**Lent Course 2024**

*Cyprian of Carthage: Showing Grace*

Welcome to the third session of our Lent Course, looking at 5 early Christians and how they were transformed by the Gospel. We’re moving on 50 years this week to the middle of the third century, but sticking in the North African city of Carthage. And we’re going to be looking at a bishop of Carthage, Bishop Cyprian. It’s fair to say, his time as bishop was far from easy. He faced first one of the fiercest persecutions of Christians thus far, which resulted in many denying their faith and had a devastating impact on the Church across the Roman Empire; and then this was swiftly followed by a deadly plague that swept across the Mediterranean. So today we’re going to be looking at Cyprian’s response to both these crises.

**Bishop Cyprian**

Some background, first of all. With Cyprian we’re in the middle of the third century, and these were troubling times for the Roman world: there was near constant warfare, both civil and external, economic instability, devastating plagues, an increase in crime, and most significantly a rapid turnover of emperors. From 235 to 250, a space of just 15 years, there were seven emperors, and 4 of them were killed. In short, this was a period of massive instability, politically, economically, socially. Furthermore, we have little literature from this period, meaning the extensive writings of Cyprian are one of the few windows we have onto this time.

So this was the world Cyprian grew up in. He was born in Carthage around the year 200 – so just a toddler, when Perpetua and Felicity were martyred in the arena of his home-town. He was born into a wealthy family and was well educated, but we know little of his background. His family, like most wealthy Roman families, would likely have been pagans, for he only converted to Christianity later in life. He lived the typical life of a Roman aristocrat, living a life of luxury, and later wrote of the difficulties he had when he became a Christian in giving up his life of extravagance.

We don’t really know much about how he became a Christian. It seems to have been a gradual process, a growing realisation of the vanity of his wealthy life, and a dissatisfaction with the Roman philosophies of the day. A presbyter of the Carthaginian church, Caecilianus, seems to have been instrumental in leading him to faith. Whatever precisely his journey, finally, in 246, so in his mid-40s, he took the step of baptism, which he described as ‘a second birth … to a new man’, setting him free from the sins of his former life, and he gave away much of his vast wealth to the Church. Just two years later, the Bishop of Carthage died, Bishop Donatus, and, though a baptised Christian for just two years, Cyprian was chosen as the next bishop. The reasons why he was chosen so young in his faith are not clear – but we can guess that his education and eloquence were probably factors. His rapid rise, though, did rankle with some, which was to have implications in the crises that followed.

**‘Decian Persecution’.**

In 247, the year before Cyprian became bishop, Rome celebrated her 1000th birthday. The Emperor Philip spared no expense in staging huge games to celebrate – celebrations which, it was hoped, would mark the beginning of a new era for a troubled empire. Any hopes that Rome was turning a new leaf, however, were soon dashed. Just two years later, in 249, civil war again broke out, and Philip was defeated in battle by Decius the city prefect of Rome, who was in turn hailed as the new emperor.

Like many pagan Romans as we saw last week, Decius saw the troubles being experienced by the Empire as being the result of the anger of the gods. If the fortunes of Rome were to be restored, drastic measures were needed. And so, on 3 January 250, he issued a decree that every citizen across the empire would have to offer a sacrifice to the Roman gods. Decius wasn’t specifically targeting Christians; rather it was an empire-wide attempt to regain the favour of the gods, and to bring about more prosperous times. But everyone had to sacrifice to the gods, and a refusal to do so would see yourself arrested and quite likely executed. Church leaders were especially targeted for compliance, and Bishop Fabian of Rome was executed as early as the 20 January. As we’ve seen, persecution had happened sporadically throughout the early life of the Church – but now for the first time, it was being systematically prosecuted on something-like an empire-wide scale (there were some variations in how much the decree was followed in different parts of the empire). Unsurprisingly, Christians were caught unprepared, and responded with varying degrees of confusion and uncertainty.

