

Lord, we thank you for the example of Cyprian, bishop of Carthage in the mid 3rd century. Amen,

Today is when the church celebrates the life of Saint Cyprian of Carthage. It is a day that is special to me because my son was baptized and at the same service, I was instituted as Rector of three churches, south of Ithaca in New York, just north of the Pennsylvania border.

But who was St. Cyprian? Born in 210 he grew up and was considered the best Latin writer in the church of his day.

His relevance to the Gospel lesson is related first to his baptism at age 35 of which he wrote:

“with the help of the water of new birth, the stain of my former life was washed away, and a light from above, serene and pure, was infused into my reconciled heart... a second birth restored me to a new person.”.

It is important to see that in his experience forgiveness flowed through the Sacrament of the Church. We'll come back to that.

Within 4 years Cyprian became bishop of Carthage, a city in north Africa.

Less than a year later, the Emperor Decius ordered sacrifices to the gods throughout the empire. Cyprian chose to go into hiding rather than face possible execution. He defended his hiding, “[One who] departs for a while does not deny his faith, but waits for the time...” Cyprian shepherded his people from a distance, and encouraged others to also go into hiding, but many saw his decision to hide to be cowardly. After the persecution died down, people who returned to church from hiding were admitted. But those who had lapsed, whether by actually sacrificing, or by producing signed statements saying they had sacrificed to the Roman Gods, were at first denied reentry. Two controversies emerged:

1. Some produced signed statements from charismatic popular leaders in the church that they had done adequate penance. This provoked a longstanding widespread conflict between the duly ordained and the charismatic leaders. Did forgiveness flow through the popularity of a person or through the authority and sacraments of the church. The hierarchy of the church always won this argument, which came up as an issue often, though you wouldn't have heard about that very much. (It would be fair to ask, had the charismatic leaders won the day, would the church have survived? That's a question for another day.)
2. The second controversy had to do with what the church would require of those who had lapsed during the persecution. Some people wanted to welcome the lapsed back with minimal repentance demanded of them. Others said the lapsed could never make up for what they had done. They should not be readmitted under any circumstances. Cyprian held a middle way, strict but forgiving where the hierarchy of the church would require public repentance and penance of the lapsed.

The purists who denied any forgiveness of the lapsed, were condemned as heretics, so they just started their own church which gradually fizzled out.

Back in Carthage, 6 years later, another persecution of Christians came under Emperor Valerian in 256. In 257 Cyprian was banished, but he was recalled in 258 and he was questioned by the Romans about being a “ringleader:” who led others to not “conform” to the Roman rituals. Rome had to make an example of him



before his wicked associates. “The authority of the law would be ratified in his blood.” And so the sentence was announced: to “be executed with the sword” Cyprian replied, “Thanks be to God.”

He was led out of the city. “A vast multitude” of the faithful followed him out and surrounded him with their prayers and their support. He was immediately beheaded. The Christians buried him nearby, eventually building a church over the location.

(The full text is provided in case a reader is interested:)

Galerius Maximus: "Are you Thascius Cyprianus?"

Cyprian: "I am."

Galerius: "The most sacred Emperors have commanded you to conform to the Roman rites."

Cyprian: "I refuse."

Galerius: "Take heed for yourself."

Cyprian: "Do as you are bid; in so clear a case I may not take heed."

Galerius, after briefly conferring with his judicial council, with much reluctance pronounced the following sentence: "You have long lived an irreligious life, and have drawn together a number of ~~men~~ [people] bound by an unlawful association, and professed yourself an open enemy to the gods and the religion of Rome; and the pious, most sacred and august Emperors ... have endeavored in vain to bring you back to conformity with their religious observances; whereas therefore you have been apprehended as principal and ringleader in these infamous crimes, you shall be made an example to those whom you have wickedly associated with you; the authority of law shall be ratified in your blood." He then read the sentence of the court from a written tablet: "It is the sentence of this court that Thascius Cyprianus be executed with the sword."

Cyprian: "Thanks be to God."

The execution was carried out at once in an open place near the city. A vast multitude followed Cyprian on his last journey. He removed his garments without assistance, knelt down, and prayed. After he blindfolded himself, he was beheaded by the sword. The body was interred by Christians near the place of execution. What would we decide to do today? As Anglicans we're wired to take the middle way as Cyprian did. But as Episcopalians we're fairly liberal so we might be very forgiving, erring on the side of laxity. I think it is hard to know how we would react when it is just theory.

In some ways we're sympathetic with the Romans who were concerned with conformity. They wanted to have something that would define them as Roman. It wasn't sincerity they were after, or even belief, they wanted a defining ritual and Christians refused.

The Romans' response to those who refused to sacrifice to the gods is not unlike how we are tempted to respond when people don't conform to our special rituals. We just passed the 10th anniversary of the NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick taking the knee, not standing during the national anthem. This provoked a very visceral unforgiving response. That would be the last season he played—No team wanted the controversy.

Do you remember how you responded to his not conforming. Did his peaceful demonstration irk your ire? Or your friends'? Did it matter that he was protesting police brutality and racial inequality? Do you see him as a civil rights activist or a disrespectful person of incredible privilege paid millions of dollars?

I cannot end without bringing up one thing that bothers me about the Gospel lesson today. In our culture once a gift is given, you cannot take it back. It is hard to see the God figure forgive the slave, but later take it back because the slave treated others without forgiveness, but God's love is unconditional, and God's forgiveness can be trusted. God could hold us accountable for future actions, but once a sin is forgiven, God won't take it back. Parables illustrate a point, not necessarily speaking the truth in every aspect. You must evaluate the truth of each point that could be made. Amen....