

‘This is the wood of the Cross ...’

Num 21: Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert      Ps 77: *Never forget the deeds of the Lord.*      Phil 2: 6–11: *He was humbler yet, even to accepting death ... on a cross.*      Jn 3: 13–17: *God loved the world so much that He gave His only Son.*

You may never have heard of *Aelia Capitolina* but it's a very famous capital city, one of the most renowned cities in world history. It existed under this strange name in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> c., but for most of the rest of history it has been known as ... *Jerusalem*. The reason it was known by that other name was that the Romans tried to obliterate the whole of Jerusalem's significance after its siege and destruction in 70AD. Emperor Hadrian in c. 130AD attempted to eradicate completely the Jewishness of the capital, and at the same time suppress the Christian heritage. Apart from desecrating with statues of Roman emperors the Temple Mount where the Jewish Temple had stood for 1000yrs, he also 'concreted over' the sites of the Crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. He laid out a huge stone platform on which he erected a pagan Temple to Jupiter, and with a statue of Aphrodite, pagan goddess of love, on the rock of Calvary. This was intended as a

deliberate desecration of the holy places, but the flip-side was that by building over the site, Hadrian *preserved the memory* of the exact spot of the Cross and the Tomb!

I mention this as it has direct relevance to today's celebration of *the Triumph of the Holy Cross*. The origin of this feast is in the unveiling of the holy places by Empress Helena, mother of Constantine, the first Christian Roman Emperor. St Helena — who was in fact from Essex according to some accounts — went to Jerusalem after her son's conversion to Christianity in the early 4<sup>th</sup> c. She went to uncover the Christian relics in the city, and to transform it into a place worthy of Christian pilgrimage. She was a determined woman, even though already in her 70s, and she set about the great archaeological work with a passion. She had the Temple of Jupiter torn down, and the flagstones all lifted, so she could excavate the site which was known to be the place of Jesus's Cross and Resurrection. She unearthed the Rock of Calvary, and she discovered also a series of cave-tombs, one of which was declared to be the one of the Lord's burial. And, over the

whole site, Calvary and Tomb alike, she organised for the Bishop of Jerusalem, Bishop Macarius, the building of a fitting church, known as ‘the Holy Sepulchre.’ Not all of that majestic church of hers is still standing today, sadly — it would have been a most impressive sight — but some of it still does, enclosing the place of Jesus’s Crucifixion and the Tomb of His burial. Both can be visited, within the single span of the church today: the most famous places in all of Christ’s ministry. The feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross is kept on the date in the calendar that this new church, built over the course of 10yrs by St Helena, was consecrated: 14<sup>th</sup> September 335AD. It must have been a glorious occasion, the opening of this first church to commemorate the death and resurrection of Jesus in Jerusalem, some 300yrs after the events. It allowed Christian pilgrims to come and pray in a church dignified for the sanctity of what they were in Jerusalem for. Fragments, supposedly of the Cross itself, were housed in the church of the Holy Sepulchre, and on Good Friday the faithful would come in procession and kiss the wood of the

True Cross as part of the liturgy. From this practice in Jerusalem, comes the ceremonial we have at the heart of our Good Friday service: *the veneration of the Cross*.

This beautiful feast, then, is in some way *an extension of Good Friday*. Coming as it does at the start of autumn, it reminds us of Holy Week, almost half the year ago; it recalls for us that at all times of year it is the Cross which stands at the heart of our belief in Jesus. There is no escaping it, the historical fact, that Jesus Christ, in the 30s of the 1<sup>st</sup> c., *was crucified under Pontius Pilate, died and was buried; and on the third day rose again from the dead*.

