

The Wisdom of God on Display – Persecution (AD 100-300)

“I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” – Matthew 16.18

Thursday Night Bible Study - 14th January

1. Why study church history?

- a. To be humbled
- b. To be warned
- c. To be encouraged

The only palliative is to keep the clean sea breeze of the centuries blowing through our minds, and this can only be done by reading old books. Not, of course, that there is any magic about the past. People were no cleverer then than they are now; they made as many mistakes as we. But not the same mistakes. They will not flatter us in the errors we are already committing; and their own errors, being now open and palpable, will not endanger us. - C. S. Lewis, Introduction to Athanasius' *On the Incarnation*

2. Jesus' and Apostles' prophecies about the church:

- Matthew 10.21-23
- Yet the gospel spread from Spain to India (death of the Apostles)
- Ephesians 3.10, 1 Timothy 2.1-2, Hebrews 11.35-40

3. The world at the beginning of the second century

- Roman Law
- Jewish Exception
- Establishment of Christianity

4. Apostolic Fathers

- Polycarp, Ignatius, Justin Martyr,
- Church rule organised
- Doctrine – Didache
- Worship – (often a 3 hour service...standing was normal!)

And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen... But Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Saviour on the same day rose from the dead.

– Apology of Justin Martyr

5. Persecution

- Why?
 - Charges of incest, atheism, cannibalism, and treason
 - Instability in the empire
 - Plague, war, famine

They think the Christians the cause of every public disaster, of every affliction with which the people are visited. If the Tiber rises as high as the city walls, if the Nile does not send its waters up over the fields, if the heavens give no rain, if there is an earthquake, if there is famine or pestilence, straightway the cry is, “Away with the Christians to the lions!” – Apology of Tertullian

- How and by whom?
 - Often local, regional
 - Occasionally across the empire at the Emperor's orders
- Response
 - Blandina (ad 162-177)
 - Polycarp (ad 70-160)
 - Justin Martyr (died ad 165)

6. Lessons

- a. Christianity is costly. – Matthew 10.37-38
- b. Pray for the persecuted church. – Ephesians 6.19-20
- c. Live for Jesus today. – Hebrews 12.1-3

Application Questions:

- 1. What is persecution?
- 2. How should Christians in the western world think about persecution?
- 3. Is persecution bad? Is persecution desirable?
- 4. What can we learn today from the example of the martyrs?
- 5. What have you found helpful or new from tonight's study?