

EARLY CHURCH HISTORY

Term 2 2023

Unit 5 - The hour of trial: Persecutions of the early church

Can you Identify? (who? where? when?)

I asked them whether they were Christians..... If they kept to it, I ordered them for execution; for I held no question that whatever it was that they admitted, in any case obstinacy and unbending perversity deserve to be punished."

Eighty-six years have I served Him, and He has done me no wrong! How then can I blaspheme my King who saved me?"

*May I have the joy of the beasts that are prepared for me....
..... I will even entice them to devour me promptly... "*

You have long lived an irreligious life, and have drawn together a number of men bound by an unlawful association, and professed yourself an open enemy to the gods and the religion of Rome..."

If the Tiber reaches the walls, if the Nile does not rise to the fields, if the sky doesn't move or the earth does, if there is famine, if there is plague, the cry is at once: 'The Christians to the lion!'"

Who am I?

- A. Born 185 in Alexandria of Christian parents, his father was martyred in 202 and he was only prevented from the same by his mother hiding his clothes! A prolific writer and translator, accused of reading Platonism into the Bible. Imprisoned and severely tortured in the Decian persecution (249-251); died from his injuries a few years later.
- B. Born c160 at Carthage into a pagan Roman family, practised as a lawyer in Rome, became a Christian before 197. A very skilful apologist, he possessed the rare gift among theologians – 'incapable of being dull!'
- C. A Greek, born to Christian parents in Asia – listened to Polycarp in Smyrna. Became a presbyter in Lyons then succeeded Polycarp as Bishop in Smyrna in 177. His major work is generally known as 'Against Heresies' and is principally a refutation of Gnostic ideas.
- D. Born in the early 3rd century into an upper-class pagan family. Taught rhetoric at Carthage but turned his back on career prospects by becoming a Christian in c245. He served as Bishop in Carthage from c248 until his martyrdom in c258. Major works included 'The Lapsed' and 'The Unity of the Church.'
- E. Born in Palestine of Greek parents early in the 2nd century, he saw in Christianity the fulfilment of all that was best in philosophy, particularly Plato. He was executed in Rome in the 160s confident of his salvation in Christ, refusing to renounce his faith.

Persecutions

1. What was Rome's policy?

- generally tolerant of other religions
- Jews, in particular tolerated
- Christians not just a Jewish sect

2. Reasons for Persecution

- (a) Christians were significantly different (holy ?)
- ~ By their lifestyle Christians were perceived as being critical of paganism.
 - ~ They were unwilling to participate in local feasts (to the gods) or attend gladiatorial contests
 - ~ They would refuse to use their skills for heathen practices
 - ~ Slaves and children were treated with respect
 - ~ They were uncompromising in their view of chastity and family life (in contrast to Roman society's excesses).
- (b) They were accused of gross immorality and cannibalism
- (c) They were accused of atheism (insulting the ancient gods)
- (d) They were perceived as disloyal to Rome

3. What about serious lapses?

- three sins forgivable by God – but not the church: sexual immorality, murder, denial of the faith.
- penalty: exclusion from church fellowship and the Lord's Supper
- Callistus versus Tertullian. Can the church accept repentant sinners (post baptism)?
 - ~ large numbers apostasised during the Decian persecution (249-251); could they be readmitted to the church?
 - ~ Those who were killed were called 'martyrs' (witnesses), those who endured persecution were called 'confessors'.

4. When did they take place?

- AD 64 Nero (according to Tacitus) blames the Christians for starting a fire in Rome that destroyed much of the city.
- AD 81-96 Domitian. Difficult to know the severity and length but Revelation tells of persecution in Asia
- AD 111-113 Pliny the Younger is governor of Bithynia and writes to the Emperor Trajan.
- AD 110-115 Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, is on his way to Rome to be executed. According to his letters he is eager to be killed for his faith.
- AD 156-160 Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, is martyred.
- AD 161-180 Marcus Aurelius, who particularly hated Christians, executed believers in Rome and in the provinces of Gaul and Africa.
- AD 249-251 Emperor Decius commanded all citizens to sacrifice to the Roman gods. Any who couldn't provide a certificate of proof faced death. Many believers were killed and/or tortured and many denied Christ. This was the most violent persecution Christians had faced and only ended when Decius was killed in battle.
- AD 305 Diocletian had been emperor since AD 284 and had a reputation as a great general and skilled statesman – bringing new life to a crumbling empire. No one is sure why, but in 303 he suddenly ordered the destruction of church buildings, the burning of Scriptures and the prohibition of Christian worship. This was the most vicious of all persecutions and was quite unexpected – he had tolerated the growing number of Christians in his court (his wife and daughter were considered Christians also) for eighteen years. Many were imprisoned, tortured and put to death.
- AD 305 Although Diocletian abdicated, his successor in the east, Galerius, seemed intent on exterminating Christianity completely. Public opinion increasingly was horrified and sickened by so much bloodshed. In his last official act, Galerius, on his deathbed, issued an 'act of toleration' AD 311. Times were changing for Christian believers.