**Lent Course 2024**

*Perpetua: Witnessing in Death*

Welcome to Session 2 of our Lent Course, looking at 5 individuals from the early centuries of Christianity, and through them telling the story of the early Church and learning lessons for our life as followers of the same Lord Jesus today. Last week you may remember we looked at one of the earliest Christian writings outside of the New Testament, and reflected on how the early Christians tried – and sometimes failed – to live out the Gospel call to establish communities of mutual love and service across social divides.

This week, we’re going to fast-forward a hundred years to a very specific date: the 7th May, 203 AD. We’re in the city of Carthage, one of the major Roman cities in North Africa, in modern-day Tunisia, and the second-largest city in the Western Empire, after Rome itself. Carthage has become home to a large community of Christians, and would go on to produce a number of key theologians: Tertullian, who was active around this time; Cyprian, who we’ll be looking at next week; and Augustine spent much of his early years there, and later became bishop of Hippo to the west. So Carthage was an important early centre of Christianity – but that didn’t prevent the Christians there from undergoing waves of persecution.

On the 7th May, 203 AD, the Proconsul, the governor of the province, a man named Hilarianus, put on a day of games and spectacles in the city’s amphitheatre to celebrate the birthday of the Emperor’s son. During the day, two young women, called Perpetua and Felicity – one from an aristocratic family, one a servant-girl, both no more than their early 20s – were led out into the arena, condemned to face the brutal attacks of wild beasts. Events like this were major sources of entertainment for the general population, a festival day-out for all the family, and it was how many a condemned criminal was despatched. The charge laid against these two young women: they were Christians. What led them to this moment?

**Persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire**

Even though we live in an increasingly secularised country, Christianity is still the official, established religion, churches remain at the heart of many communities in towns and cities across the nation, and being a member of the clergy is still (to some extent) seen as a respectable profession. And so it is hard for us to fully appreciate what it must be like to live in a place where simply identifying as a Christian carried the death penalty. Of course, this is the reality for many people around the world today: in places like North Korea, you can be sent to a labour camp simply for being in possession of a Bible, and in places like northern India or northern Nigeria, Christians regularly face attack and persecution from militant groups.

Why did Christians face persecution in the Roman Empire? Christians were viewed with a high degree of suspicion – as I said last week, for some the Christians were a deeply unsettling presence. Churches met in secret, usually in someone’s house or apartment, and these secret meetings aroused a lot of suspicion. They were believed to get up to all sorts of sinister things. For example, they were often accused of cannibalism, because there were rumours that Christians ate Jesus’ body and drank his blood. The equal respect given to women and slaves in their gatherings, which we thought a little about last week, was seen as dangerously overturning established social hierarchies. If slaves were equal to masters, and women to men, this was seen as potentially overturning the whole social order. Women especially were supposed to marry and produce legitimate heirs; but the Church threatened all that by encouraging and supporting women in an alternative vocation, of remaining single and devoting their lives to the service of Christ.

But perhaps most significant was the Christians’ refusal to worship any other god. They were in fact known as atheists for their rejection of the traditional gods. In our highly individualistic world, it can be hard to fully understand why this was such a problem. Does it really matter what religion the family down the road are pursuing? Well for ordinary Romans, there was huge danger if elements of the community were not partaking of the communal acts of worship. The Christians’ refusal to participate, it was believed, alienated the favour of the gods, and the Christians were therefore the cause of any natural disaster that befell them. Tertullian complained that ‘If the Tiber rises to the mountains, if the Nile fails to rise over the fields, if the heavens are inactive, if the earth is overactive, if famine, if plague, at once ‘the Christians to the lions!’ is cried out’ (Apol. 40.1). The Christians were seen as a corrupting influence, destroying any act of united piety by their refusal to join in, and therefore threatening the unpredictable wrath of the gods.

