

Sermon: Helena's story and the importance of place

Silvia Purdie, 18 June 2017

I have a story for you this morning. It is a true story even.

My story begins in the year 270, more or less, in a small coastal town near Istanbul. A young man from Kosovo, an up and coming officer in the Roman army, got posted there, and he fell in love with a local barmaid. His name was Flavius Constantius. Her name was Helena. They married and had a son.

Constantius was ambitious. He worked his way up through the ranks of the Roman army, getting embroiled in military strategy and politics at the highest level. In 289 Constantius ditched Helena in order to marry the Emperor's daughter, and get the job of Caesar by doing so. Helena lived for some years in Diocletia's palace in Cosovo, while her son Constantine set about doing as his father had done, moving his way up through the ranks of the Roman army. His father became Emperor in 305 but died only one year later, appointing his son as his heir. So in 306 Constantine became emperor. But in those days there were various different emperors and caesars, all very complicated, splits between east and west. It took him another 20 years but Constantine eventually defeated all the rest of them and became emperor of a united Roman Empire.

Constantine could have just been one in a long line of Roman emperors – it's a long line full of political intrigue, sex, violence, betrayal, you name it. What made Constantine so significant to us is that he became a Christian. This event was one of the single biggest events in Christian history. You have to remember that before Constantine Christianity was illegal. Christians were executed as traitors to the empire because they would not worship the Emperor. Church buildings were banned, and churches had to meet secretly in each others homes. Despite vicious and sustained attack on the Christian faith more and more people were becoming Christians. From tiny beginnings in the 1st century, by the year 300 a significant proportion of people were Christians, maybe 10%. This was a phenomenal growth rate in 200 years.

I wish I knew how Helena became a Christian. She was living in royal court at a time when Roman leadership was rabidly anti Christian. Diocletia launched a terrible attack on the church in the late 3rd century. She would have seen Christians dying for their faith. Maybe one of her servants was a Christian, who knows. What we do know is that by the time her son rose to power, Helena already had a deep, considered and passionate faith in Jesus Christ.

And Constantine honoured his mother, and listened to her. When he came sole Emperor Augustus in 325 he gave her the title of Augusta, Empress. As sole Emperor he finally had control over the East, including Palestine, and he sent his mother there in 326. She was 77 years old. She went with a bottomless supply of cash and manpower. She went to liberate the land of Christ from pagan worship. At 77 years old!

One thing she really really wanted to do in Palestine was to find the actual cross of Jesus. Constantine had had a vision of the cross in the sky and he attributed his greatest military victory to God's help because he carried the sign of the cross with him. So he was also keen to find the actual cross.

I just think this is a fascinating story: can you imagine it? A feisty but very elderly lady arrives in Palestine and starts ordering the tearing down of pagan temples, which were the very symbols of the roman empire. Every other Emperor had wanted to be worshiped, and suddenly now here is an Emperor sending his mother to encourage the worship of Jesus.

Helena astonished people wherever she went. She was kind and godly. She gave money and clothes to the poor. She met with local Christians. She found out from them where the events in the gospels actually happened. Everywhere she went she commissioned churches to be built.

In Israel I visited several places where there is still preserved the Byzantine church that was built in the early 4th century. At the well where Jesus met the Samaritan woman, the house where Jesus grew up, the house where Mary grew up, the cave where Jesus was born, and many many more. Helena personally ordered and funded anything up to 80 churches to be built in Palestine.

Mostly these were small round structures, built into the rock underground, or with a dome above ground. Helena spared no expense, importing the best mosaic artists from Europe to lay brilliant coloured flooring and Biblical scenes on the walls. These Byzantine churches had large baptism pools, access to water and sunlight. The one in Nazareth we visited had a carefully designed hole in the roof through which light shone down onto the altar.

