

21ST MAY 2022 – ST HELENA

[PATRONAL FESTIVAL OF ST HELEN'S, HEMSWORTH]

NICHOLAS TURNER (CANON THEOLOGIAN OF THE DIOCESE OF ST HELENA)

That Helen was the first wife of Constantius, who then divorced her for political reasons when he rose to become Emperor of Rome, is a matter of acknowledged history. That she was the daughter of Coel of Colchester, Prince of the Britons, is one of the happier historical fictions of our island story. It is undoubtedly the reason for the many church dedications to St Helen in the later kingdom of York, where her son, Constantine I, had been declared Emperor in the year 306.

These church dedications, most probably early medieval, are in many cases connected to the number of Holy Wells dedicated to St Helen. And many of these do appear to be Romano-British in origin; in other words, before the Anglo-Saxon period, whose favourite saints were quite different.

This ancient British connection, albeit manufactured, has enough substance through the person of her son, to make it one of the oldest and most interesting of church dedications. If the roots here in Hemsworth do indeed go back to the 4th empress, (however piously inventive those may have been) I don't know whether it is encouraging or discouraging to recognise that Christianity, in this county, disappeared completely for some two centuries before being restored once more, from the 7th onwards.

So whether she was British (highly unlikely) or from Bithynia, now northern Turkey (most probably), Helen was given the title *Augusta Imperatrix* in the year 325. What is most striking, in all the accounts after that, is not only her extraordinary energy – especially her journey to the Holy Land – but her genuine humility. For all the allowances we must make for hagiography and pious exaggeration, her Christian faith, even as an empress, was unquestionably genuine and remarkably humble.

It is, I think, a pity that when she is portrayed, always of course with the Cross and wearing the imperial crown, that she is not shown as a properly old woman. Strong, probably robust and in remarkably good health; with a proven capacity for organisation and command; imperial but not proud nor pompous. But unquestionably elderly. Not unlike our own Queen over the past two decades.

In Helen, we celebrate humble faith. Let me commend to you, then, the Diocese of St Helena, the smallest in the Anglican Communion, comprising

some 7000 people, on the Islands of St Helena and Ascension, 700 miles apart in the South Atlantic Ocean.

By history, culture, language and passports, they are entirely British, but the diocese is part of the Church of Southern Africa (from the founding of that province back in 1870). Which does mean that there are no formal links to the Church of England, though the connections are of course strong.

My own involvement, since we served on Ascension Island, has been as Canon Theologian to the little diocese. Every now and then Bishop Dale zooms me with a problem that needs a carefully worded traditionalist response; often about changes to marriage law and canons, either from the UK government or the South African church, both of which are thousands of miles away. Isolated as they are, they simply do not have the breadth of resources.

But they do know why it matters to hold to the tradition. Visitors patronisingly call the Island and its churches old-fashioned, 'England in the 1980s'. It's not that at all. It is a long-held awareness that isolation demands a special faithfulness to the tradition received. In this country, we can experiment as much as we like, we can outdo each other in liberal inclusiveness; because if it all goes wrong, or proves a complete disaster, there will always be someone to save us and pull us out of the fire, or there'll be another church to go to.

But when you are on a tiny Island, with just one plane a week connecting you to the outside world, there is no one to save you if you make a mess of things. That sense of responsibility, to keep to the tradition received, is very strong.

It is not for us to change nor modify the Sacraments of the Church. We have been entrusted with these precious gifts by the Lord himself, and not just for ourselves but for others. I don't mean to speak *against* liberal experiments; but I do want to re-emphasise, in a liberal national church, how important it is that some at least hold firm to that with which we have been entrusted.

This treasure that we hold in earthen vessels is not for us to play with as we wish, but to pass on undamaged to the next generation. I shall always remain grateful to that tiny diocese in the South Atlantic that has been, and still is, a fine example of that precious vocation.