

iv. the Catacombs

by Martyrs of the Catacombs

The sermon explores Marcellus's transformative journey into the Catacombs, revealing the profound faith and hope of early Christians amidst persecution.

Scripture: Psalm 23:4, John 8:12, Romans 8:38, 1 Corinthians 15:55, Revelation 21:4

Topics: "Persecuted Church", "Faith Triumphs"

Description

In the sermon 'No light, but rather darkness visible,' the preacher explores the journey of Marcellus, a Roman soldier, as he ventures into the catacombs to seek out the persecuted Christians. Despite the darkness and danger, Marcellus is drawn by a desire to uncover the secrets of these Christians and is moved by their unwavering faith and hope even in the face of death. As he witnesses a Christian gathering in the catacombs, Marcellus is touched by their songs of praise, prayers for forgiveness, and belief in the victory over death through Jesus Christ. The preacher delves into Marcellus' internal struggle as he grapples with the newfound revelations and the profound impact of encountering the persecuted Christians in the depths of the catacombs.

Transcript

"No light, but rather darkness visible

Served only to discover sights of woe,

Regions of sorrow, doleful shades."

They went on in utter darkness, until at length the passage widened and they came to steps which led below. Marcellus held the boy's dress and followed him.

It was certainly a situation that might provoke alarm. He was voluntarily placing himself in the power of men whom his class had driven from the upper air into these drear abodes. To them he could only be known as a persecutor. Yet such was the impression which he had formed of their gentleness and meekness that he had no fear of harm. It was in the power of this boy to lead him to death in the thick darkness of these impenetrable labyrinths, but even of this he did not think. It was a desire to know more of these Christians, to get at their secret, that led him on, and as he had sworn, so had he resolved that this visit should not be made use of to their betrayal or injury.

Plan of the Catacombs

After descending for some time the steps ended, and they walked along the level ground. Soon they turned and entered a small vaulted chamber which was lighted from the faint glow of a furnace. The boy had walked on with the unhesitating step of one perfectly familiar with the way. Arriving at the chamber, he lighted a torch which lay on the floor and resumed his journey.

There is something in the air of a burial place which is unlike that of any other place. It is not altogether the closeness, or the damp, or the sickening smell of earth, but a certain subtle influence which unites with them and intensifies them. The spell of the dead is there, and it rests alike on mind and body. Such was the air of the catacombs. Cold and damp, it struck upon the visitor like the chill atmosphere from the realms of death. The living felt the mysterious power of the dead.

The boy Pollio went on before and Marcellus followed after. The torch but faintly illumined the intense darkness. No beam of day, no ray however weak, could ever enter here to relieve the thickness of the oppressive gloom. It was literally darkness that might be felt. The torchlight shone out but a few paces and then died in the darkness.

The path went winding on with innumerable turnings. Suddenly Pollio stopped and pointed downward. Peering through the gloom, Marcellus saw an opening in the path which led further down. It was a pit to which no bottom appeared.

"Where does this lead to?"

"Below."

"Are there more passages below?"

"O yes. As many as there are here, and still below that again. I have been in three different stories of these paths, and some of the old fossors say that in certain places they go down to a very great depth."

Christian Tomb

The passage wound along till all idea of locality was utterly lost. Marcellus could not tell whether he was within a few paces of the entrance or many furlongs off. His bewildered thoughts soon began to turn to other things. The first impressions of gloom departed he looked more particularly upon what he passed, and regarded more closely the many wonders of this strange place. All along the walls were tablets which appeared to cover long and narrow excavations. These cellular niches were ranged on both sides so closely that but little space was left between. The inscriptions that were upon the tablets showed that they were Christian tombs. He had not time to stop and read, but he noticed the frequent recurrence of the same expression, such as,

HONORIA--SHE SLEEPS IN PEACE.

FAUSTA--IN PEACE.

Gemella Dormt In Pace

On nearly every tablet he saw the same sweet and gentle word. "PEACE," thought Marcellus; "what wonderful people are these Christians, who even amid such scenes as these can cherish their lofty contempt of death!"

His eyes grew more and more accustomed to the gloom as he walked along. Now the passage way grew narrower; the roof drooped, the sides approached; they had to stoop and go along more slowly. The walls were rough and rudely cut as the workmen left them when they drew along here their last load of sand for the edifices above. Subterranean damp and fungous growths overspread them in places, deepening their somber color and filling the air with thick moisture, while the smoke of the torches made the atmosphere still more oppressive.

They passed hundreds of side passages and scores of places where many paths met, all branching off in different directions. These innumerable paths showed Marcellus how hopelessly he was now cut off from the world above. This boy held his life in his hands.

"Do any ever lose their way?"

"Often."

"What becomes of them?"

"Sometimes they wander till they meet some friends, sometimes they are never heard of again. But at present, most of us know the place so well that if we lose our way we soon wander into familiar paths again."

One thing particularly struck the young soldier, and that was the immense preponderance of small tombs. Pollio told him that they were the graves of children, and thus opened to him thoughts and emotions unfelt before.

"Children!" thought he, "what do they here, the young, the pure, the innocent? Why were they not buried above, where the sun might shine kindly and the flowers bloom sweetly over their graves? Did they tread such dark paths as these on their way through life? Did they bear their part in the sufferings of those that lingered here flying from persecution? Did the noxious air and the never-ending gloom of these drear abodes shorten their fair young lives, and send their stainless spirits out of life before their time?"

