

## Exaltation of the Holy Cross

It's said that if we laid out, end-to-end, all the parts of the True Cross found throughout Europe today, the line would stretch from Rome to Jerusalem! Today's feast has its roots in such piety, and is an extraordinary story.

In 326 the Emperor Constantine's mother, Helena, at the grand age of eighty set sail for Jerusalem to find the cross of Jesus and his tomb. To her satisfaction she found the site of the Holy Sepulchre and established a church on the site, which is venerated as such to this day

The true cross was more elusive. It was claimed that the leaders of the Jews had hidden the cross in a Jerusalem well. One of the Jewish leaders told the Empress Helena in which well to look. The story goes that they dug for days and found three crosses. They weren't sure which one was the true cross, so the Bishop of Jerusalem, the later Saint Macarius, sent the crosses off to the bedside of a dying woman. She touched the first two crosses to no effect, but on touching the third cross she immediately recovered. St Helena had found the True Cross.

The True Cross remained in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem until the early 7th Century when the entire city was looted by the Persian king, Chosroes II who took the cross back to Persia. In 628 Emperor Heraclius II overthrew the regime in Persia and carried the cross, firstly to Constantinople, his capital city, and then in the spring of 629, to Jerusalem. Today's feast, the Triumph or the Exaltation of the Cross, commemorates this triumphant return of the Holy Cross to Jerusalem.

On the one hand it's a rather ghoulish tradition which pays so much attention to the instrument of torture used to kill Jesus. The only modern equivalent we might have is the pilgrimage people make to the ovens of Auschwitz and Dachau. No one goes there to gloat. These are places at which we remember past evils so that it might never happen again.

In a similar way this is what today's feast calls us to focus on. The triumph of Jesus' cross is that in it, through it, and beyond it, he has shown us how to let go of the evil that can trap us in the most destructive of behaviors, and embrace a life that is loving, just and good. We see in the Cross the price to be paid for living our humanity to the full, for sacrificial and saving love, and for confronting evil head-on. To the degree that we do these things, we share in the Cross as well, and in the final and never-ending triumph of Christ's resurrection.

Whatever jokes might be made about how far the fragments of the True Cross might reach today, the love between Father, Son and Spirit for all people around the world who suffer, reveals the degree to which our God wants us to know his solidarity with our lot.

The Cross stands as the sign that God does not condemn us, nor want us to perish, but that the Son came to us, and suffered, died and was raised so that we might know the way which leads to love and eternal life.

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