

Vi. the Cloud of Witnesses

by Martyrs of the Catacombs

The sermon explores the significance of the catacombs in the early Christian church, highlighting the faith, hope, and love of the martyrs and the community that formed around them.

Scripture: John 11:25, Romans 8:18, 1 Corinthians 15:54, Hebrews 11:13, 1 Peter 4:14, Revelation 2:10, Revelation 21:4

Topics: "Persevering Faith", "Martyrdom And Sacrifice"

Description

In the sermon 'These all died in faith,' the preacher Martyrs of the Catacombs shares the inspiring stories of early Christians who faced persecution and death with unwavering faith and hope in Christ. Through exploring the catacombs, Marcellus learns about the strong faith and sacrificial love of these martyrs, finding comfort in the symbols and inscriptions that point to the resurrection and eternal life in Christ. The preacher emphasizes the importance of enduring tribulations with the assurance of Christ's victory and grace, encouraging listeners to find strength in the examples of those who faithfully gave their lives for the Gospel.

Transcript

"These all died in faith."

The new convert soon learned more of the Christians. After a brief repose he rose and was joined by Honorius, who offered to show him the nature of the place where they lived.

Those whom he had seen at the chapel service formed but a small part of the dwellers in the catacombs. Their numbers rose to many thousands, and they were scattered throughout its wide extent in little communities, each of which had its own means of communication with the city.

He walked far on, accompanied by Honorius. He was astonished at the numbers of people whom he encountered; and though he knew that the Christians were numerous, yet he did not suppose that so vast a proportion would have the fortitude to choose a life in the catacombs.

Nor was he less interested in the dead than in the living. As he passed along he read the inscriptions upon their tombs, and found in them all the same strong faith and lofty hope. These he loved to read, and the fond interest which Honorius took in these pious memorials made him a congenial guide.

"There," said Honorius, "lies a witness for the truth."

Marcellus looked where he pointed, and read as follows:

PRIMITIUS, IN PEACE, AFTER MANY TORMENTS, A MOST VALIANT MARTYR. HE LIVED ABOUT THIRTY-EIGHT YEARS. HIS WIFE RAISED THIS TO HER DEAREST HUSBAND, THE WELL-DESERVING.

"These men," said Honorius, "show us how Christians ought to die. Yonder is another who suffered like Primitius."

PAULUS WAS PUT TO DEATH IN TORTURES, IN ORDER THAT HE MIGHT LIVE IN ETERNAL BLISS.

"And there," said Honorius, "is the tomb of a noble lady, who showed that fortitude which Christ can always bestow even to the weakest of his followers in the hour of need."

CLEMENTIA, TORTURED, DEAD, SLEEPS, WILL RISE.

"We do not die," said Honorius; "we but sleep, and when the last trump shall sound we shall awake to be forever with the Lord. Here," he continued, "lies Constans, doubly constant to his God by a double trial. Poison was given to him first, but it was powerless over him, so he was put to the sword:"

THE DEADLY DRAUGHT DARED NOT PRESENT TO CONSTANS THE CROWN WHICH THE STEEL WAS PERMITTED TO OFFER.

Thus they walked along, reading the inscriptions which appeared on every side. New feelings came to Marcellus as he read the glorious catalogue of names. It was to him a history of the Church of Christ. Here were the acts of the martyrs portrayed before him in words that burned. The rude pictures that adorned many of the tombs carried with them a pathos that the finest works of the skillful artist could not produce. The rudely carved letters, the bad spelling and grammatical errors, that characterized many of them, gave a touching proof of the treasure of the Gospel to the poor and lowly. Not many wise, not many mighty are called; but to the poor the Gospel is preached.

XP

On many of them there was a monogram, which was formed of the initial letters of the name of Christ, "X" and "P" being joined so as to form one cypher. Some bore a palm branch, the emblem of victory and immortality, the token of that palm of glory which shall hereafter wave in the hands of the innumerable throng that are to stand around the throne. Others bore other devices.

XP with palm branches

"What is this?" said Marcellus, pointing to a picture of a ship.

Ship

"It shows that the redeemed spirit has sailed from earth to the haven of rest."

