

Mark 13, 9 to 13

Sermon given on 7th March 2021.

Today's theme is counting the cost, and St. Perpetua and St. Felicity are given as examples.

Mark 13 verse 9 starts, "As for yourselves, beware; for they will hand you over to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them."

This conveniently enables me to introduce St. Perpetua and St. Felicity who were handed over to governors, because they wouldn't renounce their faith in Christ and venerate the Roman emperor Septimius Severus.

While the information on most early saints is based on, or partly on legend, our knowledge of Perpetua and Felicity's martyrdom is based on Perpetua's written diary referred to as, "The passion of St. Perpetua and St. Felicity and their companions." With an account of her death added afterwards by an unknown eyewitness.

St. Perpetua's diary is one of the oldest and most important early Christian text because Christian female writers of the period are extremely rare.

Vibia Perpetua to give her full name was 22 years old, was well educated and from a noble family. She was recently married with an infant son, who she was nursing, and Felicity was a slave girl and a mother of two days when they were both martyred.

Perpetua, inspired by her Christian mother and brother, was a catechumen, that is a Christian under training, and it is possible that she, Felicity and their three friends were singled out for execution because emperor Severus had forbidden new converts to Christianity, Perpetua was baptised just before her imprisonment.

At their arrest, their Christian teacher Saturus gave himself up voluntarily and he was martyred with them.

Perpetua was imprisoned in a stifling dark hole where she reports that she was terrified and above all grieving for her baby, but two deacons paid a bribe to the prison warders to put them in a better place in the prison.

The prison warders were beginning to recognise the strength of the Christians and the strength and leadership of Perpetua, and they began to allow her visitors and she had also been allowed to nurse her baby, and many warders were beginning to believe in Christ.

Her father wasn't a Christian, and after Perpetua's arrest, and through his love for her, he did his utmost to talk her out of her faith, but without success, she called his arguments diabolical.

Perpetua asked her father, "Do you see that water jar," he replied, "Yes I do." She said to him, "Can it be called anything other than a water jar." He replied, "No." She replied, "Nor can I be called anything other than a Christian."

In her diary Perpetua also writes about a vision that she had while she prayed; in the vision she was shown a golden ladder reaching up to heaven.

On the sides of the ladder were swords, and other weapons to deter people climbing the ladder, there was also a large serpent on guard at the foot of the ladder.

In her vision Perpetua ignored the serpent and stepped on its head, and she climbed to the top where she saw a large, beautiful garden and a tall shepherd milking sheep.

Standing around the shepherd were thousands of people in white garments; he gave her some milk to drink, and when Perpetua came to from her vision, she wrote that she could still taste the sweetness in her mouth.

From her vision Perpetua concluded that there would be no reprieve from the death sentence, and that she had to climb the ladder of suffering to find the peace of heaven.

Felicity was 8 months pregnant at the time of her arrest, and she prayed that her baby would be born before Perpetua and their companions were killed, so that she could die with them; it was against the law to kill a pregnant woman.

Felicity's prayer was granted, and she gave premature birth to a girl, and as I've said, two days after Felicity gave birth, Perpetua and Felicity were martyred.

They were martyred in the arena at Carthage in modern day Tunisia. Their martyrdom took place at the Roman games of 203 AD in celebration of Emperor Severus's birthday.

Their martyrdom was a barbaric affair in that the two girls were put into the arena with a mad cow, and they were badly mauled, and it was only when the horrified crowd shouted enough, were they mercifully killed by the sword.

St. Perpetua and St. Felicity are remembered today on the 7th March for their courage and sacrifice, they are the patron saints of mothers and expectant mothers.

Verse 10 of Mark's gospel reads, "And the good news must first be proclaimed to all the nations."

Dealing with the good news aspect first. Jesus is saying that there will be great opportunities when you stand before governors and kings, and there is no better place to see the opportunities they took than in the book of acts.

It's full of the disciples being arrested and taking the opportunity to speak about Jesus and the kingdom of God, to people that normally they would never be able to meet or speak too: not only to governors and kings, but also to prison warders.

Chapter 5 of Acts starting at verse 12 for example, tells how the Sadducees filled with Jealousy at the popularity of the apostles, and in the signs and wonders they were performing, had Peter and the other apostles with him arrested and put into prison, but God rescued them during the night, and told them to go and tell the people in the temple about Jesus.

Again, they were arrested, and this time brought before the high priest and the council, and Peter and the other apostles started to tell the high priest and the council about how Jesus had been crucified, but that he had risen from the dead and that they had witnessed all those things.

Regarding Perpetua and Felicity, their great witness to Christ was in their courage to stay faithful to Christ in the face of a nightmarish way to die.

Verse 10 also speaks about, "All nations." This means that the gospel must go outside of Israel, to the Gentiles with no distinction for race or nationality.

Christianity was not to be a Jewish sect but a worldwide movement with Christ at its head, and this was not to happen at some time in the future, but at once.

For the Jews to take Christianity to the Gentiles also meant that the history of the Old Testament rightly became the bedrock of our faith.

As Jesus said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them."

And then we come to verse 11, which tells us that when our faith in Christ is being challenged that we shouldn't worry about what we are to say, because the Holy Spirit within us will give us the words to say, and that applies to all situations where we are being used to the glory of God.

For example, if we are praying for a sick child the Holy Spirit will give us the words, if we are trying to show God's love in the world, the Holy Spirit will help us, I believe that the Holy Spirit will help anyone of us who is trying to put the gospel of Christ into practice for the furtherance of God's kingdom on earth.

So, if anyone asks you to pray with them, or for them, or to go and visit someone who is sick then say, "Yes", and be confident, because the Holy Spirit will give you the appropriate words to say in whatever context you are in.

Verse 12 reads, "Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents, and have them put to death."

Christian men and women are being martyred today in some Muslim and communist countries for their faith, so we must not think of verse 12 as an exaggeration, because in all probability it has been happening in every generation right back to and before Perpetua and Felicity's martyrdom.

But whereas we may not be persecuted for our faith, nevertheless we have a serious enemy, and our enemy may well be apathy; apathy is undoubtedly our biggest enemy, I know many people who used to come to this church who now do not go to any church.

You may say that is not important, that you can be a Christian without going to church, which may or may not be true, but that attitude could easily be the slippery slope to ignoring God completely in your life.

Our reading finishes on an optimistic note, and a note of encouragement, for anyone who is persecuted for their faith or feels that apathy is their real enemy.

The last verse 13 reads, "But the one who endures to the end will be saved." Perpetua and Felicity and their companions knew that and didn't flinch from their resolve.

Perpetua and Felicity's endurance not to renounce their faith in God undoubtedly saved them to be in the arms of Christ for ever, as indeed it has saved countless others over the centuries.

St Luke in his book of the Acts of the apostles in chapter 20 verse 24 quotes St Paul, when St Paul said, "However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race."

That's what endurance means, it means finishing the race, it means staying faithful to Christ to the end of your life.

St John in Revelation chapter 2 verse 7 wrote, "Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God."

St John is saying that when we stay faithful to Christ then Christ will stay faithful to us, and for us staying faithful to Christ, may well be about conquering apathy.

God gave Perpetua a vision of the future, which she passed on to her friends, and which gave them courage to endure to the end knowing that in staying faithful to Christ would mean Christ staying faithful to them.

The dreadful suffering of these two young women, and their courage to endure to the end, should be an inspiration to all of us to stay faithful to Christ to the end of our lives.

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