"We have been a long time on the way," said Marcellus, "will we soon be there?"

"Very soon," said the boy. Whatever ideas Marcellus might have had about hunting out these fugitives before he entered here, he now saw that all attempts to do so must be in vain. An army of men might enter here and never come in sight of the Christians. The further they went, the more hopeless would be their journey. They could be scattered through the innumerable passages and wander about till they died.

But now a low sound arose from afar which arrested his attention. Sweet beyond all description, low and musical, it came down the long passages and broke upon his charmed senses like a voice from the skies.

As they went on, a light beamed before them which cast forth its rays into the darkness. The sounds grew louder, now swelling into a magnificent chorus, now dying away into a tender wail of supplication.

Chamber

In a few minutes they reached a turn in the path, and then a scene burst upon their sight.

"Stop," said Pollio, arresting his companion and extinguishing the torch. Marcellus obeyed, and looked earnestly at the spectacle before him. It was a vaulted chamber about fifteen feet in height and thirty feet

square. In this place there were crowded about a hundred people, men, women, and children. At one side there was a table, behind which stood a venerable man who appeared to be the leader among them. The walls of the room seemed to have been rudely decorated with coarse pictures. The place was illuminated with the glare of torches which threw a lurid glow upon the assembly. The people were careworn and emaciated, and their faces were characterized by the same pallor which Marcellus had observed in the fossor. But the expression which now rested upon them was not of sorrow, or misery, or despair. Hope illumined their eyes, their upturned faces spoke of joy and triumph. The scene moved the soul of the beholder to its inmost depths, for it confirmed all that he had seen of the Christians, their heroism, their hope, their peace, which rested on something hidden from him. As he listened he heard their song, chanted by the whole congregation:

"Great and marvelous are thy works

Lord God Almighty,

Just and true are thy ways

Thou king of saints.

Who shall not fear thee, O Lord, and glorify thy name?

For thou only art holy.

For all nations shall come and worship before thee,

For thy judgments are made manifest."

Then there was a pause. The venerable leader read something from a scroll which was new to Marcellus. It was a sublime assertion of the immortality of the soul, and life after death. The congregation seemed to hang upon the words as though they were the words of life. Finally, the reader came to a burst of joyous exclamation which drew murmurs of gratitude and enthusiastic hope from the audience. The words thrilled upon the heart of the listener, though he did not understand their full meaning. "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God which giveth us the victory, through our Lord Jesus Christ."

These words seemed to open to his mind a new world with new thoughts. Sin--death--Christ, with all the infinite train of ideas that rested upon them, arose dimly before his awakening soul. The desire for the Christian's secret which he had conceived now burned more eagerly within him.

The leader raised his head, and stretching out his hands, uttered a fervent prayer. Addressing the invisible God, he poured forth a confession of sin and guilt. He plead for pardon through the atoning death of Christ. He prayed for the Spirit from on high, so that they might become holy. Then he enumerated all their sorrows, and prayed for deliverance, asking for faith in life, victory in death, and immortality in heaven for the sake of the Redeemer, Jesus.

After this followed another chant which was sung as before:

"Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men,

And he will dwell with them,

And they shall be his people,
And God himself shall be with them
And be their God.
And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes,
And there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor sighing,
Neither shall there be any more pain,
For the former things are passed away. Amen.
Blessing, and glory, and wisdom.
And thanksgiving, and honor, and power, and might,
Be unto our God
For ever and ever. Amen."

Now the congregation began to disperse. Pollio walked forward, leading Marcellus. At the sight of his martial figure and glittering armor they all started backward, and would have fled by the different paths. But Marcellus called in a loud voice,

"Fear not, Christians, I am alone and in your power."

Upon this they all turned back, and looked at him with anxious curiosity. The aged man who led the meeting advanced and looked earnestly upon him.

"Who are you, and why do you seek us out in the last resting-place that is left to us on earth?"

"Do not suspect me of evil. I come alone, unattended. I am at your mercy."

"But what can a soldier and a Pretorian wish of us? Are you pursued? Are you a criminal? Is your life in danger?"

"No. I am an officer high in rank and authority. But I have all my life been seeking anxiously after the truth. I have heard much of you Christians, but in these times of persecution it is difficult to find you in Rome. I have sought you here."

At this the aged man requested the assembly to withdraw, that he might converse with the new comer. The others readily did so, and retired by different ways, feeling much relieved. A pale lady advanced eagerly to Pollio and caught him in her arms.

"How long you were, my son!"

"I encountered this officer, dear mother, and was detained."

"Thank God you are safe. But who is he?"

"I think he is an honest man," said the boy, "see how he confides in us."

"Caecilia," said the leader, "do not go away for a little time." The lady remained, and a few others did the same.

"I am Honorius," said the old man, addressing Marcellus, "a humble elder in the Church of Christ. I believe that you are sincere and earnest. Tell us now what you want with us."

"My name is Marcellus, and I am a captain in the Pretorian Guard."

"Alas!" cried Honorius, and clasping his hands he fell back in his seat. The others looked at Marcellus with mournful eyes, and the lady Caecilia cried out in an agony of grief,

"Pollio! how have you betrayed us!"

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