

Readings for Personal Reflection: *Romans 8:31 – 39; Psalm 123 (124); Matthew 10: 34 – 39.*

During Lent only the most important saints are observed with a set of prayers and readings, but it is allowed to commemorate others in the liturgy of the day. Among these 'lesser' celebrations some are particularly significant.

Today's commemoration is of Saints Perpetua and Felicity, who died as Christian martyrs at Carthage in North Africa at the beginning of the third century. The earlier part of the record of their sufferings was written by Perpetua herself. It was completed by an eyewitness. Perpetua was a married woman of twenty-two nursing a son. She was still a catechumen, as were four others including the slave Felicity who was pregnant. Together with a Christian teacher they were imprisoned in a private house, where Perpetua's father, a pagan, tried hard to make her renounce her faith. She refused and in the following days all five were baptized. A few days later they were called to the forum to be tried. One by one they were questioned, and all confessed their faith. Both Perpetua's father and the Roman judge tried to persuade her to offer sacrifice for the welfare of the emperor, but she refused. The three surviving men were scourged, and the women struck in the face. Then sentence was passed that all be part of the violent 'shows' planned for the birthday of the Caesar Geta. Two days before the games Felicity gave birth to a girl, who would be brought up by a sister. The officer in charge of their prison treated them harshly as he had been told they might be set free by magic, but Perpetua persuaded him that, as they were to be part of Geta's birthday celebrations, they should be well-cared for. After that they received kinder treatment and were allowed to have visitors. Their jailor became a Christian.

On the day before the games it was customary to allow the prisoners a festival meal. The Christians managed to turn it into an agape, and some of the many visitors were so impressed by their joy at approaching martyrdom that they became believers.

At the games they were made to face various wild animals – a bear, a leopard, a boar, a savage heifer. All were wounded and then taken to the place where their throats would be cut, but the crowd called for them to be killed in the open, so they exchanged the kiss of peace and went back into the arena where they were killed by the gladiators.

They have been honoured at least since the fourth century, and Perpetua and Felicity are among those commemorated in the oldest Eucharistic Prayer of the Western Church.