

The Universal Exaltation of the precious and life – creating Cross

September 14 / 27th

This Feast is a very important one and it is a great blessing that this year (2015) it falls on a Sunday. This gives us an insight into the meaning of the feast because we are able to participate in some of the customs associated with it. The background of the feast is to be found in the immediate period after the peace of the Church in 325 AD. The Emperor Constantine had proclaimed himself as a Christian and called together all the Bishops of the Church to Nicea to proclaim the Orthodox Faith in a united Creed. Just after this, in his enthusiasm for his new faith, he sent his mother, St Helena, to the Holy Land to find the sites where the Saviour had been born, brought up, preached, suffered and rose from the dead. When she arrived in 326, she found that Jerusalem was essentially a Roman City and that much of its ancient past had been built over. She tried to search for Golgotha but eventually was told of an old Jewish man called Judah, who knew all the oral tradition about the holy sites. He told her that there were three crosses buried under the Temple of Venus which had been built over the site of Golgotha by the Emperor Hadrian. St Helena ordered that the temple should be demolished and the foundations excavated. Just as Judah had said, three crosses were found but no one knew which one was the Cross of the Saviour. Just as St Helena was praying that the True Cross would be revealed the Patriarch Makarios passed leading a funeral procession. He suggested that the crosses be laid one by one onto the body of the dead man. The first two crosses had no effect but the third cross brought the man back to life and then immediately cured a sick woman who touched it in faith. The Patriarch, no longer needed for the funeral, raised up the True Cross over Jerualsem, exposing the Cross to the four points of the compass whilst the people prostrated themselves and sang “Lord have mercy” many times. St Helena had a silver case made for the True Cross and it was set up just above the site of the Anastasis in what was to become the “Great Church”. This was to be one of the largest basilica in the world and covered the whole site of Golgotha and the tomb of the Saviour. Much of the Constatinian church has been destroyed but the arches around the Holy Sepulcre or Anastasis itself date from this period.

In the 620’s, the Persian Emperor Chozroez invaded the Holy Land and sacked Jerusalem. He stole the True Cross and took it as a talisman for his army. The Byzantine Emperor, Heraklios raised a Christian army to get back the True Cross and restore the Holy City. The Persians were defeated in 628 AD and the Emperor vowed to take the True Cross back to Jerusalem. As he approached the Holy City he dismounted and wanted to carry the True Cross on his own back into Jerusalem and follow the ‘Via Dolorosa’ to Golgotha. However, an invisible force stopped him and the Patriarch Zacharios saw an invisible angel blocking the Emperor’s path. The Patriarch told the Emperor to lay aside all his armour and imperial robes and to carry the True Cross bare foot and just in his under shirt. Once dressed so humbly, the angel permitted the Emperor to pass and the True Cross was once more set up upon Golgotha. The Patriarch performed the same Exaltation to the four points of the compass on September 14th, the feast of the original finding of the True Cross.

Now the Church keeps this feast in Royal Purple and with flowers and fragrant basil. (Basil is a royal herb hence it’s name being the same as the Greek for a King or Emperor or ”Basilaios” ) This great feast reminds us of the universal significance of the Cross. St John Maximovich in his sermon for this feast says, “The sign of the Cross is made in all the Mysteries and Prayers of the Church…with the sign of the Cross the bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ…with the signing of the Cross, the waters are sanctified.” One of the great hymns of the afterfeast says, “The Cross is the preserver of the whole Universe, the Cross is the beauty of the Church, the Cross is the might of kings, the Cross is the confirmation of the faithful, the Cross is the glory of the angels and the scourge of demons.”

This is why, in the Russian Church in particular, we make the sign of the Cross to confirm our prayers. It is a most pious custom to make the sign of the Cross with the priest (and Deacon if there is one) as he sins the litanies and the words, “Let us pray to the Lord”. This helps the faithful participate fully in the prayers in their body and their soul. Thus, I encourage all of our parishioners to follow this pious custom so that, as a whole congregation, we use our bodies to celebrate the Holy Cross, the confirmation of our faith and let its power seep into our being. So, at the next liturgy, try to remember this so that body, mind and spirit, we all participate in the Mystery of our faith and the invincible power of the Cross.

Father Paul.