

Christ Church Parish
Tacoma, Washington
Adult Formation Epiphany | Lent 2021

Baptismal Fonts and Spiritualities in Early Christian North Africa

Third Session, Tuesday, February 9:
Dying, Rising, and then Walking in Newness of Life

North African Christian martyrs

On 7 March 203, two Christian women, Vibia Perpetua, her companion, Felicity, and four others preparing for Christian baptism – Revocatus, Saturninus, Saturus, and Secundulus – were executed before thousands of people in the arena of Carthage, North Africa. The previous year, the Roman Emperor, Sulpicius Severus, had banned conversion to Christianity. Given that these six Carthaginians violated the imperial ban, they were arrested at the behest of the local Roman ruler, Hilarian. At their trial, they were given the opportunity to deny their loyalty to Jesus Christ and the practice of Christian faith. All six steadfastly refused to deny their Christian commitments. While waiting execution, Perpetua kept a diary that was then smuggled out of prison and given to a member of the Christian community who completed the last section, a vivid narration of their martyrdom. The diary, entitled *The Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicity*, was the first Christian document written by a woman (of which we are aware).



In her diary, Perpetua describes visions she receives – preparing her and her friends for death in the arena. In one vision, she speaks of a ladder she is invited to climb, that is, if she can negotiate the serpent who rests at its base and the weapons – swords, spears, hooks, and knives – attached to the ladder. In another vision or dream, she is led into the arena where she faces ferocious beasts and a giant, muscular gladiator – her opponent. In yet another vision, she sees martyred Christians who were burned alive in the arena – now healed and whole in the presence of God in a beautiful, lush garden.

Once Perpetua and her companions entered the arena on March 7, “the day of their victory,” the crowd demanded that they be tortured. First mauled and bloodied by a red bull, Perpetua was then put to death by a gladiator who struck her neck with his sword. Her companions met equally gruesome deaths.

Arrest for one’s religious commitments, imprisonment, threats, a serpent, an assortment of weapons, ferocious beasts, torture, and then – being burned alive, mauled, and murdered as forms of *public entertainment* – all these expressed the

death-dealing values of imperial Rome, the same authority that decreed the death of Jesus of Nazareth, the first martyr. Indeed, crucifixion was a brutal form of government propaganda: "If you provoke questioning or rebellion against the Kingdom of Caesar, you will meet a cruel, public death."

A taste of Roman social values

While movies, History Channel "documentaries," and popular books depict Rome as one of the greatest empires or "civilizations," historians over the past fifty years have brought to light the incredible darkness and dehumanizing power of imperial elites who viewed the vast majority of its citizens and colonized populations as nothing more than laborers whose only value was working to produce wealth for the few and fill the imperial treasury. By law, fathers could smother their newborn babies and force unhygienic and life-threatening abortions on their wives, slave girls, and mistresses. It was a society that had little regard for the virtue of mercy, a quality of relationship it viewed as pathological, as something to be avoided by all free males who valued their public reputations. Indeed, massive poverty and a slave economy were *supported* by the conviction that mercy and compassion should *never* be shown to those who suffer, for the gods had decreed their sad status in life – and who would ever provoke the anger of the gods by questioning the gods' judgment? Close to 90% lived in poverty, wondering if there would be food to feed their families the next day.



Worship the Beast?

We also know that imperial Romans and their colonized people were expected to give their loyalty, their worship, to the Roman emperor and the gods of the state, in particular, Mars, the god of war, who through rape became the progenitor of the murderous twins, Remus and Romulus –

Romulus: Rome. While Luke notes that angels sang

"Glory to God in the highest heaven," and announced the birth of a Savior and Lord on earth, every person in the empire would have known that *before* the birth of Jesus only the emperor held such exalted titles. After all, his full appellation, one that mixed both politics and religion, was *Imperator Caesar Divi filius Augustus*: Commander (One Who Alone Rules), from the House of Julius Caesar, Son of the Divine One, Sacred Majesty. In the last book of the Bible, The Revelation to John, the Roman empire and its emperor are called the beast, the one who "could cause those who would not worship the beast to be killed" (Revelation 13:15).