Cyprian, still in his first year as Bishop, flees Carthage as soon as the decree is issued. Though he tries to maintain his authority from afar by writing regular letters to members of his clergy, his flight to safety drew criticism from those who were opposed to him being appointed in the first place. About 30 or 40 years earlier, another Christian of Carthage, Tertullian, had condemned in the strongest terms those who flee persecution, writing that ‘he who fears to suffer cannot belong to Him who suffered.’[[1]](#footnote-1) Cyprian, however, defended his decision on the basis of Matthew 10:23 (‘when they persecute you in one town, flee to the next’), and that surrendering possessions is itself a sacrifice as well as surrendering one’s life. However, he struggled to direct affairs during his absence. He returned the following year, Easter 251, when the persecution had begun to fade, and just a few months before Decius himself would be killed in battle against the Goths, and yet another emperor would come to the throne.

**The Problem of the ‘Lapsed’**

The key problem that his church faced both during his absence and on his return, was the fact that considerable numbers of Christians did not do the heroic thing and make a public stand for Christ, but in various ways gave in. These were referred to as ‘the lapsed’, but the term covered different levels of ‘lapsing’. There were many who voluntarily went forwards to offer sacrifice to avoid any repercussions – Cyprian records countless Christians queuing up overnight to offer the necessary sacrifices. Others gave in during torture, but were seen at least as putting up a fight for the faith. Others purchased certificates by bribery which declared that they had offered a sacrifice. \* These certificates seem to have been issued to everyone as part of the enforcement. Many Christians, it seemed, felt this was a good way out of avoiding both persecution and the need to sacrifice to idols.

All this meant that after the pressure to sacrifice subsided the following year, the church was in a fractured state. You’ve got some who, though not martyred, suffered enormously as a result of their refusal to sacrifice to the Roman gods and deny Christ. But you’ve also got a considerable number who compromised in some way, and many of whom had not had to suffer at all – though no doubt for some of those it was a painful and difficult decision. But then church leaders were faced with the difficult decision of what to do with the vast numbers of those who had compromised, the ‘lapsed’, but who still wanted to be a part of the church. We mustn’t forget that Jesus was quite clear: ‘Whoever denies me before others, I will also deny before my Father in heaven.’ (Matt. 10:33). Their public denial of Christ was serious. But this wasn’t just one or two; we’re talking about hundreds, and who’d done so under extreme pressure. How were church leaders going to respond to those who’d either denied Christ, or found a way out of avoiding making a stand through the certificates? Before I tell you what Cyprian did, have a chat with those near you: what would you do in Cyprian’s position, and why?

*Discussion.*

Two key groups emerge, which became known as the laxists and the rigorists.

Let’s take the rigorists first. The rigorists argued that the Church needed to be kept pure. For them, the Church wasn’t just something to go to on Sundays, but the very Bride and Body of Christ, witnessing to Christ in the world. As the Body of Christ, the Church witnesses to the life-transforming power of Christ’s Gospel. It was vitally important, therefore, to that witness of the Church that they lived united as a community in a holy, Christ-like, Christ-honouring life. Those who’d publicly denied the faith were therefore potentially damaging the Church’s witness. The rigorists argued that the purity of the Church must be maintained, and so the lapsed should not be readmitted, apart from perhaps on their deathbed.

Though they rightly took the Church very seriously (much more so than we often do), the problem with this viewpoint is that Jesus himself spoke of the Church as always being a mixed bag. Think of the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds, where both grow up together until the Last Day. The Church will always be a mixed bag, and each of us individually this side of glory will always be a mixed bag. To seek a truly pure Church would be to have no-one left in it.

The rigorist viewpoint was not common in Carthage, though a rival rigorist bishop was appointed. The more common view in Carthage was the laxist position. The laxist view was that grace should be shown to those who had fallen, and they should be welcomed back into the Church. Sounds good. But they ended up being rather too liberal and precipitate in accepting people back.

