



St Luke's in the City

150 years - 2009

Celebrating at the Crossroads

Feast of the Holy Cross

14 September 2008

FEAST OF THE HOLY CROSS

Holy Cross Day is now most commonly observed for remembering and reflecting on the way Jesus died and on the cross as a seminal Christian symbol and on his saving death.

Crucifixion involved both public degradation and a lingering, agonising death by thirst and exhaustion. This form of execution was taken over by the Romans from the Phoenicians and Persians. It was reserved for slaves and foreigners, especially in cases of robbery, rioting and sedition. Crosses were a common sight in Palestine during the Roman period. Apart from the usual implications, of such a death, the death of Jesus by crucifixion created an additional obstacle to any Jewish follower, since Deuteronomy states, "Anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse." (Deuteronomy 21:23; cf. Galatians 3:13)

The early church, living in the triumph of Easter, showed no great interest in the cross as a sign or symbol. Then, in the fourth century, the growth of pilgrimages to Palestine created an interest in places and things associated with Jesus. The Romans had destroyed Jerusalem in 135CE, and later built a new city, Aelia Capitolina, on the site. At that time the hill of Calvary was buried under tonnes of fill.

In the early fourth century, Constantine decided to erect a number of buildings to honour the principal places associated with Jesus. The excavations in Jerusalem for the new basilica, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, were supervised by the empress Helena, Constantine's mother. She discovered in the rubble a piece of wood that she identified as a relic of the true cross. The buildings were dedicated on 14 September 335, and the feast of the dedication was kept annually. The relic of the cross was housed in the basilica.

*from Booth K (ed), **For All the Saints**, Common Life Liturgical Commission, 1996.*