Behold the Lamb of God

In the Gospel of John, we read this: "[John the Baptist] saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world'" (John 1:29). In contrast to the devouring, colonizing "beast" of the Roman Empire, the gospel writer, John, speaks of Jesus as a lamb. Does it ring a bell?

From the Gloria: *Lord God, Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world: have mercy on us.* From the fraction anthem, the Agnus Dei: *Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world: have mercy on us.*

What is it that the lamb takes or bears away? The sin or sins of the world. While much of Christian history after the 6th century has focused on the sin of the individual, there has been the persistent voice of Christian ethicists and theologians who have pointed to the reality of **social sin**, that is, the active presence of values, structures, and practices alive in a nation or a culture – in an empire – that discriminate, diminish, dehumanize, and deal death in ways often subtle and often obvious. In this regard, we have begun to see that the gospels and other books of the New Testament were implicit or explicit **criticisms** of social values – better yet – social sins of the dominant Roman imperial culture: the very thing experienced by Perpetua and her companions.

What were the social sins of Rome? Patriarchy, hierarchy, gross economic disparity, slavery, objectification and abuse of the poor (the majority of the population), idolatry (the worship of a political leader as godlike), legalized murder of infants, environmental degradation, use of military force to silence dissent, capital punishment (i.e., crucifixion) – but: *all of these were considered “normal” dimensions of cultural life among the Romans*. How did such social sins “wound” people who lived in this culture? By training them from birth the *normalcy* of such structures (e.g., patriarchy), attitudes (e.g., show no mercy; win at any cost), and practices (e.g., various forms of legalized murder; colonization).

Washing away the social debris

To be raised in such a culture – and indeed, to be raised in any culture, including our own – is to imbibe such social values, some if not many of which are social sins thought to be perfectly normal, acceptable, “the way things should be.” In Perpetua’s *Passion*, we encounter people preparing for the sacraments of initiation: water washing, chrismation (anointing with chrism as a “Christ”), and first communion. Evidence from early Christian sources suggests that catechumens – people preparing for baptism – spent one to three years in preparation for sacramental initiation. “What?! *One to three years?!*” you may ask with some astonishment. “Why so long?”

The Christian Way of Life aspired to *reject* the social sins of the dominant culture. The Christian Way of Life was an implicit criticism of the social sins that were thought to be “normal” by many. One did not simply slough off those attitudes and practices at variance with the Gospel of Jesus Christ overnight. To be baptized was and is to enter into a Way of Life that asks for one’s wholehearted commitment to that Way of Life in a minority community. Thus we come – at last – to the image of a cross-shaped font.

Dying and rising

In his letter to the Christians at Rome, Paul spoke of baptism as a dying and rising: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:3-4). In contrast to the birth imagery we have encountered in John and the marriage imagery in 1 Corinthians and Ephesians, Paul presents the baptismal image of dying and rising that leads to “walking in newness of life.” Please note the end result of baptism: **walking in newness of life**. While the 1928 Prayer Book portrayed Holy Baptism as protection from Satan and the promise of eternal life (a notion popular in the late medieval period, 1350-1500), the historical Paul viewed baptismal immersion as a dying to, a drowning of, an old way of life – a way of life marked by the forces opposed to the Gospel of Jesus Christ – and a rising into a new way of living in the world.

One could say that baptism was (and is) **a drowning of the social sins of one’s culture**, and **a dying to those values, structures, and practices that have come to “inhabit” one’s life**. Thus we find in North Africa, Perpetua’s home, cruciform baptismal pools: their shape signifies the death of Jesus in a form of *Roman* capital punishment – the cross – and God’s victory over Roman death in raising Jesus to “newness of life” as a life-giving spirit. As a *life-giving* Presence, the risen Christ is present throughout the cosmos and present in each of the baptized. The shape signifies the drowning of an older way of viewing oneself, one’s relationships, and one’s living in this world and **a rising into the Way of Life revealed in Jesus Christ**.



