

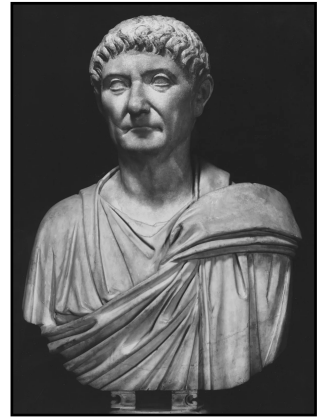
The Life of the Church

Learning our Church History

Part 5 - Emperor Constantine

Persecution by Law

At the start of the fourth century there was an intense storm of persecution. The persecution came from the Roman emperor, Diocletian. Diocletian was born in Dalmatia in modern day Croatia. He sought to restore stability and peace to the Roman Empire, and was convinced that peace must involve a renewed commitment to the gods of ancient Rome. Diocletian was determined to destroy anything that stood in his way, particularly the Christian church. He sought to destroy places where Christians met, their Scriptures, their leaders, and Christians in general. Diocletian launched an empire-wide persecution. Last week we learned of one of the targets of Diocletian's persecution in Caesarea Maritima called Pamphilus. He was a Christian and was a significant figure in the life of the city and gets credited for building up the city's library. Both he and his library became targets in Diocletian's persecution. But Diocletian was not to rule forever and in 303 Diocletian suddenly left Rome due to illness. His health deteriorated and in 305 he abdicated the Roman throne and retired to the small town of Spalatum on the shores of the Adriatic Sea, close to where he was born. After an illness that left him in a worse condition, Diocletian is believed to have taken his own life.



Diocletian, 242-311

Following his abdication Diocletian saw a split in the Roman Empire. His two sons, Galerius (ruler in the east) and Constantius (ruler in the west) fought over the territory of the Empire, which was divided between east and west. In many ways this was the end of the Roman empire.

Scripture reminds us that even the most powerful and those who think of themselves highly and set themselves against God and his people will fall. In Job 12: 23-25 we read,

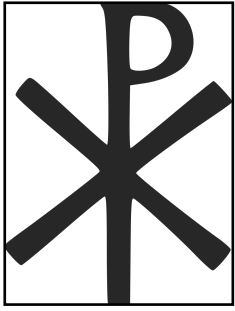
He makes nations great, and he destroys them; he enlarges nations, and leads them away. He takes away understanding from the chiefs of the people of the earth and makes them wander in a trackless waste. They grope in the dark without light, and he makes them stagger like a drunken man.

Read: Matthew 16: 13-20

The Ruler of the West - Emperor Constantine

Constantius only ruled for just over one year before his death in York. Records tell us that Constantius died of a fever and his son Constantine was immediately declared Emperor by the Roman legions in York. At this point Constantine was 34 years old and serving in the Roman army. He inherited a divided empire but became the sole ruler in 324 after the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312. There he defeated Maximian and went on to defeat Licinius. But it was this battle in Rome that drew Constantine to Christianity. Before the battle of the Milvian Bridge, 27 October 312, he passed through a remarkable spiritual experience.





The story goes that he claimed he saw in the sky a flaming cross with the inscription in Greek 'By this sign conquer.' This was seen in a vision of the *chi rho* symbol, a monogram using the first two Greek letters in the title *Christ*. Whether this was an optical illusion due to his excitement at the time, it is hard to say. The whole incident may just be pious legend. What is certain is that something affected him profoundly. While his motives were sometimes mixed, and he retained some old superstitions, he now showed that he fervently believed in the God of the Christians.

This conversion of the emperor was an event of great importance to the church, for not only was it productive of great good, but it led also to certain evils. Only a few years earlier such an occurrence would have been regarded as quite impossible. In 312 Constantine became joint emperor with Licinius. A few months later, in March 313, they issued from Milan their epoch-making decree giving full toleration to the Christian faith, and restoring to the church all places of worship that had been confiscated, and making good all losses. This was a historic day. One interesting fact about this proclamation is that it was based upon the rights of the individual conscience, and granted unconditional religious liberty to all in the West, a truly remarkable decision in such an age.

Eleven years later Constantine, having quarrelled with Licinius, defeated him in battle at Adrianople and became master of the whole empire, east and west. Christianity now enjoyed complete freedom throughout the Roman world. With his growing power Constantine became vainer and more self-complacent. He liked to array himself in splendid robes. It is not surprising to find him presenting the Bishop of Jerusalem with a set that vied in splendour with the best vestments of the pagan high priests. This is the first instance of the use of vestments in the Christian church.



At the end of the fourth century paganism had virtually disappeared in the Roman Empire. Jerome could declare in his time that every altar in Rome was forsaken and every temple was desolate. Yet, in the Christian church itself there were at work tendencies towards priestcraft, sacramentalism and monasticism that were ominous for the future.

This seemed like a time of great freedom for the Christian world, and it was, but a church polity was looming that would hinder and restrict worship. Yet, we stand in testimony today of what Christ said in Matthew 16:18

And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

The jury is out on whether Constantine's creation of a Christian empire is to our benefit today or not. But one thing is for sure, God used this Roman emperor, once an enemy of Christ, to be the one to bring liberation to Christians so that they could worship, service and proclaim the gospel of God.

Questions to Discuss

1. It has often been said that the UK is a Christian country, whether we have said that about ourselves or others have said it about us. How would we evaluate that statement today?
2. What influence should the church have in society?
3. Is there a danger that like the church of the end of the fourth century we become too "churchy"?

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