

REFLECTION

“Stand fast in the faith, and love one another.” Perpetua of Carthage

In the gospel reading today, Jesus is warned by the Pharisees that he'd better not go to Jerusalem because Herod is of a mind to kill him. Why the Pharisees did this has been a point of scholarly debate for years. In the past, this has been yet another so-called reason to underpin the anti-Semitism of the Christian church. Perhaps, it has been argued; the Pharisees longed to thwart the work of Jesus and the fulfilment of his earthly ministry. Throughout the gospels, the Pharisees are often juxtaposed in opposition to Jesus and his work. They stand in for as the antagonist to Jesus on many occasions, and rather than considering them as aligned with Empire; the shorthand has been to view them simply as rigid adherents of the law, opponents to Jesus' grace, or further simplified; ornery Jews. This is both problematic and lazy. So, we must ask who are the Pharisees, really? The Pharisees were the religious elite, politically relevant, centred in the institutions of the day. Honestly, as an educated, trinitarian, Christian cleric, I have more in common with the Pharisees than you might think at first glance. Of course, we like to think of our own religious institutions as somewhere between bastions of virtue and morally neutral. While Christians frequently critique or villainise the Pharisees for acquaintance with the empire, our Jewish siblings rightly denounce our poorly disguised antisemitism, especially when Christian religious institutions have upheld Imperial values with, I would argue, far greater efficacy than the first century Temple. In our very name, The United Church of Canada, we must accept our identity as a National church that has traditionally been aligned with the centres of political and governmental power. This is why we have had to issue 2 apologies to our Indigenous siblings who suffered at the hands of residential schools; it is why we still learn in seminary that in our so-called glory days, the moderator was a phone call away from the Prime Minister of Canada. We, too, have been Pharisees and perhaps some of us long fondly still for those days when we held more power. Let us remember that the power of Jesus has always been in his grace, and he stands in opposition to regime that does not set people free, and as he states clearly: he answers to a higher authority than any emperor. I think this indicates to us that we must embrace this passage's offering of categories for its characters beyond the hero/villain binary.

The Pharisees who approach Jesus with this warning clearly are not antagonistic, evidenced by the apparent option to simply withhold this information and await Jesus' capture. Instead, they go to Jesus with a potentially lifesaving warning. While they ultimately want to have Jesus' work continue (or at least his life preserved), they don't view the *Missio Dei* to cultivate liberative mystical space as worth the circumstantial dangers. So, begins this intriguing interplay between imperial forces, fear/intimidation, and our revolutionary minister. Empires, whose core essence is violence, also weaponise fear of that violence as a means of control - to maintain their authority.

This is at play in today's world both close to home and abroad. We don't have to look far to see examples, but rather than a contemporary example, I want to tell the story of Perpetua of Carthage, the

martyr whose words began today's reflection. I think there may be something life-giving for us in our Lenten walk as we reflect upon her story. "Stand fast in the faith, and love one another."

Perpetua, in full Vibia Perpetua, died March 7, 203, feast day March 7, Carthage [now a residential suburb of Tunis, Tunisia]), Christian martyr who wrote *The Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicity*, a journal recounting her trial and imprisonment that was continued by a contemporary who described Perpetua's death in the arena. Her martyrdom and its account have been highly revered by ancient and modern Christians. Her text is one of the rare surviving documents written by a woman in the ancient world.

Carthage in the 2nd century AD had a vibrant Christian community that included the Church Father Tertullian. Among those drawn to the growing church was a young mother, Perpetua, the daughter of a prosperous provincial family. Sometime after 201, the Roman emperor Septimius Severus forbade conversion to Christianity or Judaism, and in 203, the governor of Carthage, Hilarian, enforced this edict. Perpetua and four companions were arrested. In clear violation of the emperor's decree, all five were preparing for baptism by studying intently. Another Christian voluntarily joined the small group. All were arrested and imprisoned. Her father immediately came to her in prison. He was a pagan, and he saw an easy way for Perpetua to save herself. He implored her simply to deny she was a Christian. He approached her, in her words, "as if he meant to pluck out my eyeballs."

"Father, do you see this vase here?" she replied. "Could it be called by any other name than what it is?"

"No," he replied.

"Well, neither can I be called anything other than what I am, a Christian." And with that declaration, the wheels of Perpetua's fate spun all the more quickly. Perpetua was moved to a better part of the prison in the next few days and allowed to breastfeed her child. Then, with her hearing approaching, her father visited again, this time, pleading more passionately: "Have pity on my grey head. Have pity on me, your father, if I deserve to be called your father, if I have favoured you above all your brothers, if I have raised you to reach this prime of your life."

He threw himself down before her and kissed her hands. "Do not abandon me to be the reproach of men. Think of your brothers; think of your mother and your aunt; think of your child, who will not be able to live once you are gone. Give up your pride!"

Perpetua was touched but remained unshaken. She tried to comfort her father—"It will all happen in the prisoner's dock as God wills, for you may be sure that we are not left to ourselves but are all in his power"—but he walked out of the prison dejected.