A practice arose that those who had ‘lapsed’ would go to a ‘Confessor’ – someone who had suffered for their refusal to deny Christ, but had not been martyred – and the Confessor would give them what was called a ‘certificate of peace’. The certificate declared the Confessor’s forgiveness of the individual’s transgression. The clergy in Carthage then accepted these certificates as sufficient to welcome those who held them back into the church. The thinking was that if someone who had suffered for their faith was willing to extend grace to those who’d fallen, then so should the Church. However, something of a black market soon arose with these certificates of peace – the Confessors were becoming quite liberal in granting them, and some certificates ended up circulating that were clear forgeries, as they were signed by ‘confessors’ who’d long been martyred. Nonetheless, the clergy in Cyprian’s absence encouraged this practice, and welcomed many of those who’d denied Christ back into the Church.

So are you with me so far? On the one side were the rigorists, wanting to maintain the purity of the Church’s witness, on the other the laxists wanting to show grace to those who had fallen, but doing so perhaps a little too liberally. Cyprian found himself steering a middle course between the two.

When he heard from his exile what was happening with certificates of peace, Cyprian expressed caution. Not only was he concerned about the black market developing, but more importantly, Cyprian was concerned that such liberal granting of reconciliation was being done without any genuine repentance on the part of those who had fallen. It was no light thing to have denied Christ before men, and there needed to be a recognition of the seriousness of their sin. For Cyprian, this could only truly be done through the practice of penance, practices of fasting, prayer and almsgiving.

Protestants have always understandably been quite wary of the idea of penance. In the mediaeval Catholic church, penance had become a way to atone for your sins, and this suggests that Jesus’ death on the cross was not sufficient to deal with all our sin. His work of salvation was not complete, and so we needed to add our own good works to fill up what was lacking. But this is not primarily what Cyprian means by penance. For Cyprian, penance is about demonstrating a genuine repentance. He writes, in characteristically colourful language: ‘Are we to believe that a man is sorrowing with all his heart, that he is calling on the Lord with fasting, tears, and lamentations, when from the very day of his sin he is found daily at the baths, or after feasting sumptuously and gorging himself to excess he is next day belching with indigestion, and never shares any of his food or drink with those in need? When he goes about laughing cheerfully, how can he be lamenting the state of death he is in?’[[2]](#footnote-2) Their actions suggest their hearts are not genuinely remorseful. They’re not acting like they’re sorry. They may say they’re sorry, but their actions suggest otherwise. For Cyprian penance was about living and acting in a way that demonstrated genuine remorse. To welcome someone back into the church without any real sign that they were sorry for what they’d done, was cheap grace, and offered only a ‘false peace’. Repentance expressed through penance was necessary to recognise the seriousness of the sin.

But nonetheless, Cyprian was not a cold-hearted disciplinarian, but felt deeply for those who had fallen. ‘Who could be so callous, so stony-hearted, who so unmindful of brotherly love, as to remain dry-eyed in the presence of so many of his own kin who are broken now? … when my brethren fell, my heart was struck and I fell at their side.’[[3]](#footnote-3) He saw those who had fallen as wounded sheep, and it would be a failure of his as a bishop, a shepherd of the flock, not to bring them back into the church. Penance must be done – no cheap grace – but full reconciliation was promised at the end of it. The gospel extends forgiveness, even seventy-seven times, to those who fall but genuinely repent. God is a Judge to be feared, but he also, Cyprian says, ‘in his fatherly affection is ever forgiving and kind.’[[4]](#footnote-4) And more than that, the penitent sinner is not simply restored, but in the fullness of time ‘he will earn not merely God’s forgiveness, but His crown.’[[5]](#footnote-5) For those who are truly sorry, truly repentant, a rich reward, a crown, awaits. In Christ, there is an abundance of mercy and grace.

So, what do we think of Cyprian’s approach? Is there anything we can learn from it today? Do you think the practice of penance should be reinstated?

*Discussion*.

