

Scripture Reading:

Acts 11: “13 And [Cornelius] told us how he had seen an angel standing in his house, who said to him, 'Send men to Joppa, and call for Simon whose surname is Peter, 14 who will tell you words by which you and all your household will be saved.' 15 And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, as upon us at the beginning. 16 Then I remembered the word of the Lord, how He said, 'John indeed baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' 17 If therefore God gave them the same gift as He gave us when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?" 18 When they heard these things they became silent; & they glorified God, saying, "Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life." 19 Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to no one but the Jews only. 20 But some of them were men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists, preaching the Lord Jesus. 21 And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord. 22 Then news of these things came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent out Barnabas to go as far as Antioch. 23 When he came and had seen the grace of God, he was glad, and encouraged them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord. 24 For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. 25 Then Barnabas departed for Tarsus to seek Saul. 26 And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for a whole year they assembled with the church and taught a great many people. And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.”

'The Church in Antioch'

I want to begin this morning with a story: The story of a slave girl named Blandina. Our text tells of the founding of the Church in the Roman city of Antioch and just over a hundred years later that Gospel had spread and come to the city of Lyon in what is today known as the nation of France.

Jerusalem had been destroyed in AD 70, and soon after Rome ceased to be a protector of the young Church but instead under Emperor Marcus Aurelius a great persecution against the Saints had broken out. At first they were just outcasts, no longer welcome in homes, driven from the baths and markets and then they became victims of mob violence as they were made scapegoats for various problems and often had their homes vandalized. Soon there were horrific myths and lies being spread about what these “Christians” really did:

- They were cannibals, eating flesh and drinking blood...
- They were accused of incest because brothers & sisters loved one another...
- And there were even accusations of child abuse because of what was done to Jesus, the Son of God, as some atheists do today.

Soon the persecution was “official” and members of the Church were hauled before government inquires & weaker members of the church began to turn others in and to renounce the faith. Soon, those who refused to renounce the faith were being tortured and killed in public to please the Roman crowds. You can still visit the amphitheater in Lyon where these bloody events took place.

It was here, in the prison behind this very amphitheater, where a group of Saints huddled in prayer knowing what lay before them in the coming days. It included Bishop Pothinus, a local deacon along with a number of others... And Blandina, a frail slave girl who had recently converted to the way.

The others were rightly concerned for Blandina because with her physical condition and being young in the faith it would be very difficult for her to hold up under the torture and to resist renouncing her faith in order to be relieved of the pain and suffering.

- Our Lord had other plans and we are blessed to have eye witness account in letters to draw from in remembering this young woman.

August 1st in the year 177 was to be a holiday to celebrate the greatness of Rome and the emperor and the governor was expected to show his patriotism by sponsoring entertainment for the whole city.

- It was expensive to hire gladiators, boxers and wrestlers.
- It would be a lot cheaper to torture these captured Christians as part of the holiday entertainment!

Blandina and the others were confined in the darkest and most awful part of the prison; many of them suffocated there. Some were placed in stocks; others were placed in a hot-iron seat where their flesh was burned. This was literally a human barbecue where the victim was chained onto a grate over burning coals. *An example of this barbaric torture instrument can still be seen today at the archeological museum at Lyon.*

It seemed impossible that any could live, having been tortured so cruelly, yet they were strengthened by the Lord, and they exhorted and encouraged each other in the faith. Pothinus, the 92-year-old bishop of Lyon, died in his prison cell two days after his torture at the judgment seat. *That cell too can still be visited today in Lyon. It is about the size of a home electric dishwasher, so cramped he could not have even stood up straight.*

After enduring days of such torture, forty-eight Christians were taken to the amphitheater to “entertain” the crowd during this Roman holiday by being thrown to wild beasts. Blandina was one of them. Though she had already endured numerous tortures and treated with inhumane brutality, she was then suspended on a stake in front of the wild beasts. Though it was intended to terrorize her fellow Christians, her torture inspired them for when they looked at her on that stake it reminded them of Christ on the cross, who was crucified for them, remembering that everyone who suffered for Him would enjoy eternal life with God.

