

PERPETUA

THE LESSON: HIS SONG IS WITH ME

“Jesus told his disciples, ‘If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.’”

(Matthew 16:24)

Towards the end of the second century, the Roman empire came under a new emperor, Septimius Severus. The empire was still that vast swath of land from modern day Iraq, throughout northern Africa, and up to the southern tips of Britain and Russia. And it was still a place where the population was kept entertained by the spectacle of cruel executions. Christians were still at risk of being arrested and killed for failing to worship other gods. But during this time they faced an additional threat: new conversions to Christianity became punishable by death.

“And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness.”

(Acts 4:29)

Carthage was a major city on the northern tip of Africa in what is now Tunisia, and in that city in the year 203 there lived a 22-year-old woman named Perpetua. Perpetua was married and had recently given birth to a baby boy. She was also a new convert to Christianity and was receiving instruction in preparation for baptism, together with a few others: Felicitas, a pregnant slave, her husband Revocatus, who was also a slave, and two young men named Saturninus and Secundulus. They were all arrested and imprisoned. Much of what we know comes from a prison diary kept by Perpetua prior to her execution. In it, she wrote:

“After a few days we were taken into prison, and I was much afraid because I had never known such darkness. O bitter day! There was a great heat because of the press, there was cruel handling of the soldiers. Lastly I was tormented there by care for the child... Such cares I suffered for many days; and I obtained that the child should abide with me in prison; and straightway I became well and was lightened of my labour and care for the child; and suddenly the prison was made a palace for me, so that I would sooner be there than anywhere else.”

“By day the Lord commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life.”

(Psalm 42:8)

In the end, the martyrs were led into an amphitheatre to be mauled by wild animals and then run through with swords to the cheers of a live audience. But there is more to the story than this, as Perpetua’s journal shows. While in prison, Perpetua was given the opportunity to share her faith with her father and pray for her brother. Her witness brought about the conversion of many others, including a guard. She was able to encourage her fellow prisoners. And she was given visions and songs of hope, which actually brought her joy as she faced execution. After receiving one such vision, she wrote, “And I awoke; and I understood that I should fight, not with beasts but against the devil; but I knew that mine was the victory.”

“In your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures for evermore.”

(Psalm 16:11)

The concluding narrative of Perpetua’s passion was added to her journal by an unnamed editor, who leaves us in no doubt as to how she faced her final moments in this life:

“Now dawned the day of their victory, and they went forth from the prison into the amphitheatre as it were into heaven, cheerful and bright of countenance; if they trembled at all, it was for joy, not for fear...”

PERPETUA

Perpetua began to sing... Thereupon she called her brother to her, and that catechumen, and spoke to them, saying: Stand fast in the faith, and love you all one another; and be not offended because of our passion.”

(SOURCE ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: DAVID FARMER, “OXFORD DICTIONARY OF SAINTS” | JUSTO GONZÁLEZ, “THE STORY OF CHRISTIANITY, VOLUME 1” | “THE PASSION OF PERPETUA AND FELICITY”, TRANS. W.H. SHEWRING, PAUL HALSALL | GERARD SAMPSON, “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 Perpetua’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 Perpetua and her companions.

- AND/OR -

Take some time to pray through the following collect.

Almighty God, by whose grace and power thy Martyr Perpetua was enabled to witness to the truth and to be faithful unto death: Grant that we, who now remember her before thee, may likewise so bear witness unto thee in this world, that we may receive with her 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)