"And what is the meaning of this fish that I see represented so often?"

Fish

"The fish is used because the letters that form its name in Greek are the initials of words that express the glory and hope of the Christian. 'iota' stands for 'Jesus,' 'chi' for 'Christ,' 'theta' and 'gamma' for 'the Son of God,' and 'sigma' for 'Saviour,' so that the fish symbolizes under its name 'iota chi theta gamma sigma,' 'Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Saviour.'"

"What means this picture that I see so often--a ship and a huge sea monster?"

"That is Jonah, a prophet of God, of whom as yet you are ignorant." Honorius then related the story of Jonah, and showed him how the escape from the bowels of the fish reminded the Christian of his deliverance from the darkness of the tomb. "This glorious hope of the resurrection is an unspeakable comfort," said he, "and we love to bring it to our thoughts by different symbols. There, too, is another symbol of the same blessed truth--the dove carrying an olive branch to Noah." He related to his companion the story of the flood, so that Marcellus might see the meaning of the representation. "But of all the symbols which are used," said he, "none is so clear as this," and he pointed to a picture of the resurrection of Lazarus.

The resurrection of Lazarus

"There too," said Honorius, "is an anchor, the sign of hope, by which the Christian, while tossing amid the stormy billows of life, holds on to his heavenly home.

Anchor

"There you see the cock, the symbol for watchfulness; for our Lord has said, 'Watch and pray.' There also is the lamb, the type of innocence and gentleness, which also brings to our mind the Lamb of God, who bore our sins, and by whose sacrifice we receive pardon. There again is the dove, which, like the lamb, represents innocence; and yet again you see it bearing the olive branch of peace.

Dove

"There are the letters Alpha and Omega, which represent our Lord; for you know that he said, 'I am Alpha and Omega.' And there is the crown, which reminds of that crown of immortality which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give us. Thus we love to surround ourselves with all that can remind us of the joy that lies before us. Taught by these, we look up from the surrounding gloom and see above us the light of immortal life."

"Here," said Marcellus, pausing, "is something that seems adapted to my condition. It sounds prophetic. Perhaps I too may be called upon to give my testimony for Christ: may I then be found faithful!"

IN CHRIST, IN THE TIME OF THE EMPEROR ADRIAN, MARIUS, A YOUNG MILITARY OFFICER, WHO LIVED LONG ENOUGH, AS HE SHED HIS BLOOD FOR CHRIST, AND DIED IN PEACE. HIS FRIENDS SET UP THIS WITH TEARS AND IN FEAR.

"In this world ye shall have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.' Thus Christ assures us; but while he warns us of evil, he consoles us with his promise of support. In him we can find grace sufficient for us."

"May the example of this young officer be for me," said Marcellus. "I may shed my blood for Christ like him. May I die as faithfully! To lie here among my brethren with such an epitaph, would be higher honor for

me than a mausoleum like that of Caecilia Metella."

They walked on as before.

"How sweet," said Marcellus, "is the death of the Christian! Its horror has fled. To him it is a blessed sleep, and death, instead of awakening terror, is associated with thoughts of rest or of victory."

Valeria Dormit in Pace

THE SLEEPING PLACE OF ELPIS.

ZOTICUS LAID HERE TO SLEEP.

ASELUS SLEEPS IN CHRIST.

MARTYRIA IN PEACE.

VIDALIA IN THE PEACE OF CHRIST.

NICEPHORUS, A SWEET SOUL, IN THE PLACE OF REFRESHMENT.

"Some of those inscriptions tell of the characters of the departed brethren," said Honorius. "Look at these."

MAXIMIUS, WHO LIVED TWENTY-THREE YEARS, FRIEND OF ALL MEN.

IN CHRIST, ON THE FIFTH KALENDS OF NOVEMBER, SLEPT GORGONIUS, FRIEND OF ALL, AND ENEMY TO NONE.

"And here too," he continued, "are others which tell of their private lives and domestic experiences."

CAECILIUS THE HUSBAND, TO CAECILIA PLACIDINA, MY WIFE, OF EXCELLENT MEMORY, WITH WHOM I LIVED TEN YEARS WITHOUT ANY QUARREL, IN JESUS CHRIST, SON OF GOD, THE SAVIOUR.

