2-10-03

MARTYRDOM AND PERSECUTION

Martus (μάρτυς) in classical Greek usage and in the LXX OT meant a witness, especially a legal witness, and comes to be used in the NT of the apostles as witnesses (or confessors) of Christ's life and resurrection, e.g. Acts 1.8, 1.22. The first Christian called a "martyr", or "proto-martyr", Stephen, is called martus in Acts 22:20. With the spread of persecution, of which the first Scriptural evidences we find are in Acts 8:1ff, II Thess. 1:4ff, and I Peter 4:12ff, the word martus comes increasingly to be reserved for those who have suffered hardships for the faith, and finally only to those who have died for it, i.e. particular kinds of witness, even unto suffering and death (terminal evangelism)! Hence, evolution in meaning of word martus: witness//suffer//die. This is another example of metonymy, the application of the name of one thing to another closely associated with it. Note: in some very ancient churches, the "confessional" is the place where the confessor (martyr) is buried, NOT a place where confessions are heard.

Persecutions

Christianity was at first sheltered under Jewish privileges, but as it became more distinct and as Christians refused to give emperor-worship, the Roman Empire came to a different and more hostile attitude toward them. Persecution of early Christians, however, did not occur at all times and in all places, but rather in certain specific periods, which are usually denominated by the emperors' names.

1) NERO. 64 AD. (cf. Eusebius, Church History II.25, p. 104). Evidence in the Roman historian Tacitus indicates that the emperor Nero used Christians as scapegoats for the fire of Rome in AD 64. There is strong tradition that Sts. Peter and Paul were martyred in this persecution (Peter crucified upside down, Paul imprisoned in chains and beheaded), [either in this year or 3-4 years later, although their common feast on 29 June (BCP) refers to the translation of their relics and should not be taken to indicate common martyrdom for both on that very day.] There is no evidence for Neronian persecution outside of Rome. Result of this persecution: precedent was now set for treating Christians as criminals, even for condemning them for the name of Christ, although technically here under Nero they were condemned for arson and not for their belief.

2) DOMITIAN. c. 95-96 AD. (Eusebius III.17-20, pp. 124-127). This despotic emperor demanded that public worship be given to him as Dominus et Deus (= Lord and God). There was persecution of both Christians and Jews at the end of his reign. Under him an ancestor of Priscilla (after whom one of the major catacombs is named) was put to death. The book of Revelation, ch. 13, refers to persecutions in his reign for refusal to worship him, and tradition (not proven) holds that it was during his persecution that the apostle John in exile on Patmos received the revelation recorded in the Apocalypse. Also probably during his reign the Colosseum, was completed, the last great building of pagan Rome and site of some Christian martyrdoms (their number has been exaggerated).

3) TRAJAN TO SEPTIMIUS SEVERUS. c. 98-117 AD to 193 AD. Long period, nearly a century, of sporadic local persecutions. Some highlights:

A) St. Ignatius of Antioch, martyred October 17, c. 107 (preferred) or c. 115 (BCP); cf. texts in Richardson.

B) Correspondence of the emperor Trajan with Pliny the Younger, governor of Bithynia, AD 112 (Eusebius III.33, p. 144; handout): Christians are not to be hunted, but if they are encountered they are to be persecuted. It is now a punishable offense to be a Christian, if caught and proven.

C) "Hadrian's Rescript," AD 124 (Eusebius IV.9, pp. 162-3): Hadrian (emperor 117-138) writes to the two proconsuls of Asia that they are to "pronounce sentence against Christians according to the seriousness of their offense." Famous but unclear, and its authenticity is doubted.

D) Martyrdom of St. Polycarp, 23 February (=BCP) c. 156 AD. (Eusebius IV.15, pp. 168-175; Richardson pp. 149-157; Staniforth p. 153 ff.); the earliest post-NT account of Christian martyrdom. Read! Compare with that of Abp. Janani Luwum, in Booty, Church in History, pp. 254-259!

E) Persecution under emperor Marcus Aurelius (emperor 161-180 AD). Especially severe persecution in Gaul, at Lyons, in 177 AD (cf. BCP, Martyrs of Lyons = June 2 = ?St. Blandina and Companions). (Eusebius V.1-2, pp. 193-205). Includes St. Blandina (p. 200: "They saw with their outward eyes in the person of their sister the One who was crucified for them;" cf. excerpt attached), also Bp. Pothinus, Deacon Sanctus. Possibly some Christians, fleeing this persecution in Gaul in 177, first took the Christian faith to England. Also in this period, St. Justin Martyr, apologist,, martyred c. 167 AD (BCP June 1) (Eusebius IV. 16-18, pp. 175-180).

