



Saints – Perpetua

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Psalm 121 Reading from The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity trans. Thomas J. Heffernan

You may not have heard of my saint for this evening but you've possibly seen her – since she is up there in the windows of the Chapel. She is at the holy end, near the altar (some of the characters down this end are a bit dodgy). And she appears with her slightly unusual attribute. Saints nearly always have attributes to make them readily recognisable: Peter carries his keys, Jerome has his lion, Andrew always appears with his X-shaped cross, St Catherine always has her wheel – and Perpetua often appears with her baby, because when she was rounded up with a few others in one of the rather random persecutions of Christians at the beginning of the third century, in Carthage, in late 202 or early 203, her baby son, who was still nursing, went along with her to prison – and he is a rather telling attribute, since her willingness to be parted from him, rather than renounce her faith, serves to signify her courage and fortitude.

We heard about her final parting from that child in the reading from a document known as 'The Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicity'. That document purports to be the prison testimony of Perpetua, topped and tailed by an editor, who provides us at the beginning with some biographical details – that Perpetua was well born, well educated and well married, and 22 years old when she and her infant and her six companions were taken into custody – and fills us in on what happens at the end, since Perpetua obviously couldn't complete the story of her martyrdom herself. There have always been doubts about the authenticity of this diary, but these days the majority of scholars reckon it to be genuine – and as such, it is pretty well the earliest piece of autobiographical writing by a woman to have survived from the classical world, and a very remarkable and disturbing document it is too.

And that baby is, I suppose, one of the, to us, most troubling bits of the story, as it would have been to Perpetua's contemporaries – and he keeps popping up. Perpetua herself tells us that what she hated most about prison was the darkness, the crowding and the stifling heat, the extortion of the soldiers (presumably taking what they could from the prisoners in return for a cup of water or a little food), and, on top of all that, 'I was consumed with worry for my infant in that dungeon.' Soon after that she entrusts the baby to her mother and brother, but since she was still worrying about him, he is brought back to prison. She had meanwhile been moved to a better part of that prison, so she is happy to have him with her – only to be separated from him again at her formal trial, as we heard, when she and the others are condemned to the beasts, for refusing to sacrifice to the health of the emperors, declaring instead, 'I am a Christian'. She and her companions 'returned cheerfully to prison' she tells us,

to await the games in which they would die – but Perpetua sends once more to her father to have the child brought back. Her father will not give up the child. And as she reports, and you heard: ‘As God willed, the baby no longer desired my breasts, nor did they ache and become inflamed, so that I might not be tormented by worry for my child, or by the pain in my breasts.’

And that is the end of her baby’s active role in the story – but we never quite forget him and are forcibly reminded of him at the end of the story – since when it is her turn to face the beasts in the arena (along with the others, but paired in particular with a slave woman Felicity, who has herself just given birth in prison), the organisers of the event – always keen to keep things interesting for rather jaded spectators – send out a wild cow against the two women. This, says the editor who finishes off the story for us, was not a traditional practice – but, as he puts it, matched ‘their sex with that of the beast’. The point it seems, by putting these young mothers in the ring with a wild cow, is both to draw attention to their maternity and to mock and ridicule their maternal instincts, for just as it was not a traditional practice to put a cow in the ring, so it was not a traditional practice for two Roman women, whether high born or low born, to give up their children for their faith. The unnaturally vicious cow meets these unnatural mothers – as the crowd were being encouraged to see it.

The real beasts, by the way, don’t exactly behave well. One of Perpetua’s companions is first bitten by a leopard, to no great effect, and then tied to a wild boar. But it is the person who tied him to the boar who is gored and died, while the intended victim is merely dragged. That intended victim, having survived the leopard and the boar, was then tied to a bridge to await a bear – he especially hated bears we are told – but the bear refused to come out of his cage. The cow, reserved for Perpetua and Felicity, does better – it grounds them both, but doesn’t finish them off.

If the beasts are a bit of a disappointment, the martyrs by contrast are exemplary. Perpetua, having been thrown to the ground, rather coolly gets up, rearranges her clothing to protect her modesty, and requests a pin to fix her hair – since it would not be right, says the editor, ‘for a martyr to suffer with dishevelled hair, since it might appear that she was grieving in her moment of glory’. But I will spare you the ending of the story of Perpetua – since you know very well that she wouldn’t be up in that window, at the holy end of the Chapel, if she and her companions had not ended well.

But you are surely wondering by now – what is the point of all this? After all, even when Augustine preached, some two hundred years later, on what he referred to as ‘the birthday of the martyrs Perpetua and Felicity’ – that is, the day on which they were born again to new life – the time of the martyrs was already a long distant memory, albeit a glowing one. There were no bears, leopards or wild cows to be faced in Carthage in 400 AD – and happily few in Cambridge in 2018. So what are we take away from this admittedly moving story?

The general question of what purpose or purposes the recollection of the saints serves is one deserving of a longer and fuller answer than I can give now, but in connection with this particular saint I want to draw attention to a particular context in which her experience, and contemporary experience, seem not far apart, notwithstanding the present rarity of being condemned to the beasts. And it has to do with ending well.

There is, of course, were I determined to be very topical, a different connection to make between this story and today. This extraordinarily self-possessed young woman pictures herself as fighting against the devil – but however that may be, what she asserts, in refusing the demands of her father and of the state that she be a good mother and wife, is the freedom of a Christian woman against the claims of patriarchy. It is the same freedom which was asserted, again against the most bitter pagan opposition, by those women

who in the early centuries took vows of celibacy. Perpetua and these others, determined to be servants of Christ, assert that they cannot and will not be subjected to, or subjugated by, earthly powers. Two thousand years later, even in nations which regard themselves as Christian, the proclamation of that freedom of a Christian woman against the directive will of earthly powers still needs to be heard, it seems.