- Amazingly, none of the beasts attacked Blandina so she was taken down from the stake and cast back into the prison again.

“On the last day of the contests, Blandina was again brought into this arena along with Ponticus, a young boy of about 15.

- Every day they had been brought to witness the sufferings of others and pressed to deny their faith and swear by idols.

Ponticus died first, and Blandina remained the last. The frail slave girl who others thought too weak! She had encouraged many others and saw them go on before her to Jesus. Now she was ready to hasten after them. She faced her death rejoicing- as if being called to a marriage feast rather than wild beasts. After the scourging, after the wild beasts, after the roasting seat, she was finally enclosed in a net, and thrown before a bull and was tossed about by the animal: Blandina seemed to feel none of the things which were happening to her, on account of her hope and firm hold upon what had been entrusted to her, and her communion with Christ.

- The frustrated Roman soldiers finally ran little Brandina through with their swords.

After the bodies of these martyrs were exposed for six days, they were burned to ashes and thrown into the Rhone river. The bodies of those who had suffocated in prison were thrown to the dogs, and guards were stationed to prevent the remaining Christians from burying them.

- By doing so, these Romans tried to prevent even the hope of a resurrection for these Christians.”

An ancient letter that recorded these persecutions in Lyon was included in the Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius and stated: “While we were all trembling, and her earthly mistress, who was herself one of the contending martyrs, was apprehensive, lest, through the weakness of the flesh, she should not be able to make a bold confession, Blandina was filled with such power, that her ingenious tormentors, who relieved and succeeded each other from morning till night, confessed that they were overcome and had nothing more that they could inflict upon her. They were amazed that she continued to breathe after her whole body was pierced and torn asunder. In the midst of her sufferings, as she for a moment revived, she repeatedly exclaimed, ‘I am a Christian; and nothing vile is done among us!’”

- This story and the many other accounts of those Martyred for the faith who have gone before us should be very familiar to us.

These accounts were long ago scrubbed from our government schools and are often neglected even in our Christians schools or our home schools. Your family should have a copy of Fox’s Book of Martyrs and you should read from it often and your children should know it well. I shared this story this morning to help us understand the immense step that the Church of Jesus Christ takes here in the Roman City of Antioch. Not only have our schools dropped the accounts about the martyrs, but they have a revisionist view of Greek and Roman history.

Young people today are much more likely to hear about the glory that was Rome or the wisdom of the Greeks, than the cruelty of Rome and the vanity that was Greece.

- Yes God in His providence used the mighty Kingdoms of this earth to protect His people until Jesus came to save them from their sins.

Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome are pictured in the King’s great dream in Daniel chapter two as the golden head, silver chest, thighs of bronze and legs of iron. As the Prophet Habakkuk rightly pointed out, these nations were evil nations capable of great cruelty as we see just a little over a hundred years later in Lyon. All of these Kingdoms had plans to rule the entire world, but each has fallen on the dust heap of history...

- They were smashed by the rock that is Christ which the King also saw in his dream.

Daniel tells the King that in his dream he saw that, “the iron, the bronze, the silver, and the gold were crushed together, and became like chaff from the summer threshing floors; the wind carried them away so that no trace of them was found. And the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth.”

And as Daniel gives the King the proper interpretation of the dream we see that “in the days of these kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, & it shall stand forever.”

- This is the story that Luke is telling in the 2nd half of his orderly account written for his friend Theophilus here in the Book of Acts.

Now to the text before us in chapter 11...

This morning Luke presents a number of simple steps that lead to the establishment of a Church in Antioch, a city which at that time was the third largest city in all of the Roman Empire behind Rome and Alexandria.

