



I have to begin with a confession which is that this Sunday will be the first time I have ever celebrated Holy Cross Day either as an ordained priest or as simply a lay member of the congregation. As a consequence I have, thanks to Google, learned a lot more about the origins of this day. Apparently, Helena or St Helena as she became, the mother of Constantine the Roman Emperor was a convert to Christianity. And with her newfound faith embarked upon a pilgrimage to the Holy Land in AD 326 and one of her aims while there was to discover the exact place of Jesus' crucifixion and the very cross on which he died. With the assistance of the Bishop of Jerusalem St Macarius she did indeed discover the spot and no less than three crosses. The Bishop then prayed to Jesus Christ to 'show clearly which it was among the three crosses, that was raised for thy glory. Distinguish it from those which only served for a common execution'. Then to aid the investigation and establish without a shadow of doubt which was indeed Christ's cross and definitely not one used for 'common execution' a noble woman of ailing health was brought forth. When the first cross touched her, nothing happened. The second cross, nothing. But when the third cross touched her, she was spontaneously healed of her illness. And thus, miracle of miracles the True Cross was identified.

Her mission successfully accomplished Helena had the Church of the Holy Sepulchre built on the site. Nine years later on 14<sup>th</sup> September AD335 her son Constantine dedicated the church containing its most holy relic. However, when the Persians successfully invaded Palestine in

AD 614 their king Chosroas appropriated the cross as loot but hooray, hooray fifteen years later the Cross was recovered and brought back to Jerusalem by the Emperor of Constantinople on – can you believe it – no less a date than 14<sup>th</sup> September. Sadly, it was lost for good in July 1187, when the bishop of Acre carried it as the army standard into the Crusaders’ decisive battle with Saladin at the Horns of Hattin. Unfortunately, the Saracens roundly defeated the Crusaders. and the cross was taken, reportedly attached upside down on a lance, and sent to Damascus, never to be seen again. That is apart from all the pieces of the ‘true’ cross which have been found throughout the centuries and would it is estimated be more than sufficient to make a forest. Pieces which can be seen in such places as Notre Dame where it was fortunately saved for that disastrous fire and in the cathedrals of Pisa and Florence. And here in the UK some of you may recall that the late Pope Francis presented King Charles with not just one but two fragments of the True Cross at the time of his accession to the throne and these were incorporated into the Cross of Wales which was carried aloft at the start of his coronation procession. Added to these two fragments those allegedly possessed by the Cornish Church of St Garda’s and by the Bar Convent in Yorkshire but none I am sorry to say by any of our Benefice churches.

So today, the 14<sup>th</sup> of September, we come with Christians around the world to celebrate Holy Cross Day although perhaps not in quite such an extravagant style as some. **The Cross, that holy cross**, which is surely so much a part of all our lives and central to our faith for just what an amazing truth it represents. You may very well have at least one in your home be it only last year’s palm cross or even better perhaps one you wear round your neck as I do. And here it’s interesting to note that as far as I can recall, clergy aside, that I don’t think I’ve ever seen a man wearing a crucifix. But in addition to these I also have an icon of the cross which I study every morning and try as it were to see through the picture itself to the meaning beyond. And one way I find helpful is to associate Christ’s Cross with some of the other crosses in our lives. Thus, helping me to gain a greater insight, a more informed understanding into just what it truly represents in our Christian faith.

First and foremost, is I think the unmissable cross we all discovered in our school exercise books when we had done something wrong in answering a question. In my teaching career I was still permitted to use red pen for these but now that is banned as being discriminatory. But for me the red is hugely significant as I recognise the scarlet life blood of Jesus shed for the sins of the whole world. He was pinned to that cross because of the numerous red crosses which mark my wrongdoing, your wrongdoing, my sins and your sins. And this divine sacrifice of

God's own Son on that wooden cross was the only way we could through God's grace obtain redemption of all those red blood-stained crosses, those wrongdoings, those sins we have committed.

Next, we have the addition sign of the cross when I recall all the blessings that the knowing of Jesus has added to my life. The example of the caring and compassionate good Shepherd who is always there to lead us in our life's journey and to protect us in the dark valleys of life and bring us through them to the safety once more of green pastures. Jesus who gave us the infallible revelatory wisdom of his teaching to act as a guide as to how we are called to love and serve the Lord. Jesus who on the cross added the unfathomable burden of our sins to the burden of his suffering. And most important of all the added gift of divine forgiveness which is beyond all value. Can we ever properly even begin to recognise just how great and wonderful all this addition is and of how it has continually enhanced and blessed our lives?

My third example is the Ballot Box cross which reminds us of that Christ of his own free will chose to be hung on that cross for our sakes, our redemption. He elected to be there and again can we have any real conception of the incomprehensible magnitude of that self-giving, selfless and unimaginably generous choice? Do we feel that our choices in life in part reflect that unique choice of Christ's?

And finally, we have of course the 'kissing' cross which I regard as the most important of all my four crosses. The kissing cross that we have all made countless times to express our fondness, our affection and above all our love for someone. The kissing cross that is complete confirmation that despite our sins, our wrongdoing, our lack of additional help and care given to others of God's children, our failures to choose the right way, the right path in life we are loved unquestionably, unreservedly and eternally by God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And that cross of love is there for all to see as we gaze at that instrument of torture. That instrument of torture whose upright points from earth to heaven and heaven to earth so we can always be in touch with God. That instrument of torture whose cross beam reveals the mystery that is ever-open arms of love in which Christ wishes to hold and embrace each and every one of his Father's children.

We may not have even a fragment of the true Holy Cross to exalt here today but we can surely still metaphorically raise it in awe and wonder as we think or even hum these words: 'Lift high the Cross, the love of God proclaim till all the world adore his sacred name. For thy blest Cross

which doth for all atone, creation's praises rise before thy throne Lift high the Cross the love  
of God proclaim till all the world adore his holy name.'