

lII. the Appian Way

by Martyrs of the Catacombs

The sermon explores the contrast between the grandeur of Roman tombs and the triumphant faith of Christians facing persecution on the Appian Way.

Scripture: Psalm 27:1, Matthew 10:28, Romans 8:35, Hebrews 13:6, 1 Peter 3:14

Topics: "Martyrdom", "Faithfulness"

Description

In the sermon 'Sepulchers in sad array Guard the ashes of the mighty Slumbering on the Appian Way,' the preacher reflects on Marcellus' search for the Christians in the Catacombs, highlighting the contrast between the grandeur of Rome's tombs and the Christians' triumphant attitude towards death. Marcellus encounters a young Christian boy, Pollio, who bravely refuses to betray his friends despite the soldier's persistence. The boy's unwavering faith and courage in the face of danger challenge Marcellus' preconceptions and lead to a pivotal moment of decision.

Transcript

"Sepulchers in sad array

Guard the ashes of the mighty

Slumbering on the Appian Way."

Marcellus entered upon the duty that lay before him without delay. Upon the following day he set out upon his investigations. It was merely a journey of inquiry, so he took no soldiers with him. Starting forth from the Pretorian barracks, he walked out of the city and down the Appian Way.

This famous road was lined on both sides with magnificent tombs, all of which were carefully preserved by the families to whom they belonged. Further back from the road lay houses and villas as thickly clustered as in the city. The open country was a long distance away.

At length he reached a huge round tower, which stood about two miles from the gate. It was built with enormous blocks of travertine, and ornamented beautifully yet simply. Its severe style and solid construction gave it an air of bold defiance against the ravages of time.

At this point Marcellus paused and looked back. A stranger in Rome, every view presented something new and interesting. Most remarkable was the long line of tombs. There were the last resting-places of the

great, the noble, and the brave of elder days, whose epitaphs announced their claims to honor on earth, and their dim prospects in the unknown life to come. Art and wealth had reared these sumptuous monuments, and the pious affection of ages had preserved them from decay. Here where he stood was the sublime mausoleum of Caecilia Metella; further away were the tombs of Calatinus and the Sarvili. Still further his eye fell upon the resting-place of the Scipios, the classic architecture of which was hallowed by "the dust of its heroic dwellers."

The words of Cicero recurred to his mind, "When you go out of the Porta Capena, and see the tombs of Calatinus, of the Scipios, the Sarvili, and the Metelli, can you consider that the buried inmates are unhappy?"

There was the arch of Drusus spanning the road: on one side was the historic grotto of Egeria, and further on the spot where Hannibal once stood and hurled his javelin at the walls of Rome. The long lines of tombs went on till in the distance it was terminated by the lofty pyramid of Caius Cestius, and the whole presented the grandest scene of sepulchral magnificence that could be found on earth.

On every side the habitations of men covered the ground, for the Imperial City had long ago burst the bounds that originally confined it, and sent its houses far away on every side into the country, till the traveler could scarcely tell where the country ended and where the city began.

From afar the deep hum of the city, the roll of innumerable chariots, and the multitudinous tread of its many feet, greeted his ears. Before him rose monuments and temples, the white sheen of the imperial palace, the innumerable domes and columns towering upward like a city in the air, and high above all the lofty Capitoline mount, crowned with the shrine of Jove.

But, more impressive than all the splendor of the home of the living was the solemnity of the city of the dead.

What an array of architectural glory was displayed around him! There arose the proud monuments of the grand old families of Rome. Heroism, genius, valor, pride, wealth, everything that man esteems or admires, here animated the eloquent stone and awakened emotion. Here were the visible forms of the highest influences of the old pagan religion. Yet their effects upon the soul never corresponded with the splendor of their outward forms, or the pomp of their ritual. The epitaphs of the dead showed not faith, but love of life, triumphant; not the assurance of immortal life, but a sad longing after the pleasures of the world.

Such were the thoughts of Marcellus as he mused upon the scene and again recalled the words of Cicero, "Can you think that the buried inmates are unhappy?"

"These Christians," thought he, "whom I am now seeking, seem to have learned more than I can find in all our philosophy. They not only have conquered the fear of death, but have learned to die rejoicing. What secret power have they which can thus inspire even the youngest and the feeblest among them? What is the hidden meaning of their song? My religion can only hope that I may not be unhappy, theirs leads them to death with triumphant songs of joy."

But how was he to prosecute his search after the Christians? Crowds of people passed by, but he saw none who seemed capable of assisting him. Buildings of all sizes, walls, tombs, and temples were all around, but he saw no place that seemed at all connected with the Catacombs. He was quite at a loss

what to do.