SACRED TO CHRIST THE SUPREME GOD. VITALIS, BURIED ON SATURDAY, KALENDS OF AUGUST, AGED TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AND EIGHT MONTHS. SHE LIVED WITH HER HUSBAND TEN YEARS AND THIRTY DAYS. IN CHRIST THE FIRST AND THE LAST.

TO DOMNINA, MY SWEETEST AND MOST INNOCENT WIFE, WHO LIVED SIXTEEN YEARS AND FOUR MONTHS, AND WAS MARRIED TWO YEARS FOUR MONTHS AND NINE DAYS: WITH WHOM, I WAS NOT ABLE TO LIVE, ON ACCOUNT OF MY TRAVELING, MORE THAN SIX MONTHS, DURING WHICH TIME I SHEWED HER MY LOVE AS I FELT IT. NONE ELSE SO LOVED EACH OTHER. BURIED ON THE FIFTEENTH BEFORE THE KALENDS OF JUNE.

TO CLAUDIUS, THE WELL-DESERVING AND AFFECTIONATE, WHO LOVED ME. HE LIVED ABOUT TWENTY-FIVE YEARS IN CHRIST.

"There is the tribute of a loving father," said Marcellus, as he read the following:

LAURENCE TO HIS SWEETEST SON SEVERUS. BORNE AWAY BY ANGELS ON THE SEVENTH IDES OF JANUARY.

"And here of a wife."

Domiti in Pace Lea Fecit

Domitius in peace, Lea erected this.

"Yes," said Honorius, "the religion of Jesus Christ changes the nature of man, and while it awakens within him love to God, it makes him susceptible of more tender affection to his friends and relatives."

Passing on, they found many epitaphs which exhibited this tender love of departed relatives.

CONSTANTIA, OF WONDERFUL BEAUTY AND AMIABILITY, WHO LIVED EIGHTEEN YEARS SIX MONTHS AND SIXTEEN DAYS. CONSTANTIA IN PEACE.

SIMPLICIUS, OF GOOD AND HAPPY MEMORY, WHO LIVED TWENTY-THREE YEARS AND FORTY-THREE DAYS IN PEACE. HIS BROTHER MADE THIS MONUMENT.

TO ADSERTOR OUR SON, DEAR, SWEET MOST INNOCENT, AND INCOMPARABLE, WHO LIVED SEVENTEEN YEARS SIX MONTHS AND EIGHT DAYS. HIS FATHER AND MOTHER SET UP THIS.

TO JANUARIUS, SWEET AND GOOD SON, HONORED AND BELOVED BY ALL: WHO LIVED TWENTY-THREE YEARS FIVE MONTHS AND TWENTY-TWO DAYS.

HIS PARENTS LAURINIA, SWEETER THAN HONEY SLEEPS IN PEACE.

TO THE HOLY SOUL, INNOCENS, WHO LIVED ABOUT THREE YEARS.

DOMITIANUS, AN INNOCENT SOUL, SLEEPS IN PEACE

Val Sabina

"Farewell, O Sabina; she lived viii years, viii months and xxii days,

Mayst thou live sweet in God."

IN CHRIST: DIED ON THE KALENDS OF SEPTEMBER, POMPEIANUS THE INNOCENT, WHO LIVED SIX YEARS NINE MONTHS EIGHT DAYS AND FOUR HOURS. HE SLEEPS IN PEACE.

TO THEIR DESERVING SON, CALPURNIUS, HIS PARENTS MADE THIS: HE LIVED FIVE YEARS, EIGHT MONTHS AND TEN DAYS, AND DEPARTED IN PEACE ON THE THIRTEENTH OF JUNE.

"Unto the epitaph of this child," said Marcellus, "they have added the symbols of peace and of glory." He pointed to a child's tomb, upon the slab of which was engraved a dove and a laurel crown, together with the following inscription:

RESPECTUS, WHO LIVED FIVE YEARS AND EIGHT MONTHS, SLEEPS IN PEACE.