First Major Persecution:

4) SEPTIMIUS SEVERUS, 193-211: Severan Persecution (NOT so-called because of its severity, although it was severe!), esp. 202 AD. Still a local and sporadic persecution, but two new features: Emperor himself actively encouraged it, and there was now a definite plan (arrest and torture, esp. of converts and the young). Eusebius book VI. Some of the highlights:

A) Tertullian wrote his Apology against the background of this persecution, c. 197 AD, in which he said "Semen est sanguis Christianorum" ("Go on: rack, torture, grind us to powder, our numbers increase in proportion as you mow us down. The blood of Christians is seed.") Irony that Tertullian himself was not martyred.

B) St. Irenaeus, exponent of apostolic teaching, was probably martyred during this persecution, c. 202. (BCP June 28).

C) Origen's father, Leonidas, 202. (Eusebius VI.1).

D) Sts. Perpetua and Felicity, martyred in the amphitheatre at Carthage on 7 March 202 (= BCP). Cf. account of this, probably by Tertullian; excerpts on handout. ["Christiana sum!]

E) Catechetical school of Alexandria, founded by St. Clement, closed temporarily under this persecution, later re-opened by Origen.

F) St. Alban, proto-martyr of Britain, probably martyred in this persecution, on 22 June 209 (BCP 22 June, but "c. 304").

G) Hippolytan Schism of 217 = delayed result of the Severan Persecution. Problem of the lapsed, and problem of rigorism. Dispute between Hippolytus, a rigorist, conservative presbyter or possibly bishop of Rome vs. Calixtus I (who became bishop of Rome 217 AD) over re-admission of those Christians who had lapsed in the Severan persecution. H. held that persons who had openly sinned even once should not be re-admitted into the Christian fellowship ("one Baptism for the remission of sins"). But the opposite, or "liberal" view of Calixtus prevailed, that the Church is a home for repentant sinners as well as for saints. H. set himself up as anti-pope and schismatic, but eventually seems to have been reconciled before his death. (Eusebius VI.21, 261-262). (H. also wrote Apostolic Tradition, c. 210).

5) MAXIMINUS. 235 AD. (Eusebius VI.28, p. 267). Origen's works, Exhortation to Martyrdom and On Prayer, were written in this context. Hippolytus was probably martyred in this persecution.

Second Major Persecution:

6) DECIUS. 249-251 AD. NB: period of 40 years of relative peace between Severan and Decian persecutions; then the first general persecution of the Church is launched under the emperor Decius. (Eusebius VI.39-43; handout). First victim of this persecution (martyred c. 250) was Fabian, bishop of Rome, who had been unexpectedly elected by acclamation (Eusebius VI.29, pp. 267-8; BCP Jan. 20), and had begun to organize the veneration of earlier martyrs at their burial places in the catacombs. Also in the persecution: Origen, imprisoned and tortured, dies in 254. St. Cyprian flees Carthage in 250, criticized; writes On the Lapsed and On the Unity of the Catholic Church, 251. Program of Decius: restore the ancient civic virtues of Rome, so in 250 orders that all subjects must sacrifice to the pagan gods of the empire and carry a certificate (= libellus) that they have done so. Program for Christians: Destroy leadership, and produce apostates. Two sorts of apostates emerge: 1) Christians who actually sacrifice, and 2) those who purchase bogus libelli without actually sacrificing = the libellatici (and hence, "libel," meaning "false testimony"). See handout. Controversy between Cyprian and Novatian (rigorist) presbyter of Rome) over whether lapsed should be excommunicate for life. Novatian splits and is consecrated rival bishop of Rome: Novatian Schism, lasting into 5th century. Problems from Decian persecution: authority, rigorism, the lapsed, Penance, Re-Baptism. Eusebius VI.43, pp. 280-4.

7) VALERIAN. 257-60. Christians forbidden to assemble (cf. ekklesia = assembly!) for worship (Eucharist = the Christian "sacrifice"); they must, instead, "sacrifice" to the pagan gods of the state. Hence, to be a Christian involves not just what you think, but also what you do. Two edicts: 1) Bishops, presbyters, and deacons commanded to sacrifice on pain of exile, and 2) Bishops to be put to death. Eusebius VI. 10-13. Sts. Cyprian and Laurence, martyred 258: Laurence = BCP Aug. 10 (The poor are the real treasure of the church); Cyprian = BCP Sept. 13.

Armenian Note: About this same time, prior to the next major persecution, very early fourth century, Armenia becomes the first Christian

nation, c. 301 AD., the first land as a kingdom to accept Christ, through the work of St. Gregory the Illuminator (c. 240-332), who converts King Tidrates III and through him the entire kingdom. (BCP March 23; cf. Booty, Church in History, p. 90).

