

'This is the wood of the Cross ...'

Num 21: Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert Ps 77: *Never forget the deeds of the Lord.* Phil 2: 6–11: *He was humbler yet, even to accepting death ... on a cross.* Jn 3: 13–17: *God loved the world so much that He gave His only Son.*

You may never have heard of 'Aelia Capitolina' but in fact it's a very famous capital city — one of the most renowned cities in world history. It existed under this strange name in the 2nd and 3rd centuries, but for most of the rest of known history it has been known as ... Jerusalem.

The reason that Jerusalem was known by that other name, 'Aelia Capitolina,' was that the Romans tried to obliterate the whole of Jerusalem's significance after their siege and destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD. Emperor Hadrian in about 130AD decided to try and eradicate completely the Jewishness of their capital, and at the same time to suppress also the Christian heritage. So, apart from desecrating the Temple Mount — where the Jewish Temple had stood for 1000yrs — with statues of Roman emperors, he also covered over — 'concreted over,' one might almost say, the sites of the Crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. He laid out a huge stone platform, on which he deliberately erected a pagan Temple, to Jupiter, and with a statue of Aphrodite — pagan goddess of love — on the

rock of Calvary. All this was planned as a deliberate desecration of the holy places ... but in a reverse sense, it actually served to preserve the knowledge of the location of Jesus's death and resurrection! By deliberately building over the site, Hadrian had preserved the memory of the exact spot of the Cross and the Tomb!

I mention all this, as it has direct relevance to today's sacred festival — the feast of the Triumph of the Holy Cross. The origin of this feast is in the unveiling of the holy places by Empress Helena, mother of Constantine, the first Christian Roman Emperor. St Helena — who was in fact from Essex by all accounts — went to Jerusalem after her son's conversion to Christianity in the early 4th c. She went in order to uncover the Christian relics in the city, and to transform it into a place worthy of Christian pilgrimage. She was a determined woman, even though already in her 70s, and she set about the great archaeological work with a passion. She had the Temple of Jupiter torn down, and the flagstones all lifted, so she could excavate the site which was known to be the place of Jesus's Cross and Resurrection. She unearthed the Rock of Calvary, and she discovered also a series of cave-

tombs, one of which was declared to be the one of the Lord's burial. And, over the whole site, Calvary and Tomb alike, she organised for the Bishop of Jerusalem, Bishop Macarius, the building of a fitting church, known as 'the Holy Sepulchre.' Not all of that majestic church of hers is still standing today, sadly — it would have been a most impressive sight — but some of it does, still enclosing both the place of Jesus's Crucifixion and the Tomb of His burial. Both can be visited, within the span of the church today: the most famous places in all of Christ's ministry. The feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, which we keep today, is kept on the date that this new church, built over 10yrs by St Helena, was consecrated in 335AD. It must have been a glorious occasion, the opening of this first church to commemorate the death and resurrection of Jesus in this place, some 300yrs after the events. It allowed at last Christian pilgrims to come and pray in a church dignified for the sanctity of what they were here in Jerusalem for. Fragments, supposedly of the Cross itself, were housed in the church of the Holy Sepulchre, and on Good Friday the faithful would come in procession and kiss the wood of the

True Cross as part of the liturgy. From this practice in Jerusalem, comes the practice we have at the heart of our Good Friday service: the veneration of the Cross.

This beautiful feast, then, is in some way an extension of Good Friday. Coming as it does, at the start of autumn, it reminds us of Holy Week, almost half the year ago, it recalls for us that at all times of year it is the Cross which stands at the heart of our belief in Jesus. There is no escaping it, the historical facts, that Jesus Christ, in the 30s of the 1st c., was crucified under Pontius Pilate, died and was buried; and on the third day rose again from the dead. He loves us so much that He died for us; this we cannot dispute, and the canopy of the Cross, Jesus's arms thrown wide open for us, shelters and protects us from sin and death, and is the greatest expression of His divine glory. Hence: the *exaltation* of the Cross. The worst instrument of Roman torture becomes the throne from which Christ reigns, and all attempts to smother this wondrous mystery of God's ineffable love by pagan Rome are thwarted. The Cross stands high and mighty above us, and on the Cross Jesus draws all men to Himself, and to life with the Father.