After this, she asked God for a vision and described her dreams in her diary; I will read the translation:

I saw a ladder of tremendous height made of bronze, reaching all the way to the heavens, but it was so narrow that only one person could climb up at a time. To the sides of the ladder were attached all sorts of metal weapons: there were swords, spears, hooks, daggers, and spikes; so that if anyone tried to climb up carelessly or without paying attention, he would be mangled, and his flesh would adhere to the weapons.

At the foot of the ladder lay a dragon of enormous size, and it would attack those who tried to climb up and try to terrify them from doing so. And Saturus was the first to go up, he who was later to give himself up of his own accord. He had been the builder of our strength, although he was not present when we were arrested. And he arrived at the top of the staircase and he looked back and said to me: 'Perpetua, I am waiting for you. But take care; do not let the dragon bite you.'

'He will not harm me,' I said, 'in the name of Christ Jesus.'

Slowly, as though he were afraid of me, the dragon stuck his head out from underneath the ladder. Then, using it as my first step, I trod on his head and went up.

Then I saw an immense garden, and in it, a grey-haired man sat in shepherd's garb; tall he was, and milking sheep. And standing around him were many thousands of people clad in white garments. He raised his head, looked at me, and said: 'I am glad you have come, my child.'

He called me over to him and gave me, as it were, a mouthful of the milk he was drawing; and I took it into my cupped hands and consumed it. And all those who stood around said: 'Amen!' At the sound of this word I came to, with the taste of something sweet still in my mouth. I at once told this to my brother, and we realised that we would have to suffer and that from now on we would no longer have any hope in this life.

The six were tried, refused to renounce their faith, and were condemned to death in the arena. Perpetua, her friends, and her slave, Felicitas were dressed in belted tunics. When they entered the stadium, wild beasts and gladiators roamed the arena floor, and in the stands, crowds roared to see blood. They didn't have to wait long.

Immediately a wild heifer charged the group. Perpetua was tossed into the air and onto her back. She sat up, adjusted her ripped tunic, and walked over to help Felicitas. Then a leopard was let loose, and it

wasn't long before the tunics of the Christians were stained with blood. The crowd roared for more blood. The gladiator set upon her with the sword and punctured between her ribs, it was recorded that as he withdrew the sword he trembled and Perpetua herself, placed her hands upon the blade and guided it towards her throat for the final blow. "Stand fast in the faith, and love one another."

Jesus says tell that fox I answer to a higher authority. He is clear that no matter what his important ministry must be lived out fully even as he alludes to it being fulfilled in his execution and triumph over death.

We understand Jesus to be the embodiment of Love Incarnate. We have heard the Apostle Paul say that though three remain; faith, hope, and love and among them love is the greatest. But I heard it said recently by Stephen Colbert, that perhaps, in his estimation, courage is the greatest of all virtues, because, without it, no other virtues are possible. That had a ring of a true thing. How do we cultivate a mystical space that allows for liberation? A space where we ourselves become brave, empowered by love, and resolute in our commitment to something so much bigger than ourselves.

In this space, the one Jesus illustrates in the gospel today, it will be greatly important for us to heed the words of the Psalmist who knows that with God there is no cause to fear. There is no cause to fear. We must understand, Church, this is lofty language, and I want you to know that I know that life is scary. That fear is real. That is why we need to find inspiration in beauty, in art and in our faith and worship. We must never allow the church to become so vacant that it is only but a laundry list of worldly-ills or a place of non-specific, spiritually-starved platitudes. We cannot be nourished in such a place. To seek our spiritual nourishment there may well leave us starved. Yes, fear is real. So we must never feel guilty that we are not faithful enough because the icy fingers of fear have gripped our hearts. We must remember in these times, especially, that there is power in the name of Jesus. There is power in the God Who Draws Us Near to her feathered breast. Just to utter the name can create a gap big enough for She Who Saves to pry in her talon and draw us under her wing. We must stand fast in our faith, and love one another. We must serve as accomplices in resistance to that which has a core of violence and domination. How do we act as solution-oriented allies who may not be fearless but understand that the loving hope in our courage to speak and act and live out our ministries of liberation will inspire counter-imperial action in spite of danger and fear?

Poet James Russell Lowell said it this way and I apologise for the non-inclusive language, as he wrote in the 19th century in the way that was common at the time:

Once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide,
In the strife of Truth with Falsehood, for the good or evil side;
Some great cause, God's new Messiah, offering each the bloom or blight,
Parts the goats upon the left hand, and the sheep upon the right,

And the choice goes by forever 'twixt that darkness and that light.

May we be determined to offer healing movements more than we offer fearful warnings. May our most justified fears be overshadowed by revolutionary love. May our courage draw upon the courage of those who came before us and made a way where there was none. Light, space, zest— that's God! So, with them on my side, I'm fearless, afraid of no one and nothing. May that allow us the liberating space to stand firm in our faith and love one another. May it be so. Amen.