

Holy Cross Sunday 12 September, Pentecost 16

Num 21: 4b-9	Psalm 78	1 Cor 1: 18-24	John 3: 13-17
--------------	----------	----------------	---------------

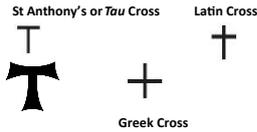
September 14th, Tuesday this week, is a feast day across different Christian denominations to honour the cross of Christ's crucifixion. It is also called the *Exaltation of the Holy Cross*, *Universal Exaltation of the Holy and Life-Giving Cross* or *Holy Cross Day*. The feast offers us an opportunity to focus on the cross other than during the traditional period of the church calendar, Holy Week, specifically Good Friday.

The feast has its roots in late antiquity (3rd to 8th Centuries), a time when the cross became an important part of Christian art and worship. Once a shameful form of execution for criminals, it eventually became the universal symbol of Christ and Christianity, representing Christ's victory over death. This feast celebrates the redemptive transformation of a barbaric instrument of torture into a divine "tree of life" that brings hope to humankind.

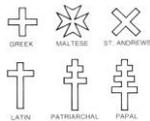
In the Eastern churches the feast dates back to the dedication of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (the purported site of Christ's tomb) in Jerusalem in about 335. The Roman Catholic Church adopted the feast in the 7th Century.

I have enjoyed the opportunity to tool around the internet reading up on this topic, particularly its pre-Christian roots. There is a vast body of evidence that shows that a cross form was used centuries before the birth of Christianity. It is thought to have originated from the ancient Babylonians before its spread to other parts of the world such as the Middle East, North Africa and South America. Evidence suggests that the pre-Christian cross was used as a religious symbol and as an ornament often connected to some form of worship.

There are lots of different forms of cross, the most common pre-Christian crosses being the *tau* cross and the *svastika* or *fylfot* cross. The *tau* cross resembles the Greek capital letter "T" and in its upper-case form has the same appearance a Latin letter "T".



It was apparently adopted by the Christians in Egypt so it is sometimes referred to as the Egyptian cross or a Saint Anthony's or Saint Anthony cross because its associated with Saint Anthony of Egypt.



The two most common forms of crosses present in our tradition are the Greek cross and the Latin cross. Although the cross was used privately as a faith symbol in the early church, the fish was the most common symbol, and it was not until after Constantine made Christianity the official religion of Rome in the 4th Century that the cross was acknowledged as a symbol of Christianity.

For some denominations the feast of Exaltation of the Holy Cross also commemorates the discovery of what is claimed to be the True Cross. Legend holds that the relic was found by St Helena, mother of Constantine, during her pilgrimage to the Holy Land in about 326. The Chapel of St. Helena inside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre to which I referred earlier was built by the Crusaders in her honour, and under that lies the Chapel of the Finding of the True Cross, in which the cross of Christ's crucifixion was reportedly discovered.



Numerous Christian churches were constructed in the Roman Empire during the 4th and 5th Centuries and with imperial financial support, they were decorated with intricate mosaics depicting figures from the scriptures, especially of Christ and the apostles.

The cross that appears in these mosaics is a golden cross adorned with precious round or square gems, a visual representation of the victory over sin and death achieved by Christ's death, called a "crux gemmata," or "gemmed cross."



Artistic representation of the Crucifixion apparently became more common from the 6th Century through the early Middle Ages. Sometimes Christ was depicted on the cross alone, perhaps between the other two criminals crucified with him, but more often, flanked by the figures of Mary and the apostle, Saint John. Here are a few examples, ending with a modern image:



The symbol of the cross today is common, some people would say it has been devalued and lost much of its spiritual meaning as it is a symbol commonly used in jewellery worn by anyone and everyone.

Why did I choose to focus on this?

Because like many others, I make the sign of the cross during worship, I have worn and wear cross like bracelet and am an inactive Associate of the Benedictine order of the Holy Cross, based in West Park, New York.

However, I realised that it was a while since I had focussed intentionally on the symbolism of cross and what it means to me. So, I want to offer you the opportunity to do the same.

We will end with a time of quiet, a chance to reflect, if you would like to, please come up help build cross of rosemary and lavender as an act of remembrance and devotion.





References

Worldatlas.com

Britannica.com

Suscopts.org: Bishop Youssef, Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

Joanne Pierce: theconversation.com