"And this one," continued Marcellus, "has a palm branch, the symbol of victory."

"Yes," said Honorius, "the Saviour has said, 'Suffer little children to come unto me,'" and he read the following inscription:

MACUS, AN INNOCENT BOY. YOU HAVE ALREADY BEGUN TO BE AMONG THE INNOCENT ONES. HOW ENDURING IS SUCH A LIFE TO YOU. HOW GLADLY WILL YOUR MOTHER, THE CHURCH OF GOD, RECEIVE YOU, RETURNING TO THIS WORLD! LET US RESTRAIN OUR GROANS AND CEASE FROM WEeping.

Their attention was also attracted by epitaphs over the graves of women who had been wives of Christian ministers.

MY WIFE LAURENTIA MADE ME THIS TOMB. SHE WAS EVER SUITED TO MY DISPOSITION, VENERABLE AND FAITHFUL. AT LENGTH DISAPPOINTED ENVY LIES CRUSHED. THE BISHOP LEO SURVIVED HIS EIGHTIETH YEAR.

THE PLACE OF BASIL THE PRESBYTER AND HIS FELICITAS. THEY MADE IT FOR THEMSELVES.

ONCE THE HAPPY DAUGHTER OF THE PRESBYTER GABINUS, HERE LIES SUSANNA, JOINED WITH HER FATHER IN PEACE.

CLAUDIUS ATTICIANUS, A LECTOR, AND CLAUDIA FELICISSIMA HIS WIFE.

"I see here," said Marcellus, "a larger tomb. Are two buried here?"

"Yes, this is a 'bisomum,' and two occupy that cell. Read the inscription:"

THE BISOMUM OF SABINUS. HE MADE IT FOR HIMSELF DURING HIS LIFETIME IN THE CEMETERY OF BALBINA IN THE NEW CRYPT.

"Sometimes," continued Honorius, "three are buried in the same grave. In other places, Marcellus, you will see that large numbers are buried; for when persecution rages it is not always possible to pay to each individual the separate attention that is required. Yonder is a tablet that marks the burial place of many martyrs whose names are unknown, but whose memories are blessed." He pointed to, a slab bearing the following inscription:

MARCELLA AND FIVE HUNDRED AND FIFTY MARTYRS OF CHRIST.

"Here is a longer one," said Marcellus, "and its words may well find an echo in the hearts of all of us." With deep emotion they read the following:

IN CHRIST. ALEXANDER IS NOT DEAD, BUT LIVES ABOVE THE STARS, AND HIS BODY RESTS IN THIS TOMB. HE ENDED HIS LIFE UNDER THE EMPEROR ANTONINE, WHO, ALTHOUGH HE MIGHT HAVE FORESEEN THAT GREAT BENEFIT WOULD RESULT FROM HIS SERVICES, RENDERED UNTO HIM HATRED INSTEAD OF FAVOR. FOR WHILE ON HIS KNEES, AND ABOUT TO SACRIFICE UNTO THE TRUE GOD, HE WAS LED AWAY TO EXECUTION. O SAD TIMES! IN WHICH EVEN AMONG SACRED RITES AND PRAYERS, NOT EVEN IN CAVERNS COULD WE BE SAFE. WHAT CAN BE MORE WRETCHED THAN SUCH A LIFE? AND WHAT THAN SUCH A DEATH? WHERE THEY CANNOT BE BURIED BY THEIR FRIENDS AND RELATIONS! AT LENGTH THEY SPARKLE IN HEAVEN. HE HAS SCARCELY LIVED WHO HAS LIVED IN CHRISTIAN TIMES.

"This," said Honorius, "is the resting place of a well loved brother, whose memory is still cherished in all the Churches. Around this tomb we shall hold the 'Agape' upon the anniversary of his birthday. At this feast the barriers of different classes and ranks, of different kindreds and tribes and tongues and peoples,

are all broken down. We are all brethren in Christ Jesus, for we remember that as Christ loved us, so ought we also to love one another."

