

Perpetua



It was a warm and sunny day in the city of Carthage in North Africa. And it was just the time of day when people rested from the sun. Perpetua was glad to rest.

'My head is going to burst,' she told her friend. 'One day my teacher spends hours doing Latin and the next we spend hours doing Greek. Sometime I'm going to open my mouth and not know which language to speak!'

'It's mathematics that I find difficult,' her friend complained. 'All those shapes and lines and angles.'

Perpetua laughed. 'If I help you with your mathematics you could help me with my language work.'

The other girl giggled. 'That sounds a good idea.'

Just then a slave arrived with freshly squeezed orange juice for the girls. As they relaxed in the shade enjoying their drinks, Perpetua noticed that the slave girl was

Ten Girls who didn't give in

working in the full glare of the sun. Having squeezed fruit to make drinks for all the family, she was now back at her job of milling wheat for bread.

'She doesn't have to bother about either mathematics or Latin or Greek,' said the visiting teenager.

But when Perpetua looked at the sweating child, who was only about ten years old, she knew that however hard schoolwork was it was easier than being a slave.

'I'd rather be me,' she told her friend. 'Or perhaps I'd rather have lived in earlier days, or in another country, where only boys are educated. It's jolly hard work being a girl in Carthage today.'

'The sun's going down now,' Perpetua said. 'Let's get my young brother and play a game.'

Summoning her slave, the teenager explained what she wanted. 'Bring my brother, and bring cloth so that we can dress up and pretend to be goddesses.'

The slave ran as fast as she could to the house and was back in no time at all. One arm was full of fabric, and the other was full of protesting boy.

'I didn't want to come outside to play,' the eight-year-old complained. 'I can't be bothered.'

The two girls were not really interested in whether he could be bothered or not, even

though they knew his lack of energy was because he was ill. In fact, it suited the game quite well that after the lad was dressed in white he lounged around under a tree.

'Imagine he's one of the gods watching us pretty girls playing,' said Perpetua. 'Let's dance to please him. Dad says we should always be finding ways to please the gods or they'll turn nasty on us.'

'Let's dress up as priestesses of the god Ceres,' suggested Perpetua, 'and pretend that my brother is Saturn. That'll be fun.'

Gathering the cloth around them, they prepared for their roles. And the dance the two priestesses of Ceres danced for Saturn was very elegant indeed. But the little boy hardly bothered with their dancing at all. He lay on the grass under the tree and watched the sunlight through the leaves. And by the next time her friend came to visit, Perpetua's little brother had died of the disease that had weakened him for so long.

Did her little brother's death make Perpetua wonder what good all the gods did, or did it make her wonder if the Christian God was real after all? Nobody knows, for the next few years of her life have been lost from the pages of history. The next time she is heard of, Perpetua is a young married woman with a tiny baby boy of her own. And she's a Christian! We have to guess how that

Ten Girls who didn't give in

happened, but our guesses join up with facts when she was 22 years old. We know the girl wasn't brought up in a Christian home, so she must have heard about the Lord Jesus elsewhere. Some of the Christians in Carthage at the time (it was just under 200 years after Jesus was born) were slaves. It may be that her father bought a slave who told her about the Lord. Or she might have heard the gospel spoken about in the city. Jesus really was the talk of the town because of what happened to some of those who believed in him.

Fast-forwarding Perpetua's life takes us to her 23rd year and a diary she kept of what happened to her. A friend who finished her story completed the diary. At that time Christians in Carthage had relative freedom, and only very occasionally did the Romans feel a need to make martyrs of them. The Roman Emperor, Septimus Severus, decided that one such time had come, and his Proconsul in Carthage carried out his orders.

'The Christians are disloyal to our gods,' he told his advisors. 'And if they anger the gods there's no saying what they'll do to us. Angry gods don't make good friends.'

'But do we need to kill the Christians?' one of the men asked.

The Proconsul stamped his foot. 'Of course we don't! All they need to do is offer incense to our gods to keep them in a good mood, then

we can set them free... till the next time. Take that young Perpetua,' the Proconsul went on. 'Why anyone from her background wants to get involved with slaves who make up most of the Christians here I really don't know. Bring her in and we'll sort her out. And bring her friends with her.'

So it was that a small group of young Christians were arrested: several youths, along with Perpetua and another girl about her own age. She was called Felicitas, and she was a slave. They knew each other from church.

'You're summoned to appear before the Proconsul's court!' the Christians were told.

The young people prayed then followed the guard without looking back. Their trial came to an end when the prisoners refused to sacrifice to the Roman gods.

'If you don't make sacrifices to them,' the Proconsul warned, 'you will be sacrificed to them.'

There was no misunderstanding what the man meant, but none of the young folk as much as flinched. In fact, they thought that giving up their lives for Jesus was the best thing in the world they could do.

The prospect of dying didn't seem to trouble Perpetua much at all, but two things did upset her - the thought of giving up her baby son before the day of her death, and

Ten Girls who didn't give in

the horrible state of the prison. Having been brought up in a wealthy home, she found the filthy prison hard to endure. But that night her mind was far from her prison, as God gave her a vision of heaven, a vision that showed her that she would soon be martyred for her faith.

'After a few days there was a report that we were to have a court hearing,' Perpetua wrote in a diary that was found many years later. 'My father came to the hearing, bringing my baby son with him. "Have pity on me, my daughter!" he cried. "Have pity on your father. I brought you up to become what you are. You are my favourite. Think of me, or your brothers, your mother and aunt. And think of your son! Just tell them you're not a Christian and they'll set you free." As he spoke, my father kissed my hands then threw himself at my feet, begging me to do what I needed to do to be sent free.'