There’s a fascinating letter from Pliny the Younger, when Governor of the Roman Province of Bithynia and Pontus in northern Turkey, writing to the Emperor Trajan in around 110 AD, asking for advice on what to do with the Christians, and outlining his steps so far. He’s aware that there’s something illegal about being a Christian, but he’s not had much experience with them, so he’s not really sure what he’s supposed to do with them. He’s already executed some of them who persistently repeated that they were Christians under interrogation, because, in his mind, such ‘stubbornness and unshakeable obstinacy ought not to go unpunished.’ Others who had been accused, but made sacrifices to the gods and reviled the name of Christ, he let go, on the understanding that ‘no genuine Christian would be induced’ to do such things. The letter illustrates just how troubled people could be by the presence of the Christians. Pliny even references an anonymous pamphlet that had been circulating listing the names of alleged Christians. You can imagine the climate of fear and suspicion in which Christians lived in the first centuries. Imagine your name being on a list of people circulating around Eaton who were seen as a threat to the local community.

The policies that Pliny and the Emperor set out in their exchange, became the established practice up until the year 250, when the persecution of Christians was severely ramped up, and we’ll be looking at that next week. The policy that they set up in their exchange was that the Roman authorities were not too interested in going after you. There were no door-to-door searches trying to snuff out the Christians. But if you were reported to the authorities as a Christian, you would likely be arrested. If you denied that you were a Christian, and performed a sacrifice to the Roman gods and made offerings to the statue of the Emperor, then you could walk free. As simple as that. And if you refused, you were condemned to death, often along with other serious criminals to face beasts in the amphitheatre. Many Christians, as we’ll see more of next week, quite understandably did what they were asked. It may not have been very heroic, but it can be hard to be heroic when you have children or elderly parents to take care of.

**Perpetua and Felicity**

So this is the background behind this moment on the 7th May 203 AD, when these two young Christian women are led to their deaths into the amphitheatre. The proconsul Hilarianus was simply following the protocol established by the Emperor Trajan in his letters with Pliny. Perpetua’s story is told in a short account called the *Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicity*. Martyrdom stories became very popular amongst early Christians, particularly after persecution ended in the following century. Some were very elaborately told to encourage similar levels of courageous devotion to Christ in a more comfortable age. The *Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicity* was one of the earliest of these accounts. And even more excitingly, the first half of the account appears to be Perpetua’s own prison diary, her own record of her experiences leading up to the day before the games. If it is her own diary, then it makes it the earliest piece of writing by a Christian woman. And her diary contains themes that you would expect from a Roman woman: we constantly see her struggling against the expectations that she should be submissive to the men around her, not least her non-Christian father, who features prominently in the narrative; and she is also a mother with a newborn baby (her husband mysteriously never appears), and her deep concern for her young child leads to some of the most emotionally poignant passages in her diary.

After her diary ends, another unknown writer takes over to tell the story of her final day, and that same writer provides an introduction to the diary to set the scene. So what was her story? We begin with the editor introducing us to five young people preparing for baptism, who have all been arrested: three men Revocatus, Saturninus and Secundulus (they’ll later be joined by their catechist Saturus), and two women, Felicity, who was a slave along with Revocatus, and Vibia Perpetua, the 22-year-old daughter of a noble family. Perpetua is described by the introduction as ‘well-educated and respectably married.’ As I’ve said, she has recently given birth to a son. We know nothing about the circumstances of their arrest – we can only presume that someone has reported them as Christians to the authorities. Her diary begins under house arrest before she’s taken to prison.

The first thing she records is her father desperately pleading with her to deny her Christian faith so she’ll be let off the charges, the first of several emotive exchanges with her father. It’s an easy thing to do, just say you’re not a Christian, and you’ll go free. In response to him, she points to a vase, and says that just as the vase can only be called what it is, a vase, so she can only be called what she is, a Christian. Her Christian identity is her fundamental identity – it’s what she’s called, like a vase is called a vase, so it’s not something she can deny. Her father leaves in a rage, and doesn’t come to see her again for a number of days. In the meantime, she and her friends are baptised, despite everything still determining to make that public commitment to Christ. Soon after, they’re taken to prison.

Their initial quarters seem to have been quite unpleasant, at least to someone like Perpetua used to the comforts of upper-class life. ‘I was terrified,’ she writes, ‘because I had never experienced such darkness before.’ The jail was crowded, and the guards corrupt; but most of all, she was tormented with worry about her baby boy. Today, of course, we’re used to there being a minimum standard of care in prisons; but there was nothing of that sort in the Roman world. To survive, they relied on the visits of two deacons from the church, who were in turn putting themselves at risk of arrest by identifying in this way with the imprisoned Christians. Their truly sacrificial service gives a very different perspective to the verse in Hebrews, 13:3, ‘Remember those who are in prison as though you were in prison with them.’ And these deacons didn’t just bring food; they went further and bribed the guards to move Perpetua and her friends to a better part of the prison. They also brought Perpetua’s baby, and she was able to nurse him in the prison for a few days, which was a cause of great comfort for her.

