3rd May 2020 Easter III

Today is the Third Sunday of Eastertide but also the Feast of the Invention of the Cross, as it is called in the calendar of the Book of Common Prayer, meaning the feast of the Discovery of the True Cross.

The story goes that St. Helena, the mother of the Emperor Constantine who died in AD 337, discovered the True Cross of Christ during her excavations in Jerusalem. A miracle apparently confirmed its true identity and then fragments of it were sent to churches throughout the world, though a large part of it was preserved in a reliquary in Jerusalem.

The pilgrim Etheria describes the veneration of this relic of the True Cross in the account of her pilgrimage in the 4th Century. How people would prostrate and kneel and then kiss the precious relic, the deacons carefully guarding it unless any tried to bite off a fragment!

This ceremony of venerating the True Cross was eventually extended to all churches where a Crucifix is so venerated on Good Friday because of what it represents and because of who hung upon it.

The later Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, called Holy Cross Day in the Book of Common Prayer, takes place on the 14th September, to celebrate the recovery of the Jerusalem relic from the Persians in AD 629.

Such special attention is paid to the Cross, both physically, artistically and in poetry and music. For the early Church, the Cross is the restored Tree of Life, the Cross becomes synonymous with the Crucifixion event and so venerating the Cross is a worship of Christ himself, a tangible and intimate coming close to him.

Bishop Fortunatus, composing in AD 500s, speaks of the *Cross shining forth in mystic glow,*

&

*O Tree of beauty, Tree of light! O Tree with royal purple dight! Elect on whose triumphal breast, those holy limbs should find their rest:*

&

*O Cross, our one reliance, hail! So may thy power with us avail.*

&

*Fulfilled is all that David told, in true prophetic song of old. Amidst the nations, God, saith he, hath reigned and triumphed from the tree.*

This verse is an important key as it refers to King David, by tradition the composer of the Psalms, foretelling that God would one day reign from a tree – a verse that can no longer be found in the Psalms but which was once there in the older Christian version of the Old Testament Scriptures, as testified to in the writings of the church Fathers.

The Cross was there in the Scriptures waiting to be fulfilled and revealed and five times in the New Testament that Cross is referred to as The Tree and so it probably was. The part carried by those going for crucifixion would have been the cross-beam carried on the shoulders.

As we celebrate with joy the Lord’s Resurrection, which we do every Sunday in the year, even in these difficult times, let us not forget his atoning sacrifice for us upon the Cross, the sacrifice of himself which we offer to the Father each time we gather for the Holy Eucharist. Hopefully before long we will be able to have our churches open again and be able to worship together as before.

Alleluia, Christ is risen!