Cyprian’s approach was not universally accepted, and division sadly remained with the laxists and the rigorists, both of whom had their own bishops for a time in Carthage. But Cyprian ended up writing quite a lot about the nature of the Church, topics such as discipline and penance, unity, bishops, the sacraments. This is a subject we call ecclesiology today – and his writings have been foundational for all later thinking about the Church. It’s clear that Cyprian took the Church, and membership of the Church, much more seriously than we do today. Though not a rigorist, he shared the basic outlook that the Church was the bride and body of Christ; it’s not a club, or a service-provider, for us to make use of when we feel like it. There’s much I think we could learn from Cyprian about how many of us think of and relate to the Church today.

**Responding to Plague**

We could spend much longer on those issues. But I want to turn now to another crisis that Cyprian had to face as bishop, another situation where he encouraged the church to exercise the grace of God. Just as the persecution was beginning to fade, in 251 a terrible plague swept throughout the Roman Empire. We’re not really sure exactly what the disease was, with various suggestions being proposed, from smallpox or measles, to a form of Ebola. But whatever it was, it was deadly. People became violently ill: the symptoms described include vomiting, diarrhoea, fevers, even losing feet and limbs. Many thousands, if not millions, died, with some 5000 supposedly succumbing to the disease every day at its height in Rome alone.

Understandably, many people did all they could to avoid catching the highly contagious disease. Sometimes plague victims who were still alive were thrown into the streets to try to get the contagion out of the house. Many, however, simply fled, escaping away from the cities where the plague was most rampant. So many fled, that bodies began piling up in the streets with no-one to bury them. Unsurprisingly, Romans placed the blame on the Christians for bringing down the curse of the gods.

The Christian response to the plague was starkly different. Bishop Cyprian reminded the Christians of Carthage, first of all, that death was nothing to fear. Most Romans believed the gods were fickle and hard to please, and death was little more than a shadowy, depressing existence in the underworld. The Christians, however, believed in a God of love, who had defeated death in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and holds out the promise of eternal life for all who believe. This is how Cyprian encourages his congregation in the face of the plague:

‘[W]e who live in hope, and believe in God, and trust that Christ suffered for us and rose again, abiding in Christ, and through Him and in Him rising again, why either are we ourselves unwilling to depart hence from this life, or do we bewail and grieve for our friends when they depart as if they were lost, when Christ Himself, our Lord and God, encourages us and says, “I am the resurrection and the life: he that believeth in me, though he die, yet shall live; and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall not die eternally.” If we believe in Christ, let us have faith in His words and promises; and since we shall not die eternally, let us come with a glad security unto Christ, with whom we are both to conquer and to reign for ever.’[[6]](#footnote-6)

Powerful words, which had an impact. Freed from the fear of death, the Christians in large numbers stayed behind in the cities, while so many others fled, and proactively cared for the sick. The Church already had an established history in providing mutual support and care for its members, something that was unique among societies and organisations in the ancient world. They did not throw their sick into the streets, but using the Church’s shared funds and resources provided them with love and care.

But Cyprian urged them to go further. They should imitate God himself in loving not just their own, but even their enemies. Even those who’d been persecuting them just a few months before. Another bishop writing during the same plague, Dionysius of Alexandria, in Egypt, described what he saw of this sacrificial service by his Christian community, with many paying the ultimate price: ‘Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbours and cheerfully accepting their pains. Many, in nursing and curing others, transferred their death to themselves and died in their stead … The best of our brothers lost their lives in this manner, a number of presbyters, deacons, and laymen winning high commendation so that death in this form, the result of great piety and strong faith, seems in every way the equal to martyrdom.’[[7]](#footnote-7)

*Transferred their death to themselves*. What motivated this sacrificial care? It was nothing less than the Gospel itself, the Gospel of Jesus transferring our death to himself that we might know eternal life. They were simply imitating the God who’d died for them, in confidence of the joy of resurrection life that was set before them. In the most profound way possible, they were living the gospel. Following the pattern of the Cross, they were willing to put their lives on the line to care for the sick, like Christ transferring the plague victim’s death to themselves. Elsewhere, Cyprian said ‘it profits nothing to show forth virtue in words and destroy truth in deeds’. This unprecedented level of sacrificial care for the sick embodied a whole different way of understanding the world. The gospel of Jesus Christ was shown in the way they lived their lives, such a starkly different way from the response of fear and self-preservation that was the more instinctive reaction of those around them.

