

The Life of the Church

Learning our Church History

Part 3 - Into the Depths: The Catacombs of Rome

How does the church survive persecution?

Over the past two studies we have seen that the church has faced persecution from the outset. At times it was so severe we would be forgiven for wondering how the church survived. We look back at the 86 year old Polycarp and the tenaciousness of Irenaeus and think we simply couldn't do it. Yet the church found strength to remain strong and flourish.

To survive persecution the church had to find two ways to survive. The first way was to stay in the word. These new Christians, coming from Judaism or Roman god worship, couldn't get enough of the freedom that the gospel message brings. They would meet and learn together, trying to understand the written Scriptures of the Old testament and how it pointed to Christ, through the message and teaching passed down through word of mouth, before it was written down. We get a glimpse of this in the account of Peter's release from prison.

Read: Acts 12: 1-19

There are two things to pay attention to here:

- 1) Herod is persecuting the church (v.1). Herod Agrippa I was a grandson of Herod the Great. He had been raised in Rome, and because of boyhood playmates who later became emperors he was granted rule over various territories in Judea until his kingdom reached the full extent of his grandfather's territory between AD41-44. His persecution of the Christians was seen as an attempt to curry favour with the Jews and to satisfy his Roman overlords. Verse 2 tells us he killed James the disciple of Jesus.
- 2) The response of the church was to gather together and pray. Peter was in prison and it was prayer for him specifically. They have been led to prayer because of concern and fear. Rather than spreading, they join together. And this is the example of the early church.



The second way of surviving persecution for the church in Rome during the waves of persecution in the second and third centuries was to join together and go to places that the Romans wouldn't go to. And so the church found itself in the catacombs.

The Catacombs of Rome



Under the city of Rome lies a vast system of catacombs. The ancient Romans built these catacombs because they simply didn't like death; they feared it and didn't want to think about it. They wanted to push death out to the margins, even out of sight, so they buried their dead underground in the catacombs. This underground maze of catacombs plays an interesting role in the history of Christianity. In the first few centuries after Christ, Christianity was at odds with the Roman Empire. Christians were marginalised, ostracised, and persecuted. Despite the opposition they faced, they found that they could worship freely in the catacombs. The

Romans would not venture down in the catacombs. They would send slaves to dig out the catacombs and bury their dead. So, the Christians were relatively free to worship there. They even sometimes built seats into the walls of these catacombs. They also left behind paintings on the walls.

The paintings, mostly frescoes, depicted key events in the Gospels. Some are of the Last Supper. Others depict miracles, like the feeding of the five thousand. Some depict scenes from parables. Some depict the calming of the storm at sea by Jesus when he was with the disciples. Many have a depiction of Jesus flanked by the Greek letters α and ω —alpha and omega, the beginning and the end.

One testimony to the practice of worshiping in the catacombs is the wonderful early Christian hymn called “O Gladsome Light”.



O gladsome light, O grace
Of God the Father's face,
The eternal splendour wearing;
Celestial, holy, blest,
Our Saviour Jesus Christ,
Joyful in thine appearing.

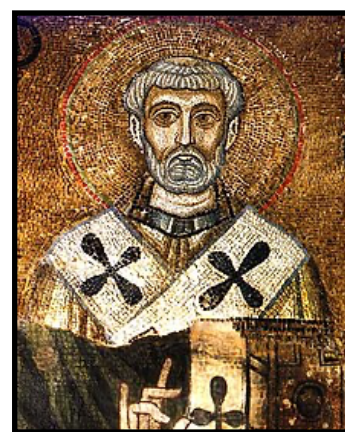
This early Christian hymn continues, “The day falls quiet and we see the evening light.” Can you imagine this? The Christians are gathering in the catacombs. They have a fire or they have torches to light the darkness of these cavernous spaces and tunnels; it is their “gladsome light.” They gather around the light to worship together and to sing their hymns of praise.

After Christianity was legalised and as it spread through the empire, catacombs became not only a place where Christians could meet; they also became the place where Christians would bury their dead. We can learn about the lives of early Christians from the epitaphs that were left at a number of these catacombs. One of them simply says, “Here lies Quintilian, a man of God, a firm believer in the Trinity, who loved chastity and rejected the allurements of the world.”

The Trinity and Pope Clement I

And this is what is striking about these memorials to the early Christians. Many of them speak of the Trinity. This shows how important this doctrine was to the early church. And when you consider the location of these catacombs, under the city of Rome, it will be no surprise then that when Pope Clement I taught of the structure of the Trinity, the Roman Christians fed on this truth, long before the Council of Nicaea in AD325 when the doctrine of the Trinity was written down.

Clement spoke of the ‘persons’ of the Trinity, thus beginning an understanding of the Godhead. This was later picked up and expanded by Ignatius of Antioch. Our understanding of the Trinity was finally compiled at the Council of Nicaea and is seen in the Nicene Creed, which is recited still today.



Pope Clement I, AD35-AD99

The creed, in its penultimate paragraph says,

*And I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life;
who proceeds from the Father and the Son;
who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified;
who spoke by the prophets.*

The creed was issued as a brief statement at the Council of Nicaea, while the First Council of Constantinople (381) later provided a substantial addition concerning the Holy Spirit. Thus historians term this creed the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. Even later, a line in the creed was changed (in the Western church only) to capture the significant teaching that the Holy Spirit proceeds not only from the Father but from the Son as well.

Creeds and Confessions, Chad Van Dixhoorn

As for Clement, at the end of the first century he was banished from Rome to the Chersonesus during the reign of the Emperor Trajan and was set to work in a stone quarry. On his arrival he discovered that the prisoners were suffering from lack of water, so he knelt down in prayer. Looking up, he saw a lamb on a hill, went to where the lamb had stood and struck the ground with his pickaxe, releasing a gushing stream of clear water. This miracle resulted in the conversion of large numbers of the local pagans and his fellow prisoners to Christianity. As punishment,] and thrown from a boat into the Black Sea.

But Clement's legacy for us today is the teaching in Rome of the persons of the Trinity, giving great assurance to the early Christians, so much so that in the second and third centuries they were known for their understanding and belief of the Trinity as inscribed on their gravestones. The catacombs not only preserved the church in its day, but preserved the teaching of the church so that we can know it today. This is not only the example of Timothy and how he came to faith, but the teaching of Psalm 145:4, which says,

One generation shall commend your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts.

As Paul writes to Timothy in 1 Timothy 6:20,

O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you.

So the early church ensure they kept and protected the deposit of the gospel as they sang among the graves and ensured faith lived in them and in the enduring generations.

Questions to Discuss

1. In times of great difficulty the early church met in the catacombs to find comfort in God's word and in fellowship. Where and how do we find comfort in times of trouble today?
2. We take for granted the teaching of the Trinity today because we are so accustomed to it. Do we risk being so familiar with Scripture that it loses its sense of awe? How can we prevent this?
3. Who in the past invested in you so that you can be mature in faith today? Who are you passing faith on to so that they likewise can grow in the faith?

Resources for this teaching series are available at www.annalongpc.org/midweek

