

# Perpetua

## *Living Together*

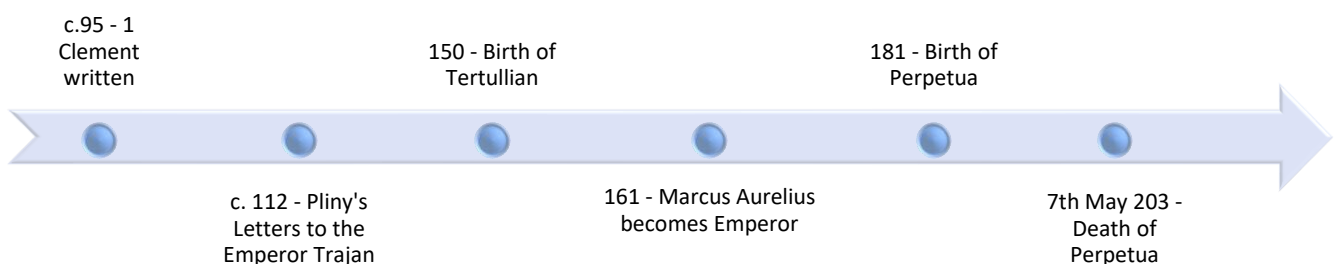
### Persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire

If the Tiber rises to the mountains, if the Nile fails to rise over the fields, if the heavens are inactive, if the earth is overactive, if famine, if plague, at once 'the Christians to the lions!' is cried out (Tertullian, *Apology* 40.1)

For the moment this is the line I have taken with all persons brought before me on the charge of being Christians. I have asked them in person if they are Christians, and if they admit it, I repeat the question a second and third time, with a warning of the punishment awaiting them. If they persist, I order them to be led away for execution; for whatever the nature of their admission, I am convinced that their stubbornness and unshakeable obstinacy ought not to go unpunished. There have been others similarly fanatical who are Roman citizens. I have entered them on the list of persons to be sent to Rome for trial.

Now that I have begun to deal with this problem, as so often happens, the charges are becoming more widespread and increasing in variety. ... I have therefore postponed any further examination and hastened to consult you. ... It is not only the towns, but villages too which are infected through contact with this wretched cult. I think though that it is still possible for it to be checked and directed to better ends, for there is no doubt that people have begun to throng the temples... It is easy to infer from this that a great many people could be reformed if they were given an opportunity to repent. (Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 10.96, trans. Betty Radice)

### Perpetua Introduction



- Vibia Perpetua – a 22-year old noble woman, martyred at the birthday games for the Emperor's son, 7<sup>th</sup> May 203.
- Events recorded in the *Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicity*, part of which consists of her own prison diary – the earliest writing by a Christian woman.
- Martyred along with the slave-girl Felicity, and three men Revocatus, Saturninus and Secundulus. Later joined by the catechist Saturus.
- Cf. Hebrews 13:3: 'Remember those who are in prison as though you were in prison with them.'

## Perpetua's Martyrdom

*What strikes you from Perpetua's account of her trial?*

The next day while we were eating breakfast, all of a sudden we were bound over for trial. We arrived at the forum and immediately the report circulated through the neighbourhood of the forum and a huge crowd assembled. We ascended the prisoners' platform. Several people were questioned under torture and confessed. Then they came to me. My father appeared there with my son and he pulled me down the step saying: 'Offer the sacrifice. Take pity on your son.'

Hilarius, the procurator who had assumed the power to enforce the death penalty, succeeding the late proconsul Minucius Timinianus, said, 'Take pity on your father's grey hair. Take pity on the tender age of your boy. Perform the sacrifice for the welfare of the Emperors.' I responded, 'I will not do it.' Hilarius asked: 'Are you a Christian?' I responded, 'I am a Christian.' When my father kept trying to pull me down, Hilarius ordered him thrown out and beaten with a rod. My father's situation made me sad, as if I myself had been beaten, and so I was upset because of his miserable old age.

Then Hilarius passed sentence on all of us and he condemned us to the beasts. Then we went back to the prison full of joy. (6.1-6, trans. Maureen Tilley)

*What do you make of their entrance into the arena? Why did they refuse to wear the costumes?*

The day of their victory dawned. They filed out of the prison into the amphitheatre as if into heaven, joyful, their faces radiant, trembling with joy not fear. Perpetua was following them with shining face and peaceful pace, like a bride of Christ, the delight of God, strong enough to stare down all the spectators. Felicity was there too, rejoicing that by giving birth she had been freed so she could fight the beasts. ...

When they had been led out through the gate, they were forced to put on costumes. The men were decked out like priests of Saturn and the women as those dedicated to Ceres. But noble perseverance fought back even at the last minute. Perpetua said, 'Now we came here of our own will, so our freedom might not be constrained. We were ready to forfeit our lives so that we would not have to do anything like this. You agreed with us on this.' Even Injustice recognised justice. So the tribune relented and they were led in just as they were.

Perpetua was singing as if she were already stepping on the head of the Egyptian. Revocatus and Saturninus and Saturus started to reproach the spectators. Then when they came before Hilarius, they began to say to him through their gestures and nodding, 'What you do to us, God will do to you.' In response the people became infuriated and they demanded that they be scourged in front of a line of gladiators who usually fought with animals. Revocatus and Saturninus and Saturus gave thanks to God that they might imitate the passion of the Lord at least in this way. (18.1-8, trans. Maureen Tilley)

## Questions for discussion

- What lessons do you learn from the story of Perpetua and Felicity?
- Can you think of other examples, from history or your own experience, of a distinctive Christian life having an impact on others?
- How can we grow in courage to fearlessly identify ourselves with Christ?