

POLYCARP

THE LESSON: LOYAL TO THE TRUE KING

*“Jesus said to them, ‘Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation.’”
(Mark 16:15)*

Jesus’ birth, death and resurrection happened in a particular place and time in human history. It was a time when people from diverse cultures had been united by a common language (Greek). The Roman empire had established political stability and constructed roads so that people and trade moved with ease – from modern-day Iraq, throughout northern Africa, and up to the southern tips of Britain and Russia. This meant that the stage was perfectly set for the Christian message to spread like wildfire: and it did. Both the Apostles and many unnamed believers carried the Gospel with them wherever they went, just as they’d been instructed to do.

*“Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds
of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.”
(Matthew 5: 11-12)*

Christians during this time faced great difficulty. Their beliefs were misunderstood and the Roman empire was hostile towards them. In particular, Christians refused to worship the emperor, and because of this they were considered “atheists”. Initially hunted down, it became government policy not to actively seek Christians out, but to put them to death if they were discovered, accused – and refused to reject their faith. The Roman empire was famous for its “games”. For the entertainment of its citizens, animals were slaughtered, gladiators fought to the death, and cruel executions were performed. In light of all this, believers knew that their faith in Christ could lead to a gruesome, public death.

*“In your hearts honour Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense
to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.”
(1 Peter 3:15)*

Polycarp was a bishop in Smyrna (modern-day Turkey). As a younger man he had been a disciple of the Apostle John, and had personally met many of those first disciples, men and women who had been eyewitnesses to Jesus’ resurrection. Much of Polycarp’s ministry was spent quietly pastoring his flock and opposing the false teachings which were circulating at that time, until the day when he became a target for those seeking to kill Christians.

Polycarp’s congregation urged him to go into hiding, which he did for a few days. While he prayed and waited, he came to believe that he’d been called to be a witness through his death: martyrdom. So when the authorities came to arrest him, he asked for an hour’s delay so that he could pray for the church, especially those entrusted to his care, and then he calmly went with them.

Standing before the faces of an angry mob, Polycarp was called upon to reject Christ. Knowing fully what the consequence of his refusal would be, he gave them this reply: “Eighty-six years have I been His servant, and He has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King who saved me?”

Polycarp was tied to a stake, stabbed with a sword, and burned. An ancient letter from the church in Smyrna records his last prayer, spoken aloud, just before the fire was lit:

“O Lord God Almighty, the Father of Your beloved and blessed Son Jesus Christ, through whom we have received the knowledge of You, the God of angels and powers and of all creation and of the whole race of the righteous, who live in Your presence; I bless You because You have granted me this day and hour, that I might receive a portion amongst the number of martyrs in the cup of Your Christ unto resurrection of eternal life, both of soul and of body, in the incorruptibility of the Holy Spirit. May I be received among these in Your presence this day, as a rich and acceptable sacrifice, as You did prepare and reveal it beforehand, and have

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accomplished it, You that art the faithful and true God. For this cause, yea and for all things, I praise You, I bless You, I glorify You, through the eternal and heavenly High-priest, Jesus Christ, Your beloved Son, through Whom, with Him and the Holy Spirit, be glory both now and ever and for the ages to come. Amen.”

(SOURCE ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: DAVID FARMER, “OXFORD DICTIONARY OF SAINTS” | JUSTO GONZÁLEZ, “THE STORY OF CHRISTIANITY, VOLUME 1” | “THE MARTYRDOM OF POLYCARP / THE LETTER OF THE SMYRNAEANS”, TRANS. J.B. LIGHTFOOT, REVISED R.N. SHROUT | GERARD SAMPSON, “THE LAYMAN’S BOOK OF SAINTS”.)

AT-HOME CHALLENGE

Each morning and evening, follow your own rule of prayer.

(IF YOU DON’T HAVE ONE, TRY SAYING THE MORNING AND EVENING PRAYERS FROM THE “FORMS OF PRAYER TO BE USED IN FAMILIES”, WHICH BEGINS ON PAGE 728 OF THE BCP. IF YOU DON’T HAVE A COPY, YOU CAN LOOK IT UP HERE: [HTTP://PRAYERBOOK.CA/RESOURCES/BCPONLINE/FAMILY-PRAYER.](http://prayerbook.ca/resources/bcponline/family-prayer))

Review today’s lesson. Choose a line of scripture or a phrase from Polycarp’s story that you find edifying, inspiring or instructive:

Throughout this week, spend some time prayerfully reflecting on the phrase you’ve chosen. Close your time of reflection with a prayer of gratitude for the witness of Polycarp.

- AND/OR -

Take some time to pray through the following collect.

Almighty God, by whose grace and power thy Martyr Polycarp was enabled to witness to the truth and to be faithful unto death: Grant that we, who now remember him before thee, may likewise so bear witness unto thee in this world, that we may receive with him the crown of glory that fadeth not away; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with thee and the Holy Spirit liveth and reigneth, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

(SUPPLEMENTARY COLLECT OF A MARTYR, P. 310)