



November 13

THE NEW SHOFAR

God is patient, working across the centuries to accomplish His mission, work he discloses in Jesus.

Meet Lucius Caecilius Firmianus Lactantius Caecilius - 250-235 AD

Most of us have probably never heard of this great writer's name and yet he was one of the earliest of Christian apologists (defender of Christian teachings and faith). He was known for his ability to communicate effectively with the ordinary Romans of his time and this led him to acquiring the nickname – the Christian Cicero. But for me, his great contribution were his writings on being a missionary community under God.

I found his thoughts on this topic in his seven volume work entitled *Divine Institutes* (available online). In that work he mentions the importance of what he refers to as *patientia* (patience) more than 150 times. He refers to it as being the *greatest of all virtues*. For Lactantius, all of the other Christian virtues must include the grace of *patientia* if they are to bring about a transformation of the individual person or the world in which they are living. Most important is the way he spoke of this patience as being the essential gift every Christian needs in carrying out their baptismal ministry of mission and evangelism.

God is patience *in action* and Christians must imitate God

The best example of God's incredible patience is to be found in the sending of his only Son Jesus to be our Christ. Up until that point, God had been dealing with his chosen people through the medium of word. He spoke to them. He revealed himself to them. He gave exhortations, warnings, threats, encouragement, laws and clear directions but they all failed to bring about obedience and faithfulness. He had sent judges, kings, prophets, holy men and women to teach them, but the people still preferred to be duped by the ways of the world in which they were living. They even killed many of the prophets, at the same time convincing themselves they were acting in the name of all that was good and holy. The divine patience shown down through the centuries tells us much about the love God has for the world. At any time he could have wiped out the Hebrew people and started all over again with another nation. But God persevered in patience.

In the end, though, it was clear words were not enough to bring about the salvation God sought to shower down upon all peoples. What was needed was *perfect witness before talk*. People needed an example of the kind of daily living God expected of them and so words were replaced by *the* Word. The Word made flesh, the Word who pitched his tent among us. It was clear to God how people considered *talk to be easy but example hard*. No longer would God speak through “disembodied words” cascading down from heaven. From that point onwards, God would communicate through his incarnate Son.

Patience was a virtue in classical thinking

In the Greco-Roman world, persevering in patience in the face of suffering, pain and even death, was a virtue to be admired and emulated, particularly when it was a part of a struggle for justice or in pursuit of fulfilling one's duty. Lactantius took this and stressed that anyone teaching or preaching a way of perfection must not only *teach it in all precept but substantiate it in action*. This is what Jesus did. He preached God's Truths regarding the Way to salvation and then cemented those same words in the way he lived and through what he was doing among them. This led him to Calvary, to the cross on which he died.

To this he asks the question: *Why did he not at least suffer some decent form of death?* The answer to this is that only by coming among us with humility and in suffering could Christ bring *the hope of salvation to all who had to die in the sort of death common among the lowest in society, in case there were even one who could not imitate him*. No one could say his living and dying was beyond human imitation. No one had only the message of divine justice at work in the world. In the lifting up of the Son on the cross, all could see what the Father was doing. In the Son, the Father was enacting justice in the world. The cross was the enduring example of God's patience at work. All can see what God was doing and all are invited to imitate it in their own lives.

The Imitation of Christ is the missionary way for believers

As Christians reflect on the mystery of the crucified Christ, they will *bear with equanimity...ills whether imposed or accidental*. They will be "content with what they have, speak the truth, charge no interest on loans, control their emotions, and refuse to create an enemy" (Kreider). When they are offended, they will not retaliate. This is one example of the way he rejected the philosophies of the Roman world. Cicero could say *a good man is one who would help those he could and would harm no one unless provoked by mistreatment*. Lactantius refuted this by saying Cicero was wrong adding the ending *unless provoked...* This is not the way of genuine, world changing patience.

He spoke of his own faith community as being one characterised by *patientia*. It was made up of people from every kind of background, men and women who *walk the heavenly path together, people of every race, sex and age*. This community lived Christ through the way they provided hospitality to all, ransomed captives, maintained orphans and widows and cared for the marginalised and the sick. They rejected all forms of violence and killing, in particular what he called the *impatient acts* of abortion, exposing of unwanted infants and children and war. In all these things, the people kept their focus on trusting in the ways of God and not being in a hurry to impose agendas onto God.

Over and over again he stressed that God was doing something great and "inexorable" across the entire world (*from east to west*), something that is engaging every man, woman, child and human experience. The great reassurance in all of this is how this divine initiative, this heavenly momentum cannot be stopped. Persecution of believers is doomed to fail. All that is required, for the Kingdom to advance, is for believers to collaborate with the saving works of God and persevere in the faithful imitation of Christ. We plant. God grows. Let it be so.