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The Feast of the Exaltation (or Elevation) of the Cross, coming so soon after the beginning of the Church year on September 1st, reminds us that during the whole year the cross will be central to our lives as Christians.

The story of the feast is familiar to most of us. We admire the persistence of Saint Helen, mother of Emperor Constantine, who despite her age traveled through the Holy Land and established churches in places that had special meaning in the life of Christ. One of the most important of these places is Golgotha, outside the city walls of Jerusalem. There Helen had workers dig, and there they discovered the True Cross. This was the place where she built the best-known of the churches she established, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher.

The icon of the feast shows the church, standing in the midst of the city of Jerusalem. The Cross, as we would expect, is very prominent in the icon, and near it stand St. Helen and Emperor Constantine, both with crowns. The Bishop of Jerusalem, Saint Makarios, is shown elevating the Cross for believers to venerate. These figures are joined by a group that includes bishops and priests, monastics, and people who live in the city.

A well-known verse about the cross comes from I Corinthians: "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1:18). Saint Paul encourages us here to do two things. First, we can confidently hold to our faith in spite of ridicule and mockery; it is a given that we will face these things because those who don't believe or don't understand the faith will consider it "foolishness." If we know that other believers have faced skepticism before us, we can be prepared for it and not be shaken. Paul adds power to his words by quoting God's own promise, which assures us that He will "destroy the wisdom of the wise" (Isaiah 29:14).

The second thing Paul encourages is patience. Verse 18 refers to "us who are being saved." This calls us to remember that our salvation takes place over the whole time of our life. We can expect that things may not go well for us in this world, because the world is fallen and it's a long journey to the Kingdom. But if we are patient, we will know that we are "being saved" through the course of our life so long as we earnestly strive to be what God wants us to be.

Kontakion - Tone 4

As You were voluntarily raised upon the cross for our sake,
Grant mercy to those who are called by Your Name, O Christ God;
Make all Orthodox Christians glad by Your power,
Granting them victories over their adversaries,
By bestowing on them the Invincible trophy, Your weapon of Peace.

In this same passage, Paul expresses in four words the life work of a Christian: "We preach Christ crucified" (1:23a). We believe it and we also proclaim it. If we meet derision, we can lean on the words of the Troparion for the feast. We know that God will, "by the power of the cross, preserve [His] habitation."