Third Major Persecution:
8) DIOCLETIAN (303-5) and MAXIMIN (305-312) = THE GREAT PERSECUTION 303-313. NB period of 40 years of relative peace between Decian and Diocletian persecutions. Diocletian abdicated 305 and was succeeded by Maximin Daia who continued the same persecution even more furiously; the entire persecution-span 303-313 is known as "the Great Persecution" and sometimes collectively as "the persecution of Diocletian". Four edicts 303-4 from Diocletian: 1) Destruction of churches, surrender of church objects, and burning of Scriptures; 2) Imprisonment of church leaders, compelling them to offer sacrifice; 3) Torture and mutilation; 4) Death penalty. Eusebius VIII-IX.8. For long it has been thought that St. Alban, the proto-martyr of Britain, was martyred in this persecution, c. 304-5, but it is now generally thought that his martyrdom was earlier, 22 June 209, under persecution of Septimius Severus.
At some point during this Great Persecution, St. Sebastian is martyred (shot by archers at the stake) and buried in the catacomb (along the Appian Way S.E. of Rome) that later will be named for him. Also, c. 304, St. Vincent of Saragossa, deacon and proto-martyr of Spain, is martyred (BCP 22 Jan.). Also, c. 304, is martyrdom of St. Agnes: a Christian girl in Rome c. 12-13 years old, stripped, tortured, raped, and martyred at a brothel at the Piazza Navona in Rome, over which spot her church and shrine stand today (BCP 21 Jan.). Also St. Januarius: San Gennaro, Sept. 19, 305 A.D. (see notes in handout).

Accession of Constantine at York, upon death of his father, 25 July 306, but C. not yet sole ruler of the Roman Empire. (Eusebius VIII.13); on the very site of this Roman military fortress there, the foundations of York Minster will soon be laid. Toleration edict of Galerius, 30 April 311 (Eusebius VIII.17), but renewed persecution under Maximin Daia 311-312. NB Antony, para. 46, longs for martyrdom under the persecution of Maximin Daia in 311. Victory of Constantine over Maxentius at Battle of Milvian Bridge (over the Tiber River, north of Rome) 28 October 312 (Eusebius IX.9). "Edict" of Milan, February 313, and succession of privileges to Christian Church (Eusebius X.5-7): freedom to worship the Christian God. Further persecutions by Licinius (Eusebius X.8-9), then victory of Constantine over Licinius, 18 or 20 Sept. 324 (Eusebius X.1). Constantine sole ruler 324-337 AD; Council of Nicaea 325 AD = First Ecumenical Council of the Church.

Donatist Schism (not in Eusebius): vs. Traditores (hence, "traitors"), persons who handed over Scriptures, vessels, vestments in violation of first edict. Donatists in N. Africa refused to accept validity of Caecilian as bishop of Carthage on grounds that he had been consecrated by a traditor. They split, set up their own church, elected their own leader DONATUS as bishop of Carthage, and begin celebrating sacraments and conferring orders. In response to this problem, St. Augustine (354-430) will develop distinction between validity and regularity of

sacraments: those conferred outside proper church authority (as by Donatists) are valid (because they come from God through ordained persons) but not regular. This forms background to later medieval distinction between ex opere operato and ex opere operantis. The former (ex opere operato) is the main-line catholic view, generally held in the Episcopal Church, and asserts that the validity of the sacraments is an objective action of the church, not just a subjective matter of interior psychology. [Anglican position, BCP Article 26, is ex opere operato: the unworthiness of the minister hinders not the effect of the sacrament].

ie. the protestant view - "I don't like my pastor so I'll go elsewhere"

OVERALL: Three major persecutions, each about 40-50 years apart, from each of which a rigorist schism splits:

1) Severan, c. 202: Hippolytan Schism
2) Decian, c. 250: Novatian Schism
3) Diocletian, c. 303-13: Donatist Schism.

NB in all major persecutions: The Rigorists and the Lapsed are two sides of the same pastoral/theological problem: what should the via media do with the extremes? How to minister to them, what to say theologically? How inclusive can/should the church be? Ecclesiology? Other issues: 1) Who or what were the martyrs dying for? Jesus Christ, the Church, Doctrines, Issues? 2) Where/how does Christian martyrdom occur today? 3) Is there anyone/anything worth dying for today?

CATACOMBS: Early Christian underground burial places, esp. in Rome. Early Christians did not generally hide in them during persecutions nor regularly worship in them, but they did bury many of their dead in them and decorate their walls. When they buried the dead there they might well have celebrated a sort of agape memorial meal, which may (sometimes) have been a Eucharist. The wall decorations of the catacombs are our major source for early Christian art.