But let me be less immediately topical, and go back to ending well.

Early on in her time in prison – when her infant is still with her – one of Perpetua’s fellow Christians suggests that she seek a vision, a dream, to discern whether their imprisonment will end in freedom or suffering. She asks and receives – and the news is not good. ‘We knew we would suffer, and we ceased to have any hope in the world.’

Those resonant words – ‘we knew we would suffer, and we ceased to have any hope in the world’ – could doubtless be used by any number of people on any number of occasions, but there is one context I am thinking of, where they seem peculiarly apposite.

Dementia is on the rise in the UK – and in the world – and (sorry to be gloomy, but I am a clergy person and it is sort of in the job description), figures I saw just this week suggest that something like 25% of us can expect to receive a diagnosis of dementia at some point in our lives – typically, of course, if we reach our eighties, but maybe before that. Either way it is – and I use the word in its literal sense – a ‘dreadful’ diagnosis. The Alice of the book and later the film, *Still Alice*, puts it crisply when, after her diagnosis with Alzheimer’s, she announces ‘I’d rather have cancer’.¹ As dementia progresses, as you know, the patient loses capacities one by one, moving backwards to the dependencies we associate with childhood. And chiefly of course, we will lose those cognitive capacities which have been central to our sense of ourselves and our identities, and central to our engagement with the world. We naturally dread the involuntary surrender of our capabilities, and seemingly of our very selves – and on receiving such a diagnosis, Perpetua’s words would probably serve us very well: ‘we knew we would suffer and we ceased to have any hope in the world’.

What Christian word is there to say to those who have to face up to this diagnosis? How can we understand a trial we may well face in the unfolding of our lives? – and can we derive any insight from the admittedly very different trial faced by these martyrs?

One thing links us – most of us – to Perpetua. That is that Perpetua and her companions had been baptised, it seems, just before they were thrown into prison. And it was by reference to their baptisms that they sought a way to make sense of what was happening to them. For them, and for others in like circumstances in the following hundred and twenty five years or so of intermittent persecution, martyrdom came to be considered a second baptism. Martyrdom, this most extreme giving up of the self to death, came to be considered a sort of recurrence, or renewing, of the giving up which is the central task of Christian existence, the task which is figured to us in the rite of initiation from which Christian discipleship takes its beginnings.

‘Do you not know’, asks Paul in Romans 6, 3, ‘that all we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death?’ Baptismal rites variously adopted and adapted this imagery of death and dying, intertwined of course, with the more obvious theme of birth, to produce complex interplay of notions of stripping away and putting on, of losing and gaining.²

¹ L. Genova, *Still Alice* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2009).

² See B. Spink, *Early and Medieval Rituals and Theologies of Baptism: From the New Testament to the Council of Trent* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 157–8.

The *Book of Common Prayer*, for example, includes in its rite the prayer that God may 'grant that the old Adam in this Child may be so buried, that the new man may be raised in him', that 'all carnal affections may die in him', and that as the child has been 'buried with Christ in his death,' so he may be 'made a partaker of the death of thy son'. Baptism – we may have forgotten – is a rite about the death of the self, about the stripping away of our selves, and our taking on and taking up another self, the selfhood of Christ.

This association of baptism with death – with death of the self – explains why, when Christians had to think in extreme but real life circumstances about actual loss of the self, such as in martyrdom, they have connected their suffering with baptism.

Now the harsh and involuntary diminishment of the self in dementia should not be romanticised – but nor should it be considered wholly exceptional and unprecedented. We need to take our bearings, even in thinking of this new challenge, from the heritage we have received, and I suggest that we can at least begin to find our way here by drawing upon the rich material of thought and reflection found in the early church's writings and thoughts on martyrdom as a second baptism. Might we then, come to speak of the possibility for those diagnosed with dementia of accepting the path before them as a vocation, as the saints accepted martyrdom – that is, as accepting in the death of the self which they face, a second baptism?

There is of course, a key issue here. And that is just that the loss of agency, whenever it occurs in dementia, leaves the subject unable to direct the show, so to speak. Perpetua and her companions could and did put on a good show in the arena. All the patient with dementia can do in steadfast faithfulness is what can be done in the early stages of the disease. But the work and witness which they may accomplish in the early stages of the disease is no longer something they can accomplish in the later stages of the disease – though it can, of course, be taken up, and is often taken up, by those who have loved them in life, who in their faithful care and support to those who face this end, become companions with them in their trials, as Perpetua and her companions encouraged one another. And this is why my theme, odd though it may be, is significant even for students here, younger every year, and 60 or more years from facing any such trials themselves – but not 60 years away from facing it in those they have known.

In the Psalm we heard as our first lesson, there are also resonant words. 'The Lord shall preserve thee from all evil: yea, it is even he that shall keep thy soul. The Lord shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in.' Great words of consolation – but are they negated, so to speak, by the experience of persecution or a diagnosis such as dementia?

What the martyrs discovered – though it is a hard word of comfort, not a soft word – is just that God gives to us the possibility of work and witness even in the most forbidding of circumstances. In the harsh undoing of martyrdom, as in the case of dementia, the Lord preserves our going out just in giving us new occasions for work and witness – so that we may conclude of Christians who enter this trial, and of those who support them, what the unknown person who finished Perpetua's diary said of her and her companions: 'These new deeds of courage may witness that one and the same Holy Spirit is always working among us even now, along with God, the Father almighty, and his Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ, to whom is glory and endless power for ever and ever. Amen.'