

St Monica (2011)

Recently, I caught sight of St Monica in an unexpected way and so saw her in a new light. St Monica, a North African, had gone to Milan to be with her son, St Augustine. There she got to know the bishop, St Ambrose. Milan, at the time, was the centre of the world because the young emperor, Valentinian II, kept court in the city. In many ways, however, it was his mother, Justina, who ruled. Justina was a Christian but not an orthodox one for she accepted the teachings of the priest, Arius, who had preached that the Son of God was not eternal but a lesser divine creature brought into existence by God the Father. For a few years, Justina and St Ambrose had been circling each other: she wishing to promote the cause of Arianism; St Ambrose fighting to defend orthodoxy.

Then, suddenly, the situation went nuclear. During Lent in the year 386, Justina sent imperial troops to occupy a church in Milan for the use of Arians, having also just had laws passed which made life difficult for those who opposed her religious views. But St Ambrose would not be cowed. He, with some of his flock, got to the church first and occupied it themselves. They stayed for the whole of Lent, with soldiers menacing them outside; a bishop and his flock, daring to oppose the mother of the Emperor.

And it's here that I caught sight of St Monica for this is what her son, St Augustine, addressing God, records in his autobiography, *The Confessions*: 'In those days your faithful people used to keep watch in the church, ready to die with their bishop, your servant. My mother, your handmaid, was there with them, taking a leading part in that anxious time of vigilance and living a life of constant prayer.' For all that St Ambrose and his followers knew, the imperial troops would attack any moment but they remained in the church and amongst them, as brave as any of them, our patroness, St Monica appears.

What made her so brave was her faith in God and in His Church. St Monica knew that we need never fear doing the right thing because even the worst enemy will one day pass away but God and His love for us will remain forever. What we so often lack is faith and its lack holds us back. We are unwilling or even frightened to do the right thing because of the potential cost but the only thing that should frighten us is life without God.

Faith is a gift. Ultimately, it is something given to us. And so it is good that we gather for our patroness' Feast Day because she has a special love for us and we can ask St Monica to pray that we, and those we love, may be gifted with faith.

At the end of Lent, on Maundy Thursday in 386, the Empress Justina backed down and many of the imperial soldiers joined St Ambrose, St Monica and the rest in prayer. In faith, may we face down temptation and the wrongs of the world and together praise God.