He went down into the street and walked slowly along, carefully scrutinizing every person whom he met, and examining closely every building. Yet no result was obtained from this beyond the discovery that the outward appearance gave no sign of any connection with subterranean abodes. The day passed on, and it grew late; but Marcellus remembered that there were many entrances to the Catacombs, and still he continued his search, hoping before the close of the day to find some clue.

At length his search was rewarded. He had walked backward and forward and in every direction, often retracing his steps and returning many times to the place of starting. Twilight was coming on, and the sun was near the edge of the horizon, when his quick eye caught sight of a man who was walking in an opposite direction, followed by a boy. The man was dressed in coarse apparel, stained and damp with sand and earth. His complexion was blanched and pallid, like that of one who has long been imprisoned, and his whole appearance at once arrested the glance of the young soldier.

He stepped up to him, and laying his hand upon his shoulder said,

"You are a fossor. Come with me."

The man looked up. He saw a stern face. The sight of the officer's dress terrified him. In an instant he darted away, and before Marcellus could turn to follow he had rushed into a side lane and was out of sight.

But Marcellus secured the boy.

"Come with me," said he.

The poor lad looked up with such an agony of fear that Marcellus was moved.

"Have mercy, for my mother's sake; she will die if I am taken."

The boy fell at his feet murmuring this in broken tones.

"I will not hurt you. Come," and he led him away toward an open space out of the way of the passers-by.

"Now," said he, stopping and confronting the boy, "tell me the truth. Who are you?"

"My name is Pollio," said the boy.

"Where do you live?"

"In Rome."

"What are you doing here?"

"I was out on an errand."

"Who was that man?"

"A fossor."

"What were you doing with him?"

"He was carrying a bundle for me."

"What was in the bundle?"

"Provisions."

"To whom were you carrying it?"

"To a destitute person out here."

"Where does he live?"

"Not far from here."

"Now, boy, tell me the truth. Do you know anything about the Catacombs?"

"I have heard about them," said the boy quietly.

"Were you ever in them?"

"I have been in some of them."

"Do you know any body who lives in them?"

"Some people. The fossor stays there."

"You were going to the Catacombs then with him?"

"What business would I have there at such a time as this?" said the boy innocently.

"That is what I want to know. Were you going there?"

"How would I dare to go there when it is forbidden by the laws?"

"It is now evening," said Marcellus abruptly, "come with me to the evening service at yonder temple."

The boy hesitated. "I am in a hurry," said he.

"But you are my prisoner. I never neglect the worship of the gods. You must come and assist me at my devotions."

"I cannot," said the boy firmly.

"Why not?"

"I am a Christian."

"I knew it. And you have friends, in the Catacombs, and you are going there now. They are the destitute people to whom you are carrying provisions, and the errand on which you are is for them."

The boy held down his head and was silent. "I want you now to take me to the entrance of the Catacombs."

"O, generous soldier, have mercy! Do not ask me that. I cannot do it!"

"You must."

"I will not betray my friends."

"You need not. It is nothing to show the entrance among the many thousands that lead down below. Do you think that the guards do not know every one?"

The boy thought for a moment, and at length signified his assent.

Marcellus took his hand and followed his lead. The boy turned away to the right of the Appian Way, when he walked a short distance. Here he came to an uninhabited house. He entered, and went down into the cellar. There was a door which apparently opened into a closet. The boy pointed to this, and stopped.

"I wish to go down," said Marcellus, firmly.

"You would not dare to go down alone surely, would you?"

"The Christians say that they do not commit murder. Why then should I fear? Lead on."

"I have no torches."

"But I have some. I came prepared. Go on."

"I cannot."

"Do you refuse?"

"I must refuse," said the boy. "My friends and my relatives are below. Sooner than lead you to them I would die a hundred deaths."

"You are bold. You do not know what death is."

"Do I not? What Christian can fear death? I have seen many of my friends die in agony, and I have helped bury them. I will not lead you there. Take me away to prison."

The boy turned away.

"But if I take you away what will your friends think? Have you a mother?"

The boy bowed his head and burst into a passion of tears. The mention of that dear name had overcome him.

"I see that you have, and that you love her. Lead me down, and you shall join her again."

"I will never betray them. I will die first. Do with me as you wish."

"If I had any evil intentions," said Marcellus, "do you think I would go down unaccompanied?"

"What can a soldier, and a Pretorian, want with the persecuted Christians, if not to destroy them?"

"Boy, I have no evil intentions. If you guide me down below I swear I will not use my knowledge against your friends. When I am below I will be a prisoner, and they can do with me what they like."

"Do you swear that you will not betray them?"

"I do, by the life of Caesar and the immortal gods," said Marcellus, solemnly.

"Come along, then," said the boy. "We do not need torches. Follow me carefully."

And the lad entered the narrow opening.

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