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His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros of America - Homily for the Vespers of Ss. Constantine & Helen



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May 20, 2020

Saints Constantine & Helen Greek Orthodox Church, Brooklyn, New York

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Χριστὸς Ἀνέστη! [and in response: Ἀληθῶς Ἀνέστη!]

Christ is Risen! [and in response: Truly He is Risen!]

This evening we gather again in this beloved Cathedral, to celebrate your patrons, the great Constantine and his pious mother, Helen, whose lives are so central to

the history of our Church. We remember them as Equals-to-the-Apostles – Ἰσαπόστολοι – whose manifold gifts to the Church speak powerfully across the centuries.

This evening though, I wish to speak mainly of Saint Helen, the mother of the man who changed the course of our Church's history. Although she was the mother of Constantine, she was only the consort of his father, Constantius. The politics around their marriage were complicated, and involved a great persecutor of Christians, the Emperor Diocletian.

Yet, in the midst of the geopolitics of the time and the court intrigue, she became the architect and artist of what “pilgrimage” means for all Christians today. Her influence extends deep into Holy Week, where we live a community pilgrimage to Jerusalem every year. For in Holy Week, we journey through song and Scripture, through processions and sacred actions, to join the Lord, in order to die with Him, so that we may rise with Him.

As we chant every evening of Palm Sunday in the Matins of Holy Monday:

Συμπορευθῶμεν αὐτῷ, καὶ συσταυρωθῶμεν, καὶ νεκρωθῶμεν δι' αὐτόν, ἵνα καὶ συζήσωμεν αὐτῷ....

Let us go forth with Him, and be crucified with Him, undergoing death through Him, that we may live with Him....[\[*\]](#)

Yes, it is Saint Helen who provides to us the entire panoply of what pilgrimage means for a Christian. For she is the one who made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem when it was yet known as Aelia Capitolina, the Roman City built on top of the ruins of Jerusalem, leveled by Titus in 70 AD. In fact, what we call today the “Wailing” or “Western Wall” was part of the outer support walls of Temple Mount, left by Titus to bear witness to the size of the stones that had been crushed into rubble.

Saint Helen's fierce love for the Lord Jesus Christ compelled her to make the voyage to the Holy Land and restore what had disappeared underneath Roman architecture and engineering for hundreds of years. And her loving son, Saint Constantine, granted her the most exalted title of Augusta Imperatrix – meaning she had all the rank and privilege of the Emperor himself – and he gave her unlimited resources to re-discover the Holy Sites of our Lord's life and ministry – τούς Ἁγίους Τόπους.

So many of the stories of what she built and discovered are well known, from

finding the Holy and Precious Cross to the construction of the Church over the Holy Cave of the Lord's Nativity.

But what I want to stress to all of us, is that the memory of the Christian community that she found in the Holy Land – even after hundreds of years of Roman occupation and persecution – was intact. In fact, Christians and Jews had been forcibly expelled from the the old Jerusalem, and only on pain of death entered its sacred precinct. Despite their exile, and despite the Roman replacing and refashioning of Jerusalem, the Faithful never forgot exactly where the Sacred Sites were.

This is something for us to keep very close to our hearts and minds during these difficult days we face. I have sensed much anxiety and worry – both among the clergy and the laity – that we are going to lose precious aspects of our Faith as we struggle to reopen our churches in this time of pandemic.

I counsel all to look to Saint Helen; to pray to Saint Helen, and be inspired by Saint Helen. She arrived in Palestine with every resource imaginable to recover the Holy Places, but it was the memory in the hearts and minds of the Faithful, that made the recovery possible.

And so it shall be with us. We shall never forget our traditions, even if we have to alter some things for a little while to protect ourselves and our communities. The Christians of the Holy Land preserved the memory of where the Lord lived, died, and rose again for hundreds of years.

Believe me, my brothers and sisters, we can do as much for the months that we will be challenged, especially when we are not suffering under persecution, but protecting the lives of our families and neighbors.

Let us not be afraid! Through the mighty prayers of Saint Helen and Saint Constantine, we will more than overcome in Christ, our God and Saviour, Who is risen from the dead!

Χριστὸς Ἀνέστη! [Ἀληθῶς Ἀνέστη!]

[\[*\]](#) *Sticheron Idiomelon* of the Matins of Holy Monday.

Source