

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost, Year C

First Lesson: Joel 2:23-32

(Psalm 65)

Second Lesson: 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18

Gospel Lesson: Luke 18:9-14

The synopsis of Paul's life reads like an epitaph: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." These final words to his friend Timothy were written from a setting of extreme trial and surprising grace from prison. Paul does not say, "I won the race," but "I finished the race." The crown that awaits him (v. 8) is not the kingly crown, *diadem*, but the athlete's award, *stephanos*. The reader can sense the nonchalance of trust as he reviews his life and anticipates his death.

Paul was in prison at Rome during the horrific days of Nero's severe persecution of Christians following the fire in Rome. Tacitus tells of the circus events where Christians were punished in the games and sent before the lions as scapegoats for Nero, whom many in Rome suspected as the one who started the fire that swept out of control and burned a vast part of the city. Paul had carried on his ministry throughout the time of his imprisonment to the extent that he could inform the Philippians that members of the Praetorian Guard in Rome had heard about Christ because of his imprisonment (Phil. 1:13). Indeed, his imprisonment in Rome had contributed to the progress of the gospel (Phil. 1:12).

Paul wrote the letter to Timothy from Rome under circumstances that were intense and dangerous. Rome was a cruel and angry city at the time Paul wrote to his young friend. Nero had become emperor in A.D. 54

through murder and intrigue that had been actually sponsored by his ambitious mother, Agrippina. Britannicus the son of Claudius should have become emperor by right of birth as eldest son of the emperor, but he and his father were no match for Claudius's latest wife, Julia Agrippina.

Agrippina's son, Nero, was a teenager when he began his rule as emperor. The opening years of his reign were essentially peaceful and moderate because of the regency authority of Afranius Burrus and Lucius Annaeus Seneca, who together skillfully governed the Roman Empire in Nero's behalf until the young emperor at age nineteen decided to take full power into his own hands. From that point until Nero's death in 68, the Roman Empire descended into a period of terrifying cruelty and sadism sponsored by the depraved Nero himself.

Nothing could stand in Nero's way or interfere with his personal desires or his lavish plans for Rome. He instituted daily gladiatorial contests in the arena; these became progressively bloodthirsty and decadent. Seneca wrote with dismay in his memoirs about these daily events at the Colosseum. After one such gladiatorial contest he wrote, "I felt as if I had been in a sewer." Nero became impatient with the moderation of Burrus and Seneca, dismissed them from their posts, and finally arranged for their deaths. He murdered his own wife and finally arranged for the assassination of his mother, Agrippina. Her last words tell something of the horrifying story of Nero. "The one good thing about my death," she said to her executioners, "is that the womb that bore Nero is now dead."

Tacitus the historian accused Nero himself of starting the infamous fire in Rome in 64 in order to clear the way for his own grand plans for new buildings in the city. But what was to have been a small fire grew into a great conflagration that destroyed much of the city. Following this fire Nero in the cynical style that marked his reign, blamed the small but growing band of Christian believers in Rome for the arson and meted out to them some of the most horrible punishments that have ever been chronicled in a civilized society. Tacitus describes the terror of that persecution:

And so to get rid of this rumor, Nero set up as the culprits and punished with the utmost refinement of cruelty a class hated for their abominations who are commonly called Christians. Christus from who their name is derived was executed at the hands of the procurator Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius. Checked for the moment this pernicious superstition again broke out not only in Judea the source of that evil but even in Rome; that receptacle for everything that is sordid and degrading from every quarter of the globe; which there finds a following. Accord

ingly, arrest was first made of those who confessed (i.e., to being Christians); then, on their evidence, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much on the charge of arson as because of hatred of the human race.

Besides being put to death, they were made to serve as objects of amusement; they were clad in the hides of beasts and torn to death by dogs; others were crucified, others set on fire to illuminate the night when daylight failed. Nero had thrown open his grounds for the display and was putting on a show in the circus, where he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer or drove about in his chariot.

All this gave rise to a feeling of pity, even toward men whose guilt merited the most exemplary punishment; for it was felt that they were being destroyed not for the public good but to gratify the cruelty of an individual. (*Annals* 90.44)

This is the city where Paul the Christian was imprisoned. At first his situation was tolerable. At the close of the book of Acts Luke tells us that upon Paul's arrival in Rome as a prisoner in about 63, he was probably under house arrest for at least two years and was during that time able to receive visitors "quite openly and unhindered" (Acts 28:31).

But by the time Paul wrote his final letters from Rome (Philippians and 2 Timothy), his safety was very precarious and the conditions of his imprisonment had become harsher as the situation in Rome itself had become more chaotic and ominous. He gave at least two clues in the Philippian letter that it was written from Rome and that he was being held prisoner in one of the several prisons in that city, perhaps located near or actually in the vast villa at the southwest border of the Forum where the emperor himself lived.

First, there is Paul's reference to the Praetorian Guard (Phil. 1:13). This is almost always a reference to the troops that were attached to the emperor and served as his personal guard. They were stationed in Rome and traveled with him when he left the city.

The second clue is even more intriguing. Paul sent greetings from the Christians in Rome to the friends at Philippi and added the surprising statement, "especially [from] those of Caesar's household" (Phil. 4:22). Did Paul want to give his readers a clue as to which of the five principal prisons in Nero's Rome he was being held? Was the apostle at that time being held in the prison at Nero's Villa Vale? We cannot be sure. What is clear, however, is that this letter and the letter to the Philippians were not sent from the comfortable safety and stability of Caesarea on the Palestinian coast, but from Rome itself, from the very heart of the decadent empire of Nero, and

that is was written at the most unstable and, especially for Christians, dangerous period in that city's history.

Perhaps guards from the Roman cohort, the Praetorian Guard had become acquainted with Epaphroditus as he served the prisoner Paul. There were speculations in the early church that Paul, during his final imprisonment, had been visited by Roman officials who were themselves troubled on the one side by this remarkable new message about Jesus Christ the Lord and on the other by the increasing decadence and inhumanity of the reign of the emperor Nero. There are accounts in early church writings that Seneca, the brother of Gallio whom Paul had met at Corinth (Acts 18), visited Paul in private, as well as reports of visits by the historian Suetonius.

We cannot conclude such visits from this text, but we do know that there were persons in the Roman Praetorian Guard who had become Christians during this time. This handful of people in Caesar's household would expand over the years, while the Roman Empire continued on its course toward disintegration.

In danger of death, Paul also suffered desertion. But the protecting presence of the Lord sustained him and empowered him with the grace to forgive (2 Tim. 4:16). The persecutor-turned-apostle had received forgiveness from the dying Stephen (Acts 7:60; 8:1), and now extends that forgiveness to his deserters. Paul's message and mission remained intact (2 Tim 4:17), and God received the glory (v. 18).

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