

Memorial of St. Perpetua and Felicity

March 7th 2017

Today's Old Testament reading is one of the most poetically beautiful writings celebrating the efficacy of the Word of God. This word "efficacy" comes from the Latin "*efficere*" which means, to work out and accomplish. In Isaiah God's Word is compared to the precipitation falling from the skies in the form of rain and snow that allows for a fruitful earth. "So shall my word", says the Lord, "be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it."

Today we see a particular way in which the efficacy of God's word is fulfilled. The date was March 7th, the year 203, the City, Carthage. Two young Christian women, Perpetua and Felicity are to be fed to the beasts in the Carthage Stadium. Perpetua was a well-educated twenty-two-year-old married mother with a nursing infant, and Felicity was her servant, herself seven months pregnant. Together they and their companions were imprisoned and roughly treated by the soldiers as they awaited their martyrdom.

In the days preceding their martyrdom, Perpetua's father had attempted repeatedly to dissuade his daughter from going to her death by encouraging her to renounce her faith in Jesus Christ.

We know in detail the events leading up to her spiritual birthday, because the Passion of Perpetua is the oldest extant writing we have by a Christian woman.¹ She recounts her trial at which her father and son were present:

Then they came to me, and my father immediately appeared with my boy, and withdrew me from the step, and said in a supplicating tone, 'Have pity on your babe.' And Hilarianus the procurator, said, 'Spare the grey hairs of your father, spare the infancy of your boy, offer sacrifice for the well-being of the emperors.' And I replied, 'I will not do so.' Hilarianus said, 'Are you a Christian?' And I replied, 'I am a Christian.' And as my father stood there to cast me down from the faith, he was ordered by Hilarianus to be thrown down, and was beaten with rods. And my father's misfortune grieved me as if I myself had been beaten, I so grieved for his wretched old age.

Later in Perpetua's account, as the day of their martyrdom was fast approaching, Perpetua notes that Felicity was growing anxious that she might not be allowed to die with her companions, as it was illegal to publically chastise pregnant women. Though in her eighth month, Felicity and her companions prayed that she might deliver early so that she, too, could be martyred. When they finished their prayer, Felicity went into labor. A soldier's servant taunted her, saying that the sorrows she presently felt would be nothing compared to the pain she would later endure from the animals. Felicity replied, "Now it is I that suffer what I suffer; but then there will be another in me, who will suffer for me, because I also am about to suffer for Him." Felicity gave birth to a girl who was raised by a fellow Christian woman.

Another takes over to tell the account of their martyrdom. This eye witness recounts:

¹ To read her passion please see: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0324.htm>

The day of their victory shone forth, and they proceeded from the prison into the amphitheatre, as if to an assembly, joyous and of brilliant countenances; if perchance shrinking, it was with joy, and not with fear. Perpetua followed with placid look, and with step and gait as a matron of Christ, beloved of God; casting down the luster of her eyes from the gaze of all. Moreover, Felicitas, rejoicing that she had safely brought forth, so that she might fight with the wild beasts; from the blood and from the midwife to the gladiator, to wash after childbirth with a second baptism.

To their deaths they went, at first gouged by a wild cow and then put to death with the gladiator's sword.

Now here is the remarkable thing. Carthage in 203 witnessed these women and the companions living out fully the Lord's Prayer as they witness to the Father in Heaven and his eternal kingdom. Now travel with me 194 years into the future. We are now in Carthage in the year 397. Although in 393 the first council that accepted the present New Testament canon was the Synod of Hippo Regius in North Africa, the Acts of that council have been lost. Four years later, a council was convened in Carthage that has a paragraph beginning with this sentence:

It was also determined that besides the Canonical Scriptures nothing be read in the Church under the title of divine Scriptures. The Canonical Scriptures are these.... Then are listed the 73 Books that make up the Old and New Testaments as the Roman Catholic Church has always attested.

Think about this. The oldest manuscript affirming the list of Canonical Books hails from the City where Perpetua and Felicity proclaimed the Word of God by their life and their death.

History has this way of affirming that God's word will accomplish that for which it is sent and will be fruitful. On any given day this may be hard for us to discern.

May this story inspire us to pray: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven".