.

And we must not overlook verse 17. Too often, people stop at John 3:16, but verse 17 completes the thought: "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." That is the heart of the Cross: not condemnation, but salvation; not rejection, but embrace. And Saint Paul echoes this when he writes to the Corinthians that the Cross is "the power of God and the wisdom of God." To the world it looks like foolishness — a Messiah who suffers, a Savior who dies. But for those who believe, it is the deepest truth: that God's power is not domination but self-giving love, and God's wisdom is not clever argument but the embrace of the broken. This is the heart of the Gospel: that in the Cross, God has chosen not to destroy the world, but to heal it. Not to condemn humanity, but to draw us into his eternal life.

Many of you know that just across the hall, in our Anglican Centre where we gather for Council meetings and where we share refreshments after every Sunday service, there stands a simple white cross. Beside it hangs a meditation by Yvonne Kendal. That meditation reminds us that the Cross, though plain, carries many layers of meaning: sacrifice, love, forgiveness, transformation, and peace. It tells us that the Cross is not about ornament or grandeur but about authenticity and purity. It invites us to let go of fear, resentment, and control, and to let God's love flow through us.

How fitting that this white cross is placed in the Centre where we make decisions as a church and where we share food and friendship. It quietly reminds us that everything we do — from council discussions to coffee and cake — must flow from the Cross, where God's love embraces the world.

And this matters because our world is wounded. People are displaced by war, torn by injustice, burdened by poverty, or quietly suffering in loneliness and illness. In these wounds, the Cross speaks: you are not alone. You are loved. You are not condemned but embraced. Saint Paul knew how strange this sounds: "the message of the Cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." The world sees power in domination; the Cross reveals power in humility. The world seeks wisdom in pride; the Cross shows wisdom in love poured out.

That woman with the wooden cross under her pillow knew this truth. Her suffering did not vanish, but she was not alone. The Cross gave her strength because it connected her life to Christ's love. And so for us: whenever we face illness, exile, injustice, or fear, the Cross is God's reminder that we are never abandoned. We are loved with a love that gives itself fully.

On this Holy Cross Day, the Gospel calls us back to the heart of our faith. The Cross is love lifted high, not condemnation. It is healing for a broken world. It is the wisdom of God's power in weakness. And, as the meditation beside our own white cross in the Anglican Centre reminds us, it is the call to simplicity, forgiveness, and peace.

So let us look to the Cross again — not as an ornament, but as the power of God, the sign of healing, and the embrace of love. Amen.