

An Early Christian Martyr Remembered

Each year a week is set aside in January for prayer for Christian Unity. It is heartening that despite the varying denominations, Christians here in the Petersfield area work together so well. However, since its infancy, disputes within Christianity have abounded and the task of the early fathers of the church was to ensure that the true message of Jesus was passed on.

An early defender of Christianity was St Polycarp, whose feast day falls on 23rd February. He was a major influence in the founding days of the church and was appointed Bishop of Smyrna, now called Izmir, in Turkey. Born in CE 69, Polycarp died in CE 155 and can be regarded as a second-generation Christian. He was a disciple of St John the Evangelist, the latter an eyewitness to Jesus and his teachings. Polycarp had to confront the problem of how to pass the Christian message on when these witnesses to Jesus' teachings all had gone and waves of dissent were appearing. From all accounts Polycarp was not a particularly educated man but he may have been instrumental in the formation of the New Testament. Although it seems he avoided heated controversy during his life, his death could be said to be the result of a clash between Church and State. Pressured to declare that the Roman Emperor Caesar was divine and make sacrifice to him, he refused to recant his faith and was burnt to death.

Thankfully, Christians and other religious believers in this country do not risk a similar fate to that of Polycarp, but by standing up for their beliefs they can sometimes experience ridicule and censure. Perhaps it was inevitable that Christianity would split into a variety of Churches with differing interpretations of worship and practice while still holding a common intrinsic belief. The legacy we all share however, thanks to Polycarp and other leaders in the early church, is ready access within the New Testament to these essential teachings of Christianity's central figure.

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