

“An Enduring Legacy”

Liturgical Date: Commemoration of Constantine and Helena (May 21)

Primary Texts: Psalm 68:1-10, Acts 26:12-20, St. John 17:1-11

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The primary texts for today, the Commemoration of Constantine and his mother Helena, are Psalm 68, Acts 26, and St. John 17. The title of the sermon reflects the massive impact of these two people on the Church, “An Enduring Legacy”.

Try to imagine for a moment that you were a Christian living in the first few centuries after Jesus ascended into heaven and the Holy Spirit descended on Pentecost. Life would likely not be easy for you. Of course, you would not have all of the technological gizmos that we have today, modern medical care, nor would you have as many educational and travel opportunities. But I am not really wanting you to focus on those aspects. What I want you to think of is how hard it would be to be a follower of Jesus. There was definitely a cost, there were crosses to be taken up. You see, you would almost certainly be a Christian living under the authority of the most powerful political, military, and economic force in the world at that time-The Roman Empire. The Roman Empire was a pagan empire with many false gods, many of which they adapted from the Greeks. The emperor, the Cesar, had also become to be viewed as divine. You would be a religious minority, and a persecuted one. While the Romans often tolerated local and minority religions, they did require some deference and an offering to the emperor. This Christians could not do as the First Commandment is, *“Thou shalt have no other gods before me.”* Persecution varied with intensity based on who

was the emperor, but it would never be really easy for you. You had to really have faith, cultural Christianity would be of no benefit to you. You would be part of a rebel and countercultural minority.

And when we get to the beginning of the fourth century, 303 AD to be exact, things got really bad for Christians. Emperor Diocletian launched an all-out purge of everything Christian. The Diocletian persecution was severe. Christians were forbidden to work for the Roman government-including serving in the military, pastors were rounded up and killed, churches were burned to the ground, and an effort was made to destroy every Bible manuscript. But as He has all throughout history, God has heard the cries of His people. Deliverance would be coming. And coming in a very dramatic way.

The history of the Roman Empire is intriguing, and there is plenty of political rivalry and backstabbing to learn about. I am just going to give you a quick summary of what was going on at this time to set the scene. The Empire had gotten big, huge in fact. It is stretching all the way from England to India, down into North Africa and the Middle East. In 286 Diocletian had divided the empire into two parts, two administrative zones to help manage the size. He would rule the eastern part and Maximian would rule the western regions. As you can imagine, this was only setting up a later power struggle. After Maximian retired, he was replaced by Constantius Chlorus. But then Maximian, and later his son Maxentius would want to regain power. A showdown for control of the Western Roman Empire was coming between Maxentius and the son of Constantius Chlorus, a young man named Constantine.

In October of 312, Constantine and his army march toward Rome to do battle with Maxentius. But something miraculous would happen right before this

battle. These events were recorded by the early church historian Eusebius who lived at the time and later by another historian named Sozomen. Let me read to you excerpt from Sozomen to tell you what happened...(read from 1297-1298 in Treasury of Daily prayer from CPH).

This is amazing, isn't it? God intervenes with this pagan emperor Constantine and gives him a literal sign from heaven and vision of Jesus and then has the Christians instruct him in the faith. This sounds a lot like what we heard in our Second lesson from Acts 26. There we heard St. Paul recounting his conversion on the road to Damascus in telling this to King Agrippa. Jesus would intercept Saul when he was on his way to kill more Christians. God would then use this man, now known as Paul, to spread Christianity in a powerful way. While the circumstances are a little different for Constantine as he was going into battle, he was no more a Christian that Saul was before Jesus came to him. And like St. Paul, Constantine would leave an enduring legacy on the Church.

Constantine ordered that the shields of all his soldiers be emblazoned with the emblem that he had seen in the vision. It was a cross incorporating the first two letters in the Greek form of Christ, *Christos*. *Chi* which looks like an "X" in English and *Rho* which looks like a "P" in English. No doubt you have seen this, I know you have in the sanctuary. As promised by "go forth and conquer", Constantine and his army soundly defeated Maxentius at the Battle of Milvian Bridge. The victorious and now undisputed emperor entered Rome on October 29, 312 with the *Chi Rho* painted on his helmet. What a dramatic turn for Christians. Once reviled, persecuted, and even killed in the most gruesome ways, now the emperor is one of them. The cross, the symbol of the faith and victory, now marches into Rome itself. Wow!

And Constantine was not finished yet. Along with Licinius, the emperor of the east, the Edict of Milan was issued in 313. This was life-changing for Christians of the Roman Empire. It stated thus, *“From now on every one of these who have a common wish to observe the Christian worship may freely and unconditionally endeavor to observe the same without any annoyance or disquiet.”* The persecution was over! Christians could now freely worship and practice their faith. God had delivered them. As we heard in Psalm 68 this morning, *“God shall arise, his enemies shall be scattered; and those who hate him shall flee before him!” “But the righteous shall be glad; they shall exult before God, they shall be jubilant with joy!” “God settles the solitary in a home; he leads out the prisoners to prosperity.” “In your goodness, O God, you provided for the needy.”* Indeed, a new day had dawned.

