



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21057

The First Sunday in Advent, November 28th, 2010

✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son And of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠

Today is the First Sunday in Advent, but instead of discussing the Second Coming of Jesus Christ – the traditional subject of the sermon of the day – I am going to talk about a Roman soldier from the Province of Asia Minor who was judicially murdered towards the end of the third century AD.

It is doubtless hard to imagine that a bunch of Americans living at the beginning of the third millennium could have much in common with such a person. But the fact of the matter is today's America and the Roman Empire have a great deal in common.

Like theirs, ours is an intensely materialistic society. We cleave to the conviction that ingenuity, fostered by our free enterprise system, is equal to any challenge that will ever be presented to us. The Romans shared a similar conviction; a conviction, moreover reinforced by an 800-year record of intellectual achievement and technical innovation.

America is by far the world's pre-eminent military and economic power. Much as our rivals may envy us, none of them can equal either our industrial might or our ability to wage war.

Rome was in an even stronger position than we are. It had utterly destroyed its only serious military rival – the Carthaginian Empire – some 500 years before and, thus, was, effectively, able to dictate the terms of trade to most of the

known world. The Roman head of state, the emperor, was not an elected official as is ours, but, even so, the organization charts of the U.S. government, and the Roman imperial government virtually mirror one another.

America has the FBI, so did Rome. Like America, Rome had city and state police, fire departments, sanitation and public health departments, welfare offices, law courts, running water and public sewers.

Even the economies were similar. Like us, Rome had banks, insurance brokerages, joint stock companies, stock exchanges, publishing houses, freight lines and agro-businesses. Their tax collection system was even more efficient than the IRS, and its politicians and civil servants wrestled with precisely the same problems as ours -- trade, tariffs, sagging productivity, the national debt and inflation. Often they came up with the same answers.

At the time, St. George's was martyred, for instance, the Emperor Diocletian's treasury secretary had just imposed price and income controls.

There is, however, a big difference between the U.S. and Rome – namely Rome had no Bill of Rights. All Roman citizens were equal before the law. All Roman citizens had the right to trial by the Emperor. But Rome recognized no such thing as human rights. All interests were subordinate to those of the state and the state brooked no rival, not even God.

This explains why Roman officials – from the emperor down to the lowliest local magistrate – found Christianity such an irritant. Jesus Christ teaches that man's duty to God takes precedence over his duty to everything else. Roman church/state relations were, thus, invariably uneasy, and frequently marked by periods of brutal persecution.

Curiously enough, a main center of Christian in the Roman world was the army. There was few legion in which Christians were not at least a sizable minority and a number of legions were Christian to a man. St. George, who was born the province of Cappadocia, a major Christian center, served as an officer in the Roman army in Palestine. The Holy Land was as big a trouble spot back then as it is today, and George's courage and ability brought him to the Emperor Diocletian's attention. And under Diocletian's direct patronage, he rose to the rank of tribune, or colonel.

Diocletian's efforts to curb the rampant inflation afflicting the empire by means of price and income controls was not only ineffective, but destructive economically and, thus, highly unpopular. The policy impoverished entire industrial sectors. Farmers, large and small, went bankrupt. Bakers joined the breadline. Factories laid-off workers. And riots broke out all over the empire.

This is the background to Diocletian's great persecution – an event calculated not only to distract the population from their economic woes, but to provide the emperor with an opportunity to test the loyalty of his legions.

The news of persecution reached one legion as it marched over the Alps en route to put down an insurrection in Gaul. The legion was paraded and all Christians were ordered to advance one pace. The entire legion stepped a pace forward. Executioners were ordered to decimate the ranks. One man in every ten was executed, and all remaining Christians were ordered to advance a pace. Again, the entire legion stepped forward. Again, orders were given to kill every tenth man. When only 40 remained, the exhausted executioners forced

them out onto an ice-covered lake where they froze to death. When the persecution reached Palestine, George immediately resigned his commission and went to Rome to protest the persecution and the atrocities direct to the Emperor Diocletian, in person. He was immediately arrested and imprisoned. When a prolonged period of torture failed to persuade him to recant, he was summarily put to death.

George didn't achieve sainthood by means of his military prowess. The dragon he fought was the dragon of tyranny and injustice. He fought not with sword but through the legal system. In this, he is a very modern martyr, far more akin to Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer who so bravely resisted the Nazis than the arch-typical English saints, like Edgar, who died at the hand of unlettered and brutish pagans.

Bonhoeffer wrote of those who remained silent in face of Nazi persecution: "When they came for the Communists, I said nothing for I was not a Communist. When they came for the socialists, I said nothing for I was not a socialist. When they came for the conservatives I said nothing for I was not a conservative. And when they came for me nobody said anything – for there was nobody left to speak."

The Christian faith today is no more popular with the power brokers who believe every one's interests are subordinate to those of the state. Persecution is still a fact of life for Christians today; albeit it is soft persecution rather than a murderous one. It is persecution by ridicule, exclusion and suppression rather than arrest, torture and execution.

Like George and Bonhoeffer, we must speak out fearlessly against tyranny and injustice. Bonhoeffer summed up the consequences of failing to do so in this wise: "When they came for the Communists, I said nothing for I was not a Communist. When they came for the socialists, I said nothing for I was not a socialist. When they came for the conservatives I said nothing for I was not a conservative. And when they came for me nobody said anything – for there was nobody left to speak." *AMEN.*