



THE EXALTATION OF THE HOLY CROSS

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This solemnity presents us with various significant challenges. Firstly, we need to understand exactly what we are celebrating. This Feast has a number of different titles: 'The Finding of the True Cross', 'The Feast of the Holy Cross', 'The Triumph of the Cross' and 'The Exaltation of the Cross'. Each of them adds something significant to our overall understanding of the Feast.

In 326 AD St Helena, mother of the Emperor Constantine and a devout Christian, journeyed to the Holy Land to visit and identify the Holy Places associated with the life of Jesus. Working with Bishop Macarius, she excavated the site of Calvary and found the three crosses of the Crucifixion of Jesus, which the Jews had buried on the site. The true Cross was identified when an ill man touched it and was miraculously healed.

At her insistence, Constantine built a church on the site and had it dedicated as the 'Church of the Holy Sepulchre' on 14th September 335 AD. The Feast of 'The Finding of the True Cross' was celebrated on 3rd May. A third of the Cross remained in the church, while St Helena brought a third back to Rome and sent a third to Constantinople.

The next significant moment in growing our understanding of the Feast is the Edict of Thessalonika, issued in 380 AD, by which Emperor Theodosius I declared the Nicene Church the Religion and the Church of the Roman Empire. This was a huge step forward for Christianity and the Church. Emperor Constantine, with the Edict of Milan in 313 AD, had given freedom of expression to the Church.

In itself, this was very significant for a Church that had been persecuted for so long. But the Edict of Thessalonika took things way beyond jewels, different to the wooden cross with the Body of Jesus on it. The Cross is now exalted in glory.

There is a curious twist to this narrative. In 614 AD, Chosroas, the King of Persia, invaded Syria and Palestine and abducted the Cross.

In 629 AD it was recovered and brought back to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem by Emperor Heraclius of Constantinople on 14th September. In the 7th Century the date for the celebration of 'The Exaltation of the Cross' shifted from 3rd May to 14th September.

The second challenge of this celebration is more personal and demanding. While we easily celebrate 'The Triumph of the Cross' on an external level, how is the Cross triumphant in our lives? Is the Cross a living reality in our lives, or does it stay on an external level of our lives?

We have to die with Christ if we are to live with him. This means that we must live the Cross so as to come to glory in him. Only then can we say that we are living in 'The Triumph of the Cross' – The Cross is being exalted in us.