During this time, she asks God for a vision to know what the future held. And she gets a vision, which she describes in great detail. In her vision she sees a ladder going up to heaven, guarded at the bottom by a huge dragon. And all the way up the ladder are all sorts of sharp weapons, swords, spears and the like. Her teacher Saturus, who had already been arrested, climbs the ladder first, and from the top urges Perpetua to follow. She confidently responds, ‘In the name of Jesus Christ, it will not harm me’, and she steps on the dragon’s head and climbs up the ladder. When she awoke she understood her dream to mean that she would face martyrdom, but she would prevail and reach heaven.

A few days’ later they’re suddenly bundled off for trial. It’s a key moment in the narrative, so I’ll read it through, and then take a moment to discuss among yourselves what strikes you from this account?

*Read and discussion.*

* Concern for father and child, the real distress caused by choosing Christ over family.
* Her definitive ‘I am a Christian.’ In Latin, the phrase is ‘Christianus sum’, and it became almost a catchphrase by martyrs, confidently declaring their new identity. They are Christians, a fact that cannot be denied, and an identity that sets them apart from the wider culture. To see others, whether in history or in many places today, boldly asserting their Christian identity when faced with terrible persecution, is a huge challenge to us, who can be so often shy about speaking of our faith, though the cost for us is so much less.
* Her joy: Astonishingly, she records, ‘We went back to the prison full of joy.’ Full of joy? Fearlessness we can just about understand, but joy? It’s such a different mindset from our own. But there was such a clear sense, which came through in her vision also, that the goal was heaven, that the battle they faced was seen not as being with the Romans, but with the devil, who wanted to turn them from the path. By holding fast to their Christian faith, despite everything, that for them was their victory. Indeed, on her final night, she has another vision, in which she is in the arena facing not the beasts, but an ugly Egyptian, who she defeats in hand-to-hand combat. When she wakes up, she writes ‘I realised I would not have to fight against the beasts, but against the devil, and I knew that victory was mine.’ Again, it puts a very different complexion on Paul’s famous saying, ‘to live is Christ, to die is gain.’ She really believed that. She saw this life as of no value other than in serving Christ – her real desire and longing was to be with Christ in heaven.

With that vision of the ‘ugly Egyptian’ her diary ends, and the story is completed by an anonymous editor, who describes what happened the following day. One of the others, Secundulus, dies in prison, presumably from the poor conditions. Felicity, the other woman, is herself eight months pregnant. There was a Roman law making it illegal to execute pregnant women, and so Felicity began to get worried that she would be separated from her companions, and taken to the beasts on her own at a later date. It just goes to show the strength of bonds between Christians, even of different social ranks, that she did not want to be separated from them. So they all pray for the baby to come early, and the prayer is answered. She gives birth prematurely to a baby girl, who she gives to a member of the church to raise as her own.

Then the day of the games arrives. The amphitheatre in Carthage could seat up to 30,000 people, and would no doubt have been full for an occasion such as this. On the handout is the account of their entrance into the amphitheatre – it’s of course written by someone who was a huge fan of Perpetua and her companions, so it’s a very glowing account of their conduct. *Read* What do you make of it, and particularly why do you think they refused to wear the costumes?

*Discussion*

* Again we see not just their fearlessness, but their joy. This sort of reaction was so confusing and jarring to those looking on. This was not how condemned criminals were supposed to behave. They were supposed to be quaking with fear at what was awaiting them, a fear the audience took delight in as part of the just punishment for their crimes. Their subversion of what was supposed to happen aroused all sorts of different responses, from intrigue as to how they could be so different, to disgust at this threat to the Roman way of doing things.
* Perpetua’s bold refusal to wear costumes again goes back to her ‘I am a Christian’ declaration. It was common for condemned criminals to put on costumes to act out myths in the arena, something designed to be humiliating to those condemned to die. For Perpetua, however, they are in the arena as Christians, and refuse anything that will obscure their identity. She is a Christian, and she wants to be seen as such – not as a pagan priestess.