Just imagine the impact this witness would have on the watching Roman world. Imagine you’re an ordinary Roman citizen. Let’s say someone in your household falls sick with the plague, a son or daughter perhaps. Terrified of catching the deadly plague yourself, and presuming there’s nothing you could now do for your child anyway, you flee for your life. Then from the countryside, you get news that a Christian had come round to your house, someone you’d previously despised and scorned for their ‘superstition’. They’ve come round to bring food and water to your child. They’ve tended to them, and now you actually hear your child is recovering. They haven’t died after all. But the Christian ended up catching the plague, and is deteriorating rapidly. What impact would that have on you? What would that make you think about the Christians? We don’t know for sure, because we just don’t have the evidence, but a number of scholars researching the rise of early Christianity have speculated that the Christian response to this plague, led by Cyprian, may have led to a rapid rise in the number of Christians across the Roman Empire, as people saw such a powerful enactment of the gospel and came to believe for themselves.

The twentieth-century missionary and theologian Lesslie Newbigin put it like this: ‘How is it possible that the gospel should be credible, that people should come to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross? . . . The only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it.’

Part of what it means to live by the Gospel, is to live in and through God’s grace to us in Christ. I’ve called this session showing grace, because in these two different scenarios we see Cyprian trying to do just that. First with those who’ve committed serious sin, that of denying Christ, he feels for them deeply and longs to see them restored. But sin cannot just be overlooked. Though grace is free, it isn’t cheap; Jesus wouldn’t have died on a cross if our sin were not serious. Jesus calls us to repent and believe in him. So Cyprian urges his people to repent, genuinely and wholeheartedly, and in doing so to experience the riches of God’s grace. Then secondly, with those suffering from the deadly plague, he urges people not to fear for their lives, nor even just to care for their own kin, but to imitate the grace of Christ in laying down their lives for their enemies. In these two ways, Cyprian urged the Church to live more fully in and through the grace to sinners revealed in the Gospel of Christ. How our witness would be different if we more fully believed it and lived by it!

What would it look like for us to live more by the Gospel we profess to believe?

Can you think of other examples, in history or your experience, of the Gospel being powerfully seen in action?

[Not on handout] Thinking more generally about the session, what lessons will you take away from Bishop Cyprian? *Discussion*

**Conclusion**

In 258 a fresh persecution arose during the reign of the Emperor Valerian, who, like Decius, saw the troubles the Empire was experiencing as the result of the growth of corrupt influences like Christianity. He sought to stamp Christianity out by targeting the leaders of the church, and Cyprian was among bishops from across the Empire who were arrested. On the 14 September 258, he was publicly executed by the sword. His sentence was read out by the judge, that he was a ‘standard-bearer of the sect, an enemy of the gods, and one who was to be an example to his people.’ Cyprian would have whole-heartedly agreed.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your servant Cyprian. Thank you for bringing him to faith in you, thank you for his love for your Church, and thank you for his sacrificial service even unto death. We pray that we too may take sin seriously and lead penitent lives trusting in your grace to sinners, and we pray that we would show your grace in costly service following the pattern of the Cross. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

1. Quoted in Arnold, p. 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *De Lapsis* 30 – trans. Maurice Bévenot [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *De Lapsis* 4 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *De Lapsis* 35 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *De Lapsis* 36 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *De Mort.* 21, trans. Ernest Wallis, *The Early Church Fathers and Other Works* (ANF 5) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Quoted in Arnold, p. 48 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)