

Holy Cross Day

September 14, 2021

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Philippians 2:5–11; Psalm 98:1–7; John 12:31–36a*

Last year, while preparing a sermon for the Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday, I came across an explanation for why the cross is not a common symbol in early Christian art. But unfortunately, when I wanted to refer to it later, I couldn't find the reference.

The online *Encyclopedia Britannica* states that Emperor Constantine banned crucifixion in the early fourth century in honor of the cross. But realistic portrayals of Jesus' crucifixion do not begin until the early fifth century.¹ The explanation that I had come across said that crucifixion was such a cruel and horrible punishment that it needed to pass out of living memory before the sign of Jesus' suffering could become part of the devotional life of believers.

In *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*, we read, "The historian Eusebius, in his *Life of Constantine*, tells how the emperor ordered the erection of a complex of buildings in Jerusalem 'on a scale of imperial magnificence,' to set forth as 'an object of attraction and veneration to all, the blessed place of our Savior's resurrection. The overall supervision of the work—on the site where the Church of the Holy Sepulchre now stands—was entrusted to Constantine's mother, the empress Helena."² In the excavations for the buildings, a cross used for crucifixion was found and venerated as the cross of Christ.

Most of us probably know Judeans revolted against Rome in the year 66 of the Christian Era. As a result, Jerusalem was conquered in the year 70, its surviving inhabitants were enslaved, and the city's walls and temple were

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/crucifixion-capital-punishment>, (accessed 5 February 2021).

² *Lesser Feasts and Fasts 2006* (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, 2006), 378.

destroyed.³ The war ended at the famous fortress Masada in the year 73 or 74.⁴

In the year 130, Emperor Hadrian visited the ruins of Jerusalem and decided to build a Roman city. The city was renamed *Colonia Aelia Capitolina*. The Old City of today's Jerusalem preserves the layout of Hadrian's city.⁵ It's not clear whether Hadrian banned Jews and Christians from the city at the same time. There was another revolt in the year 132. Christians returned under Constantine. Muslims took the city in 638 and allowed Judeans to return in the year 650.⁶

Though the cross doesn't seem to have played a role in early Christian art, it was preached by the greatest Christian missionary, Paul—and surely by others. At the end of his Letter to the Galatians, considered the second earliest text in the New Testament,⁷ Paul concluded: “But far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation . . . The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters. Amen.”⁸

Here are the first and last verses of a hymn we sing on Palm Sunday. The text is by Samuel Crossman, a seventeenth-century priest of the Church of England. The tune is by the English organist and composer John Ireland, born in 1879, who died in 1962. He called tune after two words of first-line, *Love Unknown*.⁹

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Jewish%E2%80%93Roman_War, (accessed 14 September 2021).

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege_of_Masada, (accessed 14 September 2021).

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aelia_Capitolina, (accessed 14 September 2021).

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Jerusalem#Roman_Aelia_Capitolina, (accessed 14 September 2021).

⁷ Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 468.

⁸ Galatians 6:14–18.

⁹ Carl P. Daw, Jr., and Raymond F. Glover, *The Hymnal 1982 Companion*, ed. Raymond F. Glover (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1990), Vol. 3 B, Hymn 448, pages 864–59.

My song is love unknown, my Savior's love to me, love to the loveless shown that they might lovely be. O who am I that for my sake my Lord should take frail flesh and die?

Here might I say and sing, no story so divine: never was love, dear King, never was grief like thine. This is my friend in whose sweet praise I all my days could gladly spend.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Copyright © 2021 The Society of the Free Church of St. Mary the Virgin, New York, New York.

All rights reserved.