Luke reminds us again that the faithful Saints had been scattered from Jerusalem after Stephan was killed: We have studied at length what happened in Samaria and all of Judea and now Luke begins to talk about the rest of the world and it should remind us that as many as 25,000 believers may have been scattered at that time! At first these Jewish Saints went only to the Jews with the Good News that Jesus was the Messiah, but now God has shown Peter and the Church in Jerusalem that the Gentiles were to be brought into the Kingdom as well. As word of this great change spread, some of the Saints in Antioch grew bold and began to preach to the Gentiles as well and God richly blessed their efforts.

- **Luke tells us that the “hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord.”**

News of this revival travels back to Jerusalem and as they had done with other events, the Church sends a trusted ambassador to see what God is doing and to make sure that all is being done in good order. There is much discussion about why Barnabas went to get Saul for help with the work in Antioch and I for one think those discussions may very well have begun right here in Jerusalem: Barnabas had taken the converted Saul to the Apostles...

- **Jesus said Saul would be a vessel sent to the Gentiles they had sent him on to Tarsus for safety.**

In any case when Barnabas arrives in Antioch he witnesses the grace of God and it makes him glad! Barnabas means son of encouragement and he certainly lived up to his name.

- **We saw Barnabas at the end of chapter four selling land and bringing the money to meet the needs of other Saints.**
- **It was Barnabas he believed the testimony of Saul, despite his being the great persecutor of the church, and took him to the other disciples.**
- **Now here in Antioch Barnabas encourages the new Saints telling them that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord.**

Luke tells us again that Barnabas was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. God continues to bless the Church there at Antioch as a great many people were added to the Lord!

- **We reviewed the great persecution in Lyon earlier because it happened only about one hundred and thirty years later in a very similar Roman city.**

People coming to the Lord and continuing with the Lord as Barnabas admonished them would not have been easy and that is something we should remember and see as a lesson for us even today. Barnabas goes to Tarsus to seek out Saul and they both return and spend the next year discipling the new converts here in Antioch.

- **Luke tells us that they “assembled with the church and taught a great many people.”**

And finally Luke tells us that “the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.”

Now the term Christian is very familiar to us today and has been down through Church history: It was the title that faithful Brandina took even in the face of brutal torture and finally death.

**She proclaimed to her Roman persecutors to the bitter end:
“I am a Christian; and nothing vile is done among us”**

Now it is interesting that the word **Christian** is only used three times in the Bible. It is used twice by Luke, here where he tells us that the term was first used in Antioch and again when King Agrippa declares to the Apostle Paul, "You almost persuade me to become a Christian." The other occurrence is in Peter's first epistle where we read words that were likely a great comfort to Blandina and the other martyrs in the early church:

"12 Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; 13 but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. 14 If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified. 15 But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people's matters. 16 Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter. 17 For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God? 18 Now "If the righteous one is scarcely saved, Where will the ungodly and the sinner appear?" 19 Therefore let those who suffer according to the will of God commit their souls to Him in doing good, as to a faithful Creator."

So we have **Christian** used three times and in all three cases it is those outside the Church who seem to be using the term!

- **Quite simply, a Christian is one who believes that Jesus was raised from the dead and who follows Him as one of His disciples!**
- **As we remember in ordinary time: Hear and obey Jesus!**
- **This is what the world should see & "Christian" gives them a way to rightly identify who we are.**

When speaking among ourselves, both in the Scriptures and down through Church history, we more often are called **disciples, believers, followers of the Way or Jesus... Saints, the called out ones, children of God, brothers or sisters and often just the beloved.**

- **However, we should not avoid or belittle the title of Christian:**
- **The world may mean it as a reproach, but we can claim in as a title of distinction!**

So let me leave you with a couple of questions to ponder this morning if you are one who is a disciple of Jesus...

- **If you are, the world will likely label you as a Christian!**
- **Of course they will add all the insults and false accusations that the Romans did with Blandina and the others.**

We don't often get called cannibals or accused of incest these days, but you don't have to go far to see us called ignorant bigots who have denied all reason and like to oppress our wives and beat our children.