Let’s understand why on this feast of the Holy Cross we get that 1<sup>st</sup> Reading from *Numbers*: the *bronze serpent on the pole* in the wilderness years after the Exodus. The point of that episode is that God made the Israelites stare at the very thing they feared (the venomous snakes with their lethal bite) so they knew that only God could heal them of that fear, and be their Saviour. Jesus informs His hearers that, “*as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up*.” So, when He is lifted up

on that cross-beam and attached to a pole, He asks us to lift up our eyes, and stare at Him in death — to gaze at the very thing we might most fear as human beings, the horror of death — and know that we need not fear it, that Jesus is our healing and our Saviour.

And yet ... as we gaze, do we really take to heart, interiorize, and appreciate the true agony that this acceptance of the Cross by Jesus entailed for Him? The whole idea of the Cross should be *shocking*: it was the worst execution the Roman Empire dreamt up. Crucifixion was very public, utterly humiliating (since one was stripped naked), and excruciatingly painful, because as one's legs gave way through exhaustion, then one suffocated through an inability to lift oneself up to breathe. Often, crucified criminals would linger for days on the scaffold. Jesus's own Crucifixion lasted just a few hours, because He was already brutally mistreated in the preceding hours at the scourging by the soldiers; and his pain increased, too, by his being *nailed*, rather than just tied, to the Cross. And this dreadful means of torture and death we

celebrate today: *the 'Triumph' of the Cross*. As one priest I heard put it, it has the shock which we might have if we were to celebrate a feast of the 'Triumph of the Electric Chair' in our own day. The moment of our sacrificing the Son of God, is surely a black day for humanity. We killed the very one who had come into the world to reveal God perfectly to us: the humble and innocent Jesus ... the one who preached repeated forgiveness ... who urged His followers to 'turn the other cheek.' ... who taught us to 'love your enemies, do good to those who hate you.' The price for this supposedly inflammatory teaching was, dreadfully, the ignominy of the Cross.

To ponder on this event of Jesus's Crucifixion should bring us to a heartfelt appreciation of what God has done for us, but also put other concerns and fears in perspective. I remember having to preach at the Tuesday evening Mass on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, right after the Twin Towers attacks, and I expressed to the people that night that of course mankind had long ago committed a much worse atrocity than any Twin-Towers attack, (or any

terrorist bomb, any teenager knifing, any sniper's bullet assassinating a college-campus debater): man had 2000 yrs ago put God to death cruelly as a criminal. We had responded to the gift of Jesus not just by ignoring Him or side-lining Him, but actually by *eliminating* Him. This should rightly shock us: the worst that mankind could ever do, in the past or future. But surely a greater surprise for us is in the response of God to this outrage: He did not seek revenge, bring the world to an end, destroy us in our sins. That afternoon of the Crucifixion of Jesus, our all-out attack on Almighty God, God's reaction is not one of vengeance: in fact, He restored our crucified Lord to us in the *joy, peace and light* of the resurrection. Instead of trading like for like, dealing death to us for death to Jesus; God deals us again the offer of life. In this way, the Cross is turned from being a sign of torture and failure, to being a sign of love and forgiveness.

It is, therefore, at the heart of our faith and of the Church, the sign of God's divine humility. An early Christian hymn, incorporated by St Paul into his letter (2<sup>nd</sup>

reading) sings: *Christ Jesus, though He was in the form of God ... emptied Himself by taking the form of a servant, and ... He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a Cross.* Let's gaze up at the Cross, the altar, and the Eucharist, and be humbled ourselves before the majesty of God's humility. With this faith, we can overcome anything that life may throw at us, and know that just as God brings Jesus through His Crucifixion, He will bring us, with Jesus, through sufferings and even death, to true and eternal life. He loves us so much that He died for us; this we cannot dispute, and the canopy of the Cross, Jesus's arms thrown wide open for us, shelters and protects us from sin and death, and is the greatest expression of His divine glory. Hence: the *exaltation* of the Cross. The worst instrument of Roman torture becomes the throne from which Christ reigns, and all attempts to smother this wondrous mystery of God's ineffable love by pagan Rome are thwarted. The Cross stands high and mighty above us, and on the Cross Jesus draws all men to Himself, and to life with the Father.