

Readings: *Hosea 2: 16 – 17, 21 – 22; Psalm 44 (45): 11, 12, 14 – 17; Matthew 25: 1 – 13.*

Saint Cecilia was a member of the Roman family of the Caecilii. She is one of the most popular of the early Roman virgin-martyrs, said to have died in the early third century. But little more is known for certain than her name and the fact of her martyrdom, since the account of her suffering dates from the fifth century.

This account tells that – like many of the other virgin martyrs – she was a Christian, whose father arranged her marriage to a pagan man named Valerian. On the day on which they were to be married Cecilia sat alone, praying and “singing to God in her heart”. When Valerian arrived she told him that she was protected by an angel who would punish him if he tried to consummate the marriage, but that if he was baptized he too would see the angel. He went to the Pope and was baptized. On his return he did see the angel, who crowned them both with wreaths of flowers.

Soon Valerian’s brother Tiburtius arrived, was convinced by Cecilia and went to be baptized.

From this point Valerian and Tiburtius spent their time and money on charitable works. Eventually they were arrested for burying the bodies of Christian martyrs, tried, condemned and beheaded.

Officers were now sent to persuade Cecilia to sacrifice to the Roman gods, but instead she converted them to Christ. She was taken before a court, and, refusing to renounce her faith, was sentenced to be suffocated in her own bathroom. When this failed, an executioner was sent to behead her: he failed to complete the sentence and she lingered for three days before dying.

There is evidence of martyrs named Valerian and Tiburtius being buried in the mid-third century, but no further details exist of them or of Cecilia. Relics, presumed to be hers, were discovered in a catacomb in the ninth century and, with those of Valerian and Tiburtius, translated to the church of Santa Cecilia in the Trastevere district of Rome.

The connection of Cecilia with music derives from the reference to her “singing to God in her heart”, which came to be understood as singing openly, and led to her being portrayed playing an organ with a choir of angels.

The Gospel of the wise and foolish virgins is fitting for her feast, falling as it does just before Advent.