Then the games begin. The men are attacked first by a leopard and a bear. Then it’s the turn of the two women, Perpetua and Felicity. The animal led out for them is a cow who’d recently given birth, and so particularly enraged to be separated from her calf. This was not an animal normally used in the games, but was chosen deliberately and cruelly to mock the two young mothers. They’re initially stripped naked, but it seems the audience had some limits, and they shouted out their complaints, at which point they were dressed again. When Perpetua gets tossed by the cow, she scrambles to find her hairpin so her hair wouldn’t be dishevelled. It was the custom for women in mourning to have their hair down, but Perpetua didn’t want to look like a woman in mourning in what was for her ‘the hour of her glory’. Then Felicity gets charged by the cow, and Perpetua goes to help her up: and it’s worth just remembering that Felicity is a slave, and Perpetua a noblewoman. But their common Christian identity overrides all social hierarchies. They are Christians first and foremost. They stand together and support each other as equals, which would have been utterly shocking to those looking on. They demonstrate a level of solidarity not seen in any other contemporary religious groups, relating to each other as family members who stand by each other’s sides, whatever their respective places in wider society.

This continues right to the end. When the beasts don’t finish them off, the crowd calls for their execution with the sword. So the group are all brought back in. They share with one another the kiss of peace – you may remember Paul, several times in his letters, urges the Christians he’s writing to, to greet one another with a kiss of peace. This seemed to have been a ritual Christians did whenever they met together, a ritual that bonded them together as a family. And here in front of 30,000 spectators, this group of men and women, slaves and free, kissed each other, publicly witnessing to their common bond, to their shared identity as Christians that transcends all other identities, an identity that joins them together as one. And with that, they are each put to death with the sword.

And so ends the story of Perpetua and her friends. The editor finishes by saying that he’s put the account together for the edification of the Church. He wants others to see the courageous faith of Perpetua and her companions, their fearlessness in the face of death and their joyful confidence in the hope of glory, so that later generations of Christians may be inspired to follow their example.

And their courageous identification with Christ, even to the point of death, did have a powerful impact on many of those who were watching. Perpetua’s contemporary Tertullian famously wrote that the ‘blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church’ – that is that the public execution of Christians for their faith only served to grow the church. The only possible example we have of someone converted through Perpetua’s witness is the centurion in charge of the prison, a man named Pudens. Perpetua writes that he began to be more lenient with them, letting many friends in to see them, because, she says, he saw the ‘great power’ at work in them. Then, on the day of the games, just before he dies, Saturus the catechist gives Pudens a ring dipped in his blood, as a reminder to him of that day. Who knows, perhaps Pudens himself then became a Christian. Almost certainly others would have done. There were lots of occasions like this when Christians were martyred, but this one seems to have been especially memorable, as the events were written down and passed on from generation to generation. It’s highly likely that many of those watching that day, and who saw their courageous faith, their commitment to Christ that nothing could shake, the depth of their solidarity with one another across social divides, and their fearlessness – nay, joy – in the hope of being with Christ, was like something ordinary Romans had never seen before.

How different the Church would be today if we lived with a clear, distinctive identity and hope in Christ, such that others are intrigued to find out what makes us so different. If we lived as Christians first and foremost, if our truest joy was to be found with Christ, if our hope was in his victory, and if the bonds between us, whatever our backgrounds, were anywhere near as deep and unshakeable as it was with Perpetua and her companions. How could the Church be more like this today? To help us think about what this could all look like for us, take a look as we close at the questions for discussion.

Questions:

1. What lessons do you learn from the story of Perpetua and Felicity?
2. Can you think of other examples, from history or your own experience, of a distinctive Christian life having an impact on others?
3. How can we grow in courage to fearlessly identify ourselves with Christ?

Prayer: ‘I am a Christian’. Our Heavenly Father, we thank you for the courageous faith and witness of your servants Perpetua, Felicity and their companions. May we follow their example, and so identify ourselves as belonging to Christ and his people, that our lives may witness to the deep longing we have for him and to our joyful confidence in his victory. For the glory of his name we pray, Amen.