Christianity would later become the official religion of the Roman Empire in 380 under Emperor Theodosius. But for now, it was tolerated and could be freely practiced. But Constantine did not stop with only this Edict of Milan. His rule as Emperor was an eventful one, which we don't have time to get into all of it today. But he is known as “Constantine the Great” in history for a reason. He would increase in power and become the sole emperor of the whole empire dissolving the East/West division in 324 and rule until his death in 337. Throughout this time, Constantine proved to be a great friend of the Church.

Christians were now free from persecution. Christian clergy were actually given the same rights as the pagan clergy. Constantine is especially thought highly of in the Eastern Orthodox branch of Christianity, they even consider him on the level of an Apostle. He would establish the great eastern Christian city of Constantinople. This Byzantine center of Christianity would remain even after

Rome had fallen, at least until 1453 when the Muslim Turks took the city and re-named it Istanbul. Constantine would work to bring doctrinal unity and organization to the Church. And this involved dealing with heresy.

In North Africa a bishop named Arius had begun preaching a heresy about Jesus known as “Arianism”. I have spoken to you about this before, but if you need a refresher, essentially Arius was teaching that that Jesus was not fully God. He said that he was “godlike”, but was a creation of, a different substance than the Father. Essentially, he is denying the Trinity. His ideas gained a following, especially in the East. Emperor Constantine called a great Church Council in 325 to decide the issue. The bishops met in Nicaea. Constantine threw his support behind those advocating for orthodox Trinitarian doctrine. He advocated for what is called in theology *homoousios*, that Jesus and the Father, although different “persons” of the Trinity have the same substance, they are both fully God. We heard Jesus say as much in our Gospel text for today from St. John 17:11 as Jesus prayed for His Disciples, *“Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one, as we are.”* The bishops drafted a wonderful summary of the Christian faith, the first draft of what we will confess after the sermon-the Nicene Creed. This Creed clearly confesses the doctrine of the Trinity, one God in three persons. We will confess that Jesus is, *“begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father.”*

And we could go into more, but I think with these highlights you see that Constantine left an enduring legacy on the Church. He was not only used by God to bring religious toleration to Christians, but helped guide the expansion of Christianity, and defended the teachings of the Holy Scripture in refuting heresy.

But this day is not only a commemoration of Constantine, but his mother Helena as well. With Mothers Day just being last week, it is a good time to think about the bond between Helena and her son Constantine. It was a strong and loving relationship. Of course, they had their issues as every mother and son does. One time Helena told her son that he really needed to be mature and grow up. To which he responded, “Well you did name me “constant-teen”. (That is a joke.) Helena became a Christian after her son, but would be very devout in her faith. Many historians see her as guiding and influencing Constantine in his decisions related to Christianity.

There is debate about the exact year of her birth, some say late 240s, others 255. Helena was ethnically Greek, Constantine’s father was ethnically Latin. Thus, Constantine would be uniquely positioned to bridge both the Latin West and Greek Eastern parts of the Roman Empire. When he became emperor, Constantine gave Helena the title *Augusta* and she wielded great influence, and of course had many resources at her disposal.

Of particular interest to Helena was the history of Christianity and the building of churches. Her extremely valuable work in these areas is her great legacy. With the influence of his mother, Constantine would order the construction of the original St. Peter’s church in Rome. Relics were collected and documents preserved about Jesus and the Apostles.

And a fascinating thing about Helena is that she undertook a pilgrimage to the Holy Land around Jerusalem. Using the Biblical texts and historical records she set out to identify places from the life and ministry of Jesus. It is also believed by many that she discovered the actual cross on which Jesus was crucified and the nails that pierced His flesh. This is why Helena is often depicted with the cross in

artwork. She identified the location (of course some of the locations are disputed) of the burning bush, Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, the place of Jesus' burial, and the Ascension at the Mount of Olives. At her direction churches were built at the locations and Christians still worship there to this very day. Additionally, Helena was very generous in the giving of alms to the poor throughout the region.

It is obvious that the impact of Helena and her son Constantine on the history of the world is important. However, most importantly we look to their impact on how the Gospel could be spread more, openly, freely, and thus to more people. God grabbed a hold of St. Paul on the Road to Damascus and the world would never be the same. He also grabbed a hold of Constantine on the road to Rome by showing Himself to this young ruler. The world would never be the same. As it is for us, we are never the same once we encounter the crucified and risen Jesus.

Christ is Risen!

He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Amen.