In this walk Marcellus had ample opportunity to witness the presence of that fraternal love to which Honorius alluded. He encountered men, women, and children of every rank and of every age. Men who had filled the highest stations in Rome associated in friendly intercourse with those who were scarcely above the level of slaves; those who had once been cruel and relentless persecutors, now associated in pleasant union with the former objects of their hate. The Jewish priest, released from the fetters of bigotry and stubborn pride, walked hand in hand with the once hated Gentile. The Greek had beheld the foolishness of the Gospel transformed into infinite wisdom, and the contempt which he had once felt for the followers of Jesus had given place to tender affection. Selfishness and ambition, haughtiness and envy, all the baser passions of human life, seemed to have fled before the almighty power of Christian love. The religion of Christ dwelt in their hearts in all its fullness, and its blessed influences were seen here as they might not be witnessed elsewhere; not because its nature or its power had been changed for their sakes, but because the universal persecution which pressed on all alike had robbed them of earthly possessions, cut them off from earthly temptations, and by the great sympathy of common suffering had forced them closer to one another.

A Passage in the Catacombs

"The worship of the true God," said Honorius, "differs in one respect from all false worship. The heathen must enter into his temple, and there through the medium of the priest offer up his prayers and his sacrifice. But for us Christ has made a sacrifice once for all. Every one of his followers can now approach God for himself, for each one is made, through Jesus, a king and a priest unto God. To us, then, it is a matter of no moment, as far as worship is concerned, whether our chapels are left unto us, or whether we are banished from them out of the sight of earth. Heaven is the throne of God and the universe is his temple, and each one of his children can lift up his voice from any place and at any time to worship the Father."

Marcellus's journey extended for a long time and for a great distance. Prepared as he was to find a great extent, he was still astonished at its vastness. The half had not been told him! and though he had traversed so much, he was told that this was but a fraction of the whole extent. The average height of the passage ways was about eight feet, but in many places it rose to twelve or fifteen feet. Then the frequent chapels and rooms which had been formed by widening the arches gave greater space to the inhabitants, and made it possible for them to live and move in greater freedom. In some places, also, there were narrow openings in the roof, through which faint rays of light passed from the upper air. These were chosen as places for resort, but not for living. The presence of the blessed light of day, however faint, was pleasant beyond expression, and served in some slight degree to mitigate the surrounding gloom.

Marcellus saw some places which had been walled up forming a sudden termination to the passage way, but other paths branched off and encircled them and went on as before. "What is this place which is thus inclosed?" he asked.

"It is a Roman tomb," said Honorius. "On excavating this passage the workmen struck upon it, so they stopped and walled up the place and carried on their excavation around it. It was not from the fear of disturbing the tomb, but because in death, no less than in life, the Christian desires to follow the command of his Lord, and 'come out from among them and be separate.'"

"Persecution rages around us and shuts us in," said Marcellus. "How long shall the people of God be scattered, how long shall the enemy distress us?"

"Such are the cries of many among us," said Honorius, "but it is wrong to complain. The Lord has been good to his people. Throughout the empire they have gone on for many generations protected by the laws and unmolested. True, we have had terrible persecutions, in which thousands have died in agony, but these again have passed away and left the Church in peace.

"All the persecutions which we have yet received have served only to purify the hearts of the people of God and exalt their faith. He knows what is best for us. We are in his hands, and he will give us no more than we can bear. Let us be sober and watch and pray, O Marcellus, for the present storm tells us plainly that the great and terrible day so long expected is at hand."

Thus Marcellus walked about with Honorius, conversing and learning new things every hour about the doctrines of God's truth and the experiences of his people. The sight of their love, their purity, their fortitude, their faith, sank deeply into his soul.

The experience which he too had felt was not transient. Every new sight but strengthened his desire to unite himself with the faith and fortunes of the people of God. Accordingly, before the following Lord's day he was baptized in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost.

On the morning of the Lord's day he sat around the table of the Lord in company with other Christians. There they held that simple and affecting ceremony by which the Christians showed forth the death of Jesus. Honorius offered up the prayer for blessing on the repast. And for the first time Marcellus partook of the wine and the bread, the sacred symbols of the body and blood of his dying Lord.

"And when they had sung a hymn, they went out."

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