

St. Prisca, Perpetua and Felicitas (18th January)

I'm fairly sure that most people won't have noticed this, but today is St. Prisca's day. We don't know much about St. Prisca, except that she is supposed to have been martyred in Rome in the second or third century AD, and in pictures she's always shown standing between two lions. Apparently when she was put into the amphitheatre arena to be killed, the lions refused to eat her, so she must have died some other way.

But what makes Prisca interesting is that she is one of so many early women saints and martyrs whom we don't remember much. But they were some of the heroes of the early church, who kept it going through persecution from the Romans and conflict within itself. And today I want to tell two of their stories.

Perhaps the most famous women martyrs of the early church were Perpetua and Felicitas.¹ Perpetua was an aristocrat and Felicitas was her slave, and they lived in Carthage in North Africa, around 200 AD. Perpetua was twenty-two, newly married and had a baby son, when she was accused of being a Christian and arrested. Her father begged her to deny it, but she refused and went to prison. The rest of the story is partly in her own words, which still survive, and partly in her biographer's.

"I was terrified," she says, "as I had never been in such a dark hole before. With the crowd the heat was stifling; then there was the extortion of the soldiers; and to cap it all, I was tortured with worry for my baby. One day, two of the deacons bribed the soldiers to let us go to a better part of the prison for a few hours. They brought my baby, who was faint with hunger, and I fed her. Several days later, I got permission for my baby to stay with me in prison. At once I recovered my health, relieved of my worry over the child. My prison had suddenly become a palace."

In prison, Perpetua saw visions which promised her that after fighting and defeating the devil, she and the other imprisoned Christians would go to heaven.

"One day," she says, "while we were eating breakfast, we were suddenly taken for a hearing. At the law courts, a huge crowd gathered to stare at us, and we were put in the dock. When it came to my turn, my father appeared with my baby, dragged me out of the dock and said, 'Offer the sacrifice to the emperor - have pity on your baby!' But I wouldn't, so the governor passed sentence on all of us: we were condemned to be thrown to the wild animals, and we returned to prison."

While they were in prison, some of their guards were so impressed by the Christians that they converted to Christianity.

¹ For text and translation (parts of which are adapted below) see H. Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, OUP 1982, pp. 104ff.

Perpetua's slave Felicitas was pregnant when they were arrested, which meant she couldn't be executed. "As the day of the games drew near, Felicitas was very distressed that her martyrdom would be put off. So, two days before the contest, the martyrs prayed to God and immediately, the birth pains came on her. She suffered a good deal in her labour because of the natural difficulty of an eight months delivery. One of the guards said to her, 'You suffer so much now – what will you do when you are thrown to the wild beasts?' But she said, 'What I am suffering now, I suffer by myself. But then, another will be inside me who will suffer for me, just as I shall be suffering for him.' And she gave birth to a girl, and one of the other Christians brought her up as her own daughter.

The day before they were due to die, the martyrs celebrated their last meal as a Eucharist. The day dawned, and they marched from the prison to the amphitheatre, joyfully as though they were going to heaven. Perpetua went along with a shining face and calm steps, as the beloved of God, as a wife of Christ, putting down everyone's stare by her own intense gaze. With them also was Felicitas, going from the midwife to the gladiator, glad that she could now fight the beasts.

They were led to the gates of the amphitheatre and forced to put on pagan priests' robes. The male martyrs were matched with a leopard or a bear or a boar, but for the women, there was a mad heifer. They were stripped naked, wrapped in nets and brought into the arena. Even the crowd was horrified when they saw that one was a delicate young girl and the other was a woman fresh from childbirth, with milk still dripping from her breasts. First the heifer tossed Perpetua and she fell on her back. She got up and seeing that Felicitas had been crushed on the ground, went over, gave her her hand, and lifted her up. The two stood side by side, but the cruelty of the crowd was now satisfied for the time being, so they were removed from the ring."

Later that day they were taken out again, and killed by a gladiator. He bungled it and Perpetua was stabbed repeatedly. "Eventually, she took the trembling hand of the young gladiator and guided it to her own throat. It was as though so great a woman, feared as she was by the devil, could not be dispatched unless she herself were willing."

Why should we remember stories so violent and terrible as this? Because the history of a people is like the history of a person. It's who we are and if we forget it, we're like a person who has lost their memory – not really ourselves. All of us have things we'd rather not remember – but you don't get away from the past by just burying it. You have to face it to let it go. And this part of our past has had a big effect on us. Christianity has often been a rather violent, aggressive, warlike religion, and this comes from two related roots. The earliest church was strongly apocalyptic: it saw the world as attacking goodness and godliness, and felt that it had to respond with everything from rejection to resistance. Then as the church developed, it suffered repeated violence and persecution, so we grew up thinking we had to fight to survive. But Jesus doesn't tell us to be violent and aggressive, and our whole history shows that if you attack other people, you get attacked back. And so it's time to remember where Christian aggression came from. To remember our martyrs, and say, what happened to you was terrible, but the best way we

can honour you now, is to try to make our world a more peaceful and more understanding place.

We also remember the martyrs because they were ordinary people – ordinary women, and men, and slaves. And one of the great things about our tradition is that our heroes are ordinary people, just like us. Ordinary people who in extraordinary times found the courage to be heroes.

And it's because of them that we are Christians today. In a few minutes, we'll celebrate the Eucharist with a prayer which goes back even further than the time of Perpetua and Felicitas. The night before they died they celebrated the Eucharist, using these words or something very like them. Every one of those saints and martyrs is one of the links in the chain that stretches from Jesus to us.

We can hope that we never have to face anything like what Perpetua and Felicitas did. We pray it every time we say the Lord's Prayer: lead us not into temptation, means, please don't put us to the test. But we shouldn't forget that even today there are parts of the world where people still face torture and death for being Christians, and Christians have faced torture and death even in Europe within living memory. But remembering the martyrs gives us hope, that in the worst times, even if Christianity itself looks as if it's about to be wiped out, ordinary people can not only rise to the challenge, but can even end up converting their persecutors.

To do that, Perpetua and Felicitas had to be reckless with their lives. And that's something worth bearing in mind in our relatively safe lives, too. Life is the only thing that you can really spend to save. The only thing you have by using up. As Jesus says (Mk. 8.35): Those who want to save their life will lose it, but those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

We may well ask, why did God allow these faithful people to die so terribly? I think one reason why the stories of martyrs were written down, was as a way of asking that question. And I think the early Christians came out with two answers, in so far as you can have an answer at all. One is that God didn't make this happen. People made it happen. God gave people all the help they needed to be good – loving hearts, free will, moral advice – and people messed up. But inspired by God, people also redeemed the situation. Perpetua and Felicitas proved that you can turn even the worst situation around. It cost them their families, their babies, their lives. But it can be done: good can triumph.

Which makes the martyrs very like Christ himself, and that is yet another reason why we should remember them. Amen

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