

Concise church biographies

The passion of Perpetua

Vibia Perpetua was executed in the arena in Carthage on 7 March 203. Unusually, her own account of the circumstances has survived in a Latin text written just before her death - one of the earliest pieces of writing by a Christian woman. It is thought that Perpetua was a Montanist.

Five young Christians were arrested and imprisoned in Carthage: Revocatus and pregnant Felicity (Felicitas) his fellow servant, Saturninus, Secundulus and also the 22-year old noble married woman Vibia Perpetua who was weaning a child at the time. This was only a few days after her baptism.

To encourage her, God gave her a vision, which convinced her that martyrdom awaited but this settled her soul. Her unbelieving father strived with her to give up her faith, yet she submitted to God's will.

The disciples were taken to a tribunal at the forum where a multitude had gathered. The procurator and her father urged her to sacrifice to the emperor but she refused, then her aged father was beaten with a rod. The procurator, Hilarian, sentenced the group to be condemned to wild beasts. The young disciples went cheerfully to the prison. Her father took her suckling infant. Perpetua received another vision, which gave her peace about her dead brother. At some point they were joined by Saturus.

The grace of the disciples was so clear that the adjutant of the prison favoured them and allowed people to comfort them. Days later the adjutant became a believer. Perpetua was given yet another encouraging vision showing that she must fight not against men nor the beasts but against the devil: *'I awoke; and I understood that I should fight, not with beasts but against the devil; but I knew that mine was the victory'*.

The stress upon Felicity caused her to deliver her baby in her eighth month, which was given to a sister to bring up. Felicity saw this as a blessing since she could not be martyred if pregnant; she wished to remain with her fellow captives.

When the guards treated them roughly Perpetua complained to the tribune arguing that, as victims of Caesar on his feast day, they should be in good condition. The tribune relented and allowed them to receive visitors again. The day before the games the disciples were able to celebrate a 'Love Feast'. In this they warned onlookers about the judgment of God and witnessed to Christ and many believed.

They went to the amphitheatre with joy and cheerfulness without fear. As Perpetua approached with glory in her eyes, the crowd bowed their eyes. Perpetua refused to put on the gown of the priestess of Ceres and the tribune allowed them in as they stood, then Perpetua began to sing. Revocatus, Saturninus and Saturus threatened the people as they gazed. In front of Hilarian they warned him that he would face God's judgment, which angered the crowd who demanded they be flogged.

Revocatus first fought with a leopard and was then torn by a bear. Saturus was being bound to a boar, which tore apart the gladiator instead. He was then tied on a bridge to be attacked by a bear, but the bear refused to attack him.

The women were stripped and put in nets, which shocked the crowd seeing a young girl and a nursing mother, so robes were put on them. They were then thrown by a cow. Perpetua raised herself up and fastened her hair then helped Felicity; they both stood tall. Perpetua was in such an ecstasy that she did not realise that she had already been thrown by a cow. She then encouraged a young convert called Rusticus.

Saturus had foretold that he would die by one bite of a leopard. After the first bout of attacks, he was taken and a leopard released, which with one bite covered Saturus with so much blood that the people cried *'Well washed, well washed'* (a sarcastic reference to baptism). He was then taken to a certain place for his throat to be cut but he was already dead.

Perpetua was then pierced by a sword between the bones and shrieked out; and when the novice swordsman's hand wavered, she herself set it upon her own neck. So she died with grace. Perpetua thus became an example of faithfulness to all future martyrs.