And Helena worked especially at her goal to find the true cross of Christ. Eventually she discovered that the crucifixion site had been deliberately obscured by the emperor Hadrian, who'd built a sexy temple to Aphrodite on top of it in an attempt to be as crude and insulting to the Christians as possible. So she knocked that down. And she got her team digging underneath it, and sure enough they found a tomb. And sure enough they found bits of wood and nails from actual crosses. And a dying woman was miraculously healed by touching one of the wooden cross beams, which was all the evidence Helena needed. After 2 years in Palestine Helena returned home to her son, triumphantly taking with her part of the true cross. Most of it she left behind in Jerusalem with the bishop there.

The church that she commissioned incorporating the sites of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus was enormous. It was vast. The current Church of the Holy Sepulcher is only about a third the size of Helena's.

She lived on a couple more years in her palace in Istanbul, by then named Constantinople by her son, dying with him at her side aged 80.

So there's my story. Church history often doesn't sound that interesting, but when we get to know the people we find that they were real people, like us. And it is brilliant when we discover interesting people doing extraordinary things and we see how they changed the world. This woman, Helena, must have been quite a character: the Turkish barmaid who became Empress of the world! There she was, in midst of the cut-throat politics of empire, where men longed to be worshiped, where anyone who was a threat was executed, choosing to following Jesus? And there she was, as a very old lady, choosing to leave her home of utter comfort and privilege to travel the vast distance to Israel ... can you picture her ordering the destruction of glamorous temples, surely in the face of huge opposition? Can you imagine the Empress of the Rome going into people's homes, giving them gifts, meeting with church leaders and negotiating where to build churches. What kind of old lady does that??

It fascinates me that the early church actually cared so much about actual places, facts on the ground. In contrast, the other religions of the world are more esoteric: The Koran is mostly about dreams and visions. Ancient religions have gods and goddesses in mythic battles & dramas in heavenly realms. The Eastern religions are moral teachings and personal ancestor worship. The Christian faith, uniquely, has always claimed to be based on actual historical events, real people in real places in real time. The places matter. Our gospels place the teachings and healings and arguments in physical spaces – our reading today refers to going into a house. Why does it matter where?

It mattered to Empress Helena when she went to Israel in 326 to find the historical reality of the sites where gospel events occurred. And she didn't make these up; when she got there she found local people who knew the location of what was recorded in the Gospels. Local Christians knew where Jesus had been born, where he lived and where he died. These were not disputed or mythical, they were common knowledge. And I love the way that Helena cared for each of the places she found. she preserved them. The tangible reality was important to her. And she left things intact; she didn't steal things pack them up and ship them back to Europe as many later did!

Place was important. I wonder what places are important to you. What places hold spiritual story for you? Where have you met with God? How have you preserved those memories? We'll finish our service today with a classic English hymn: Jerusalem. This powerful poem speaks about the importance of place – the places of England and the spiritual significance of the places of Israel.

Finally, a word about power. The events I have described in my story this morning marked a dramatic change: the Church of Jesus Christ went, within just a few decades, from being a persecuted minority to being the official religion of empire. From being banned, illegal and hunted the church gained power, wealth and status. In our time this process is being reversed. The church in much of the world is losing its power, wealth and status and increasingly Christians are being persecuted, attacked or ignored.

Some would say that power wealth and status were never very good for us in the first place. The Christian church has proved to be as oppressive an institution as any other, when it has a power wealth and status. But it's not easy for us to imagine being the church without these things, which Empress Helena and her son Constantine gifted to the church in the early 4th century.

Can we here in Cashmere survive as a church without wealth and status? We see ourselves as the hub of the wider community, but what if we are more and more ignored, rejected or even opposed by the community around us?

I hope you enjoyed my story this morning and I hope you continue to ponder some of the issues it raises. I'd like to close in prayer:

Loving Lord, We give you thanks that you walked this earth, sharing human history, and that you continue to work in the world.

We give you thanks for the heroes and heroines of our faith. May we continue their story. Lord Jesus Christ, inspire again your church throughout the world. Raise up women and men of faith and courage and fill us with your Spirit that we might in our time build up your church to give glory to you and not to ourselves. Amen.