'I looked at my father,' she wrote on, then pointed to a jug that was close by him. "'What would you call that?" I asked him. "It's a jug," he replied. "Would you not call it by another name?" I asked. "No," Father said. "I can't call it anything other than what it is. And it's a jug." So I said to my father, "I am a Christian. I can't call myself anything else because that is what I am.'"

Perpetua and her friends were returned to prison. But they didn't go alone as she was allowed to take her infant son with her.

'It's a strange thing,' Felicitas said, as they sat together in prison, 'but we are brothers and sisters together in the Lord, even though I'm a slave and you were born free.'

'That's what the Bible means when it says that we are all one in Christ Jesus,' agreed Perpetua. 'And now it looks as though we are going to end our lives together.'

Felicitas looked worried.

'Are you afraid, little sister?' asked Perpetua.

'I'm afraid of only one thing,' Felicitas explained. 'My baby is due in about a month from now and you know what the law says, a woman who is going to have a baby should not be put in the arena. So I'm afraid that you'll all go in the arena and be taken home to heaven, and I'll be left here in prison until I have my baby then be thrown to the wild animals along with criminals rather than Christians.'

Perpetua could understand how her friend felt, and the two of them prayed about it. Their prayers were answered when Felicitas had her baby early. A member of the Christian church in Carthage took the child home to bring her up as her own.

Ten Girls who didn't give in

'Let's tell each other Bible stories,' one of the young men suggested.

'Who'll start?' asked Perpetua; then she nodded to Felicitas. 'You go first.'

The slave had no doubt what she would share with her friends.

'I love the Revelation of John,' she said. 'His vision of heaven makes me want to go there.'

The others looked at her, knowing that they would indeed soon be in heaven if things didn't change dramatically for them.

'What part do you like especially?' Perpetua enquired.

Felicitas smiled, as she quoted the words, God 'will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.'

'Amen,' said the others together.

And the word 'amen' means 'so let it be'.

The day soon came when the young people were to die. The men were scheduled to be killed by wild beasts in the arena, all for the enjoyment of those people of Carthage who had paid to watch the spectacle. But the boar turned on its keeper and the bear refused to leave its cage. The captive leopard, which was hungry and desperate for food, pounced on one of the young men and fatally injured him.

Then it was the turn of Perpetua and Felicitas.

'Put these on,' the guard ordered, handing them clothes such as were worn by the priestesses of Ceres, robes like the ones Perpetua had dressed up in as a child.

'We cannot wear these,' Felicitas said quietly. 'We do not worship Ceres; we worship the Lord God.'

Angered by their refusal, the guards were about to take the women's robes off and send them into the arena wearing only thin undershirts. But although the crowds thought there was nothing wrong with watching Christians fed to ferocious beasts, they wouldn't have approved of them being seen in public in undershirts! So the two young women were dressed decently when they were led in to meet a fierce and hungry wild bull. Perpetua was led to the front.

'Keep on believing,' she said to her friend, and then faced the beast that was racing towards her.

The bull, foaming at the mouth from the teasing it had endured to make it angry, charged at the young woman, catching her just below the waist, and threw her to the ground. Perpetua, seeing her tunic torn, covered herself to be decent. Again the bull charged, and again she was thrown. As she struggled to her feet she saw her friend was also wounded. Raising her hand to encourage Felicitas, Perpetua slumped to the ground.

Ten Girls who didn't give in

The crowd decided it was time for a break, and the beast was caught and led away. But the break was only to give a little variety to the onlookers; it was not for the good of the prisoners. Rather than bore the paying public with too many animal displays, the guards brought out their Christian prisoners, stood them where they could best be seen by the audience and prepared to put them to death by the sword.

'Slay them!' the guard yelled to the young executioner.

Raising his sword he ran it through Felicitas and the young men, but he bungled killing Perpetua. Looking him straight in the eye, she grasped the point of the sword and held it to her throat.

'Kill her!' the crowd screamed in excitement.
'Kill her!'

And he did.

Around 200 years after Perpetua, Felicitas and their friends gave their lives rather than deny their Lord, one of the most famous teachers in all of Christian history became a bishop in North Africa. His name was Augustine, and he wrote books that are still being read today, 1600 years later! He knew the story of the two women very well, and he pointed out to his students how

Perpetua

well named Perpetua and Felicitas were. 'If you put their names together, Perpetua Felicitas, and translate the words they mean Everlasting Happiness, which is what they are now enjoying in heaven.

Fact file



The Roman Arena: Violent spectacles were a big part of Roman entertainment. The Colosseum in Rome was used to host many gladiatorial contests where participants were forced to fight each other as well as wild beasts. The fights were usually to the death, although the crowd could cry for mercy on a gladiator they approved of. Occasionally important people chose to fight as gladiators, most famously the Emperor Commodus. Those convicted of crimes could be forced to fight in the arena or they were simply thrown to the lions in public, as many Christians were. While the Colosseum was the centre for such activity, most Roman cities had an amphitheatre for the purpose.



Keynote: Perpetua had a very privileged upbringing and many around her would have thought that Christianity was beneath her, because most Christians at the time were slaves. She loved Jesus so much that she was willing to associate, and even die, with other Christians. She realised that her social status was

helpful in this life but that it would not impress God when it came to dealing with her sin.



Think: Perpetua and her friends encouraged themselves by remembering bits from the Bible when they were facing execution. The Bible contains many passages and stories which can help us when we are afraid. Can you think of any of them? Which would you remember in a situation like Perpetua's?



Prayer: Lord Jesus, please help me to remember that I will never be above needing your forgiveness, and give me the strength not to deny you under pressure. Amen