

THE FOUR FEAST DAYS OF THE HOLY CROSS

Before the time of Christ, the Cross represented the severest punishment possible for an individual. It was used in putting criminals and run-away slaves to death because it was such a slow and tortuous process. And because it was such a disgraceful way to die, no Roman citizen could be crucified, according to the law of the land.

Yet we know that Christ was crucified on a cross, and thereby gave it new meaning. By His death the Cross has been changed from an instrument of shame to the symbol of the highest glory.

It was not very long before the early Christians began to use the sign of the Cross as the symbol of their faith, that through Jesus Christ death had at last been conquered.

The Cross is such an important symbol to the Church, that our early Church Fathers had special feast days set aside dedicated to the Holy Cross. In the Armenian Church, there are four feasts of the Holy Cross.

- Exaltation of the Holy Cross 629 A.D.
- Holy Cross of Varak 650 A.D.
- Invention or Discovery of the Holy Cross 327 A.D.
- Apparition of the Holy Cross. 351 A.D.

Exaltation of the Holy Cross. This is the greatest of the four celebrations of the Holy Cross. The Church observes this on the Sunday nearest to September 14, that is the Sunday falling between Sept. 11 and 17. Exaltation of the Cross is a "Daghavar" Feast. On the day of the feast, there is a procession and Antasdan, the blessing of the four directions of the world. In the 7th century, the Persians captured the Cross of our Lord after devastating the city of Jerusalem. Emperor Heracles fought in this battle against the Persians, liberated the Cross, and upon his return, exalted it before the Christians with solemn celebrations. The Holy Cross was carried from Persia through Armenia. (The Armenian army participated in freeing the Holy Cross from captivity.)

Holy Cross of Varak. Celebration of the piece of our Lord's Cross discovered on Mount Varak near Van, where it was concealed from her persecutors by Hripsime, the nun. Tradition has it that a hermit by the name of Thodik saw a vision of a church with 12 pillars on the top of Mount Varak. He saw in the center of the pillars a cross radiating light all around it. This luminous vision descended and stood over the altar of the monastery of Varak hence the name, the Cross of Varak. It was discovered about 650 A.D. Catholicos Nerses, the Builder, came to Varak and verified the authenticity and historical details of the relic and proclaimed the nearest Sunday to September 28 to be the Feast of the Holy Cross of Varak. To this day, our church celebrates this feast. (It falls on the second Sunday after the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross.)

one who lives a solitary life for religious reasons

renewing

St. Hripsime - The heathen emperor of Constantinople wanted Hripsime for his wife, but she refused to marry him, and was forced to flee Constantinople with her companions to hide among the rocks of Mt. Yarak in Armenia. When the emperor heard of her escape, he sent soldiers after her and her companions. Hearing this, Hripsime left the relic of the Holy Cross among the rocks of Mr. Yarak and continued her escape with her companions. She was later martyred by the Armenian King Tirdat.

Invention or Discovery of the Holy Cross. Empress Helena, mother of the Roman Emperor Constantine commissioned an army to recover the True Cross, the Cross of the Crucifixion. After many years of searching, they found three crosses under a rubble heap in Jerusalem.

For many years after the crucifixion the site was lost. Even today the exact site is unknown. Many scholars, however, accept the 4th century tradition of a site inside the North Wall covered by the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, begun in 325 A.D. following the visit to Jerusalem of Helena, mother of Constantine the Great. Inside the tottering structure of this historic church (now supported by metal buttresses) shared by six Christian groups (of which Armenians are one), an impressive 14 ft. hilllock called "Calvary" rises to the balcony level. The term "Place of the Skull" may have sprung from the shape of the hilllock, from skulls seen in ancient times on the site, or from the legend that the "Skull of Adam" was buried here. The name "Calvary" is derived from the Latin "Calvaria" meaning skull. "Golgotha" is the Aramaic for "skull".

It is at present inside the city walls, rather than "without the gate" (Heb. 13:12) where the crucifixion took place -- it may well have been outside the walls of Jesus' time.

The twenty-two chapels of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre are shared by several eastern churches, each of which has its allotted space (the Armenians have two chapels). The heart of the structure is the marble Chapel of the Holy Sepulchre wherein our Lord was placed. It is perpetually lit with forty-three lamps provided by the various religious groups. The Sacristy contains priceless relics of the Crusades, which poured out of Europe during the middle ages to liberate the Church from Moslems. The Church also has a shrine covering the Stone of Uncction - where our Lord's body was anointed before burial.

After the discovery of the crosses, tradition tells us that in order to be sure which of the three crosses was our Lord's, the body of a newly-deceased man in a passing funeral procession was taken and placed on the cross, one by one. When he was placed on the Cross of our Lord, a miracle occurred -- he came alive.

Sudden sight
The Apparition of the Holy Cross. "Yerevman Soorp Khatch". This feast day always occurs on the fifth Sunday of Quinquagesima, which is a Latin term meaning "50" and is used to designate the 50-day period between Easter and Pentecost.

In the year 351 A.D., a miracle related to the Cross of Christ occurred. The countryside around Jerusalem is made up of hills and valleys. One can look from the Old City Walls by the Golden Gate where Christ entered in the city on Palm Sunday, across to the Mount of Olives.

In the sky above this country side one day appeared a huge cross over Mt. Zion. It was seen stretching from the Mt. of Olives to Golgotha (a distance of approx. 1 1/2 miles). It appeared in the afternoon and was visible to everyone in the area - Christian and non-Christian.

We see some samples of sky-writing today and it certainly makes us marvel. But think of what it must have been like to see God's work in the sky over 1600 years ago! The miracle affected everyone. Christians were strengthened in their faith, and many non-believers were converted as a result of this glorious sight. It is an event which is celebrated by all True Churches.

We have historical proof of this Apparition of the Holy Cross. A famous letter pertaining to it is preserved by the Armenian Church. The presiding Archbishop of Jerusalem, Guregh, wrote to the Emperor Constantine II of Constantinople telling him of this great miracle. Constantine II, a Christian, was at the time in danger of following the teachings of a heretic named Arius, and thereby causing a split in the Church. When he received this letter, his faith was renewed. The letter is read in all Armenian Churches on this Sunday.

ANTASDAN SERVICES

This service of the Church is performed 25 times during the year, but most notably as part of the celebration of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. Then the usual service is elaborated and includes the decoration of the Cross with basil.

Antasdan means 'fields' and the service allows for the blessing of the 'four corners of the earth'. The priest says prayers and offers blessings four times standing in different positions in the church, each time tracing the form of a ^{Cross} ~~cross~~. The response to his blessing is the singing of 'Amen, Alleluia.'

In the days when this service was initiated, the common work was farming and the fields, fruit and farmers are mentioned in the blessing. Now the service may be regarded as blessing the workplace, the work and the worker and asking God's blessing on everything He made. What we carry home from attendance at this service is the knowledge that we have asked God to enter into our lives and give us His special care as we work. And as we ask God to be with us as we work, we should remember to pray to God even as we work.