

The Sunday of the Cross

This morning we're celebrating the feast of the Elevation of the Cross. The correct date of the feast is tomorrow, September 14th.

Normally we would have an Evening Divine Liturgy but since we cannot serve one this evening we would have had to serve the liturgy tomorrow morning.

The Metropolitan has given the parishes permission to move the feast to today, therefore I chose to move it so that more could be part of the celebration.

This feast day goes back to the finding of the True, Life-giving Cross by St. Helen the mother of St. Constantine the Great.

In the year 326, She received permission and financing from her son go to Jerusalem in search for all the holy places where our Lord had been.

One of the first things that she wanted to do was to find the True and Life-giving Cross.

When she arrived in Jerusalem, she started making inquiries as to where it's location might be. Unfortunately, even the Bishop of Jerusalem did not know where the cross was.

There was a Jew named **Judah** who had some documents which identified where Jesus had been crucified. He had inherited these documents from his father. They also showed where Jesus had been buried. He reluctantly gave these documents to St. Helen.

Several weeks were spent excavating the site looking for the cross, but to know avail.

One day St. Helen noticed a beautiful flower growing in a place by itself. It was what we refer to as **sweet basil**.

Taking this as a sign, she had her excavators start digging at that location. They soon began to smell a sweet fragrance and the deeper they dug the stronger the odor was.

Soon they found three crosses, some nails, as well as the piece of wood which Pilate had written "Jesus the Nazarene, the King of the Jews" in Greek, Latin and Hebrew.

They now had to determine which of the three crosses was the True and Life-giving Cross.

The Bishop noticed a funeral procession for a man who had died. He pointed it out to St. Helen, and she was inspired to stop the procession, to take the body of the dead man, and to place it on each of the crosses.

They placed the body on two of the crosses and nothing happened. This caused them to begin to lose hope. Next, they placed the body on the third cross and to their great joy the man came to life. Thus, identifying the True and Life-giving Cross.

The people, having seen this, started demanding that each of them given pieces of the cross. The Bishop knew that this would be impossible, since he feared that the cross would be destroyed.

When he told this to the people, they then begged the bishop to at least lift the cross so that everyone could see it.

He then had a platform built and carrying the cross to the top of the platform the Bishop blessed the people on all four sides.

The cross would be brought out once a year and the Bishop would again bless the people with it.

If you recall the life of St. Mary of Egypt, she had joined a pilgrimage from Alexandria to Jerusalem to venerate the cross on this feast day.

Another reason that the church celebrates September 14th as a Feast of the Cross is that in the year 629 the cross was returned to Jerusalem.

In the year 614 the Persians had conquered and plundered Jerusalem.

They had taken the Holy Cross and many other holy and precious vessels. The patriarch of Jerusalem, Zacharias, insisted on not being separated from the Holy Cross. He was taken along with it as a prisoner by the Persians.

Then, in the year 628 A.D. the Roman Emperor, Herakleios, led his army against the Persians and defeated them.

On September 14th, the Emperor returned to Constantinople with the cross.

The next year the Emperor took the cross back to Jerusalem. As he entered the city Emperor Heraclius carried the Cross on his back, but suddenly was unable to take another step. Patriarch Zacharias saw an angel preventing the emperor from bearing the Cross on the same path that the Lord had walked barefoot and humiliated. The patriarch communicated this vision to the emperor. So the emperor removed his raiment and in ragged attire and barefoot, took up the Cross again, and carried it to Golgotha, and placed it in the Church of the Resurrection.

Later, when the holy fathers realized the dangers of invading infidels in the Holy Land, they cut the cross of Jesus into pieces and distributed them to the great spiritual centers. Portions were taken to Constantinople, Mount Athos, Alexandria, Rome, and Antioch.

The holy day of the Elevation of the Cross has a place of great significance in the Church today.

It remains with us as a day of fasting and prayer, a day when we recall that the Cross is the only sign worthy of our total allegiance, and that our salvation comes not by “victories” of any earthly sort but by the only true and lasting victory of the crucifixion of Christ and our co-crucifixion with Him.

When we elevate the Cross and bow down before it in veneration and worship to God, we proclaim that we belong to the Kingdom “not of this world,” and that our only true and enduring citizenship is with the saints in the “city of God” (*Eph 2:19; Heb 11:10; Rev 21-22*).

Thus, at the Elevation of the Cross, we make our official rededication to the crucified Lord and pledge our undivided allegiance to him by the adoration of his holy feet nailed to the life-creating Cross.

This is the meaning of this holy day of fasting and repentance today.

The Cross is our pride; by which we accept the death of the Master as the way to Resurrection for deliverance from all sin.

The baptism which we undertook was described by Paul as the participation with the Lord in His burial and in the Resurrection: He wrote, "Knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin." (Rom 6:6) This is the center of our faith. This is our vitality.

If we post the Cross on the top of the Iconostasis, we do so in order that the meaning of the New Life shall stand before us and elevate us to Jesus in heaven, that we may forget all earthly cares.

And when we make the sign of the Cross over the baptismal water, we do it in order that the power of Salvation may descend upon the baptized through the water he is being washed with.

When we Cross ourselves, we ask the Lord to send down upon us the power of Salvation.

Likewise, if we wear a Cross around our neck, we confirm our Christian faith and that we are attached to Jesus. It is sad that too many people only wear a cross as a piece of decorative jewelry.

When we Cross ourselves over the face, chest and shoulders, let us feel the connection with the Crucified. We should do this every time the name of the Trinity is mentioned in our prayers.

The true Glory descends upon us through the death of the Savior and through our faith in Him.

This is our pride and power. This is what the martyrs have delivered to us.

By the power of the Holy and Life giving Cross, Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on us.