
The Hour Has Come.

A sermon by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
Holy Eucharist, 12:15 Service

Feast of Blandina and Her Companions, Martyrs of Lyon.
Mark 14:32–42.

In the second century, Lyons and Vienne in Gaul were missionary centers that had drawn Christians from across Asia and Greece.

They were living a devout life under the elderly Bishop Pothinus when the persecution began, in the year 177.

At first the exclusions were social — from Roman homes, the baths, the marketplace.

Then came the insults, the stones, the vandalism.

Then the imperial officials forced Christians to the marketplace for questioning, and then to prison.

Some slaves from Christian households were tortured to extract accusations against their owners — that Christians practiced cannibalism, incest, other perversions.

The false charges roused the mob.

Any leniency toward the imprisoned Christians became impossible.

Even friendly pagans turned against them.

One of those slaves was a young woman named Blandina.

She was being tortured for information that would incriminate the people she served.

She could have ended it.

A name.

A detail.

Something to satisfy them.

She said one thing, over and over, through everything they did to her: “I am a Christian, and nothing vile is done among us.”.

Eusebius records that her torturers gave up before she did.

So why do we remember her? Why does the church keep a feast day for Blandina and her companions?.

There are ready answers.

Bravery.

Commitment to faith.

Steadfastness under unimaginable pressure.

These are true things.

But notice what they do.

They make Blandina a hero.

They put her at the center of the story — her exceptional will, her extraordinary character, the remarkable thing she was made of.

Admire her.

Aspire to her.

Be more like her.

The theologian Samuel Wells points out that the word “hero” does not appear once in the New Testament.

The word “saint” appears sixty-four times.

Every single reference is in the plural.

Heroes stand alone at the