



Revivals And Church History :: Genesisius of Rome - Actor and Martyr

Genesisius of Rome - Actor and Martyr - posted by sermonindex (), on: 2017/9/27 8:52

According to an ancient Roman tradition, St Genesisius was an actor of some renown who was martyred for the Christian faith. A seventh century document claiming to be the Acts of his martyrdom, relates that Genesisius lived in Rome at the turn of the 3rd/4th centuries, and died in the persecution of the Emperor Diocletian around the year 303 AD. Diocletian's persecution was the most severe in the Roman period and claimed the lives of many Christians – men, women and children; while many of these are now honoured as saints, most remain unknown.

According to the Acts, Genesisius was a gifted actor, comedian and playwright and the leader of a troupe of actors. Despite his talents, his position within Roman society would not have been distinguished. Acting at that time was not considered to be a very respectable occupation and it is most likely that he was not a Roman citizen, even if he had been born in the city: at that time actors were classed as slaves or labourers at best. Theatre in this period had declined and those who worked in the profession would rarely have performed the great dramas of the Greek and Roman playwrights. Mimes and pantomimes were the fare at the theatre and these tended to be boisterous and at times risqué in the extreme.

When Diocletian initiated his great persecution, Genesisius, who was a pagan, hatched a grand scheme to construct a play parodying the Christian faith. Diocletian was due in Rome in the summer of 303 to celebrate his twenty years as emperor (it would be his only visit to the city during his reign – he hated the politicking and squalor of Rome) and various civic and cultural events were being organised for the visit. Given the emperor's hatred of Christians, a farce mocking Christianity performed during the jubilee celebrations would not only amuse the emperor, but might also win Genesisius favour at the Imperial court and could prove quite lucrative. Genesisius was an ambitious man and perhaps he had his sights set on a position in the Imperial palace in Nicomedia. But first of all he had to do his "research".

Approaching members of the Christian community Genesisius managed to persuade them that he wanted to convert. It is a credit to his acting skills that he managed to convince the Christian leaders who at this time would have been very wary of infiltration by spies. Genesisius was accepted, enrolled as a catechumen, and he began the period of instruction which would eventually lead to baptism. Given that Christians were now living in fear of their lives, Genesisius's scheme was risky – if caught in a raid his plan could cost him his life. He was particularly interested in baptism – the concept of water washing away sinfulness and the old way of life fascinated the Romans whose love of water and bathing led them to be open to its spiritual significance. Discussing the sacrament at great length with his teachers, Genesisius decided that this would form the theme of his comedy. When he had done enough research he abandoned the catechumenate. Gathering his troupe of actors he explained the scenario of his farce, and together they composed the comedy: Roman mimes and pantomimes were mostly improvised. The Acts tell us that as he was directing the troupe what he had learned from the Christians was occupying his mind and he found himself struggling to resist believing in Christ.

As he had hoped the emperor was present at the performance and Genesisius himself led his troupe of actors in the farce: he was playing the role of a sick man confined to bed who was crying out for baptism. As the play grew more outrageous – to the delight of the emperor, an actor playing a priest came on stage to "baptize" the ailing catechumen. As the actor poured the water over his head, Genesisius was suddenly struck by the grace of God: he saw the truth of Christianity and began to profess his faith in Jesus Christ. It soon became clear to the emperor and the audience that he was no longer acting.

According to the Acts, Genesisius addressed the emperor himself and called on him to embrace Christianity:

I came here today to please an earthly Emperor but what I have done is to please a heavenly King. I came here to give you laughter, but what I have done is to give joy to God and his angels. From this moment on, believe me, I will never mock these great mysteries again. I now know that the Lord Jesus Christ is the true God, the Light, the Truth and the Mercy of all who have received his gift of baptism. O great Emperor, believe in these mysteries! I will teach you, and you will know the Lord Jesus Christ is the true God.