Baptismal font, 6th c., Tunis



Baptismal font, 6th c., Kélibia

At the Easter Vigil, a catechumen would strip naked and step down into the font where he or she would be immersed three times, then step up, be anointed with fragrant olive oil (chrism), clothed in a white robe, given a burning torch, and escorted into the church, greeted by the assembly, and then receive communion. The Tunis font, made from marble, is stark in its simplicity. The Kélibia font holds mosaics of flourishing vines, flowers, and singing birds – not unlike the vision of

Paradise Perpetua witnessed in one of her visions. The cruciform shape of the font and its use express this notion of dying/drowning and rising/breathing anew.

A beginning to live into

Of course, such dying and rising is a beginning, a committed **aspiration**. Christians then and Christians now are not absolutely "free" of the social sins in the cultural air everyone breathes. Thus, the absolute importance of being washed into an **assembly** of those who struggle with the tension and offer each other support and strength in this Way of Life. If one becomes aware of the contrast between a way of life *prescribed by one's culture* and the Way of Life *articulated by Jesus Christ*, then it seems that one's perception of affiliation with a Christian community shifts. One comes to worship not as a member of a churchy club of like-minded people in the same socio-economic class where the function of worship is to confirm one's religiosity and social status, but rather one comes as a disciple of Jesus Christ committed to and continuing his Way of Life – a Way of Life spelled out in the baptismal liturgy:

- Renouncing the evil powers that corrupt and destroy the creatures of God
- Renouncing all sinful desires that draw one from the love of God
- Proclaiming by word and example the Good News of God in Christ
- Loving one's neighbor by seeking and serving Christ in all persons
- Striving for justice and peace among all people
- Respecting the dignity of every human being
- Cherishing and preserving the Triune God's creation

We live in a nation that sanctioned slavery for 246 years and, even after its constitutional repudiation, continued in gross discrimination toward and murder of descendants of slaves. We live in a nation that sanctions child poverty despite the heroic efforts of non-profit and religious organizations to ameliorate such cruelty. We live in a culture in which corporate money and wealthy elites can buy political candidates and thus purchase public servants. And patriarchy? Women continue to earn less than men for the same work. While there may be American virtues that could complement the Gospel of Jesus Christ (e.g., a discipleship of equals and democratic equity), let us be mindful of the witness of the early Christians: one cannot serve two masters. The Christian is called to place her or his faith in the God revealed in Jesus Christ: not in a ruler, political party, body of law, economic model, or naively give one's soul over to advertisers and entertainment.

Jesus proclaimed and embodied the presence of the Kingdom or Reign of God, in sharp contrast to the kingdoms of this world. His life asks us the question: **What rules or orders your life, your values, and your actions?** That question invites our considered reflection and prayer during the Forty Days of Lent as we prepare to renew the sacred vows of Holy Baptism at Easter and continue our work to heal the "cultural wounding" that surrounds us.

Questions to consider in light of this understanding of Christian identity – the very thing the sacraments of initiation bestow:

1. Episcopalians, Roman Catholics, the Eastern Orthodox, and Lutherans dip their hands in the water of the baptismal font upon entering a church, and with wetted fingers make the sign of the cross over their forehead or heart. That gesture is a baptismal gesture. Now if we consider baptism as a dying and rising, what might that gesture signify?
2. Has our discussion of “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” sparked a new thought or understanding of that plea we should sing regularly in the liturgy? If so, what is that thought or understanding?
3. What are some forms of “cultural wounding”? That is, what do you consider a social sin that harms the creatures of God (note the term “creatures” which includes more than humans)?
4. For Americans trained in cultural individualism, religious affiliation can be viewed as one’s personal and private relationship with God (“Jesus and me”). For some people, the communal dimension of religion is important in terms of mutual support and friendship. But there is another dimension in Christian faith and life: the public, social dimension: after all, Jesus did not espouse a private relationship with God alone but also a public one in which he engaged “the evil powers that corrupt and destroy the creatures of God.” Both the witness of the gospels and the baptismal vows make clear that we are called to continue the public work of Jesus in our time and place. What is one clear way in which you do this or the parish does it?

Sources

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