It was William Wilberforce who rightly asked the first question I have in mind, in an age much like our own in England:

- **"If you were put on trial for being a Christian: Would there be enough evidence to convict you?"**

We hear a lot today about "quiet Christians" or "closet Christians" or "relevant Christians" or even Christians who strive to not offend.

These are mostly folks who want to call themselves disciples of Jesus, but are often not in danger of having the world accuse them of being Christians... At least not like THOSE Christians... The ones who actually believe that Jesus rose from the dead and that we have to do what He says or face judgment! In other words, IF you had lived in Lyon in the year 177 AD would the Roman officials have hauled you off to the arena?

So today IF, no when, the world accuses us of being Christians & add a bunch of false charges, may we always stand with Blandina saying, “I am a Christian; and nothing vile is done among us”

And that leads me to the second question in an age where we see more and more signs of coming persecution for the Christian Church:

- **Are we those who will hold fast to the faith even in the face of a cruel death or persecutions?**

If we are honest, we must all say that we would not in our own strength. Yes, we will persevere only with the help of our Comforter...

- **The Spirit of God!**

But that does not mean that we can just wander along and hope or expect that He will be there when we need Him! We must hear the encouragement, given by the son of encouragement Barnabas, to these early Christians who would face severe persecution in a few short years:

- **Barnabas encouraged them all that “with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord!”**

These Saints were brought to faith in the midst of a very wicked Empire... We are raising our covenant children in an age that grows more and more wicked and hostile to the Faith.

Psalms tell of two paths that can be taken: One with rich blessings and the other with a very bad end.

1 “Blessed is the man who walks NOT in the counsel of the ungodly, Nor stands in the path of sinners, Nor sits in the seat of the scornful”

- **We are not to follow the counsel of the wicked...**
- **We are not to walk in the ways of the wicked...**
- **And we are not to join with the scorning crowds cheering on the beasts in the arena!**

2 “[this blessed man delights] in the law of the Lord, And in His law he meditates day and night. 3 He shall be like a tree Planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season, whose leaf also shall not wither; and whatever he does shall prosper.”

- **Knowing, studying and meditating on God’s Word as well as right worship are our source of strength in this life, just as the streams of water are for the tree.**
- **Without the stream the tree dies and without the Word of God and right worship we will wither!**

With the stream, the tree grows and bears fruit and so it is with those who meditate on God’s Word and do not forsake the assembling together: Their lives will be full of good fruit!

4 “The ungodly are not so, But are like the chaff which the wind drives away.”

Yes, the wicked are those dead trees who had no water... The chaff left over from harvest of the wheat that is blown in the wind:

The arena there at Lyon is now a ruin and the Roman Empire which ordered the death of those Saints has been cast into the dustbin of history: Chaff blown in the wind as Daniel prophesied to King Nebuchadnezzar.

- **The faith that Blandina proclaimed on the dust of that arena floor in the 2nd Century lives on in the hearts and minds of many millions of Christians today!**

Those who know Jesus continue to proclaim, even in the midst of great persecutions, “We are Christians; and nothing vile is done among us”

The Kingdom of Jesus is filling the earth just as the Psalmist concludes:

5 “Therefore the ungodly shall not stand in the judgment, Nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous.”

6 For the Lord knows the way of the righteous, But the way of the ungodly shall perish.”

- **Jesus came that we might have life and life abundant!**

If you reject this life that is freely offered, your end will not be one of peace, not even the peace that these martyrs knew during their cruel deaths...

Jesus said, “49 So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come forth, separate the wicked from among the just, 50 and cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth.”

May we be those who chose life and life abundant!

An abundant life that causes those around us in the world to declare, ‘they are Christians!’”

And may we learn, in good times and bad, to steadfastly declare with those who have gone before: “We are Christians; and nothing vile is done among us”

Communion Meditation: Acts 2:

“40 And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, “Be saved from this perverse generation.” 41 Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. 42 And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. 43 Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. 44 Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, 45 and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. 46 So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, 47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.”