

On the Exaltation of the Holy Cross

14th September

The sacrifice of God is a broken spirit.

Have mercy on me, O God, in your great goodness; according to the abundance of your compassion blot out my offences. Wash me thoroughly from my wickedness and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my faults and my sin is ever before me.

Against you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and righteous in your judgement. I have been wicked even from my birth, a sinner when my mother conceived me. behold you desire truth deep within me and shall make me understand wisdom in the depths of my heart.

Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean; wash me and I shall be whiter than snow. Make me hear of joy and gladness, that the bones you have broken may rejoice. Turn your face from my sins and blot out my misdeeds. Make me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.

Psalm 51.1-10



The Festival of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, which we commemorate this week, is an echo of the Holy Week, and especially the events of Good Friday, but remembered in the light of Easter itself. It draws on the perception at the heart of John's Gospel that the Cross is something *glorious* – it marks the point at which the Glory of God shines upon us *most clearly of all* (cf John 17.1-5). An earlier text in John's Gospel (John 3.14-15) makes a comparison between *Jesus Christ* himself lifted up before us, and the *bronze serpent* lifted up in the wilderness by Moses, the very sight of which was the means of healing (cf Numbers 21.4-9). In a similar way John wants us to understand that Jesus, raised up on the cross, is himself the means of our reconciliation and life, the definitive expression of God's *healing power*. Everyone who looks upon him will be saved:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God

did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. John 3.16-17

It is in this way that the Cross itself becomes a kind of *badge* for all of us who are Christian, a sign of our salvation in God – the very opposite of a sign of shame and disaster; but, rather, the pledge that in Jesus Christ everything has been *put right*. It is the definitive example of *perfect love* which has cast out every kind of fear (cf 1 John 4.18). It is always a badge of *hope*, which is why in this week's festival, it is *exalted*.

The commemoration of this festival goes back to the time of the Emperor Constantine, who was converted to Christianity in the Year 312 after a dream in which an angel held out the Cross of Christ before him. He understood the angel's message to mean that every meaningful triumph in the world comes as a result of Jesus' own triumph, over sin and pain and death, when he was raised up on the Cross for us as John's Gospel describes. As a result of this vision, Constantine's mother, Helena, travelled to Jerusalem in order to visit the sites of the events described in the Gospels, including the crucifixion itself. She discovered a piece of wood which was believed to have been part of the True Cross, and it is the restoration of this relic, as a *pledge of our salvation*, which is honoured in the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross on 'Holy Cross Day'.



The images show, first, the angel, with a small golden cross in his right hand, swooping down from the night sky and hovering above Constantine as he sleeps. The second image, here, shows Helena as the remains of the True Cross itself are raised up before her.

They are part of an extraordinary series of frescoes painted in Arezzo in Italy in the 1450s by Piero della Francesca, one of the greatest artists of his age. They are designed to help us imagine what it would be for us, too, to *behold the Cross* – the means by which Jesus Christ was lifted up over us all, that we may look upon him and be saved. In the same way, Holy Cross Day exists for the strengthening of our trust in the events of Good Friday, with the specific focus on their *goodness* and hopefulness and grace.

The images show part of the cycle of frescoes in the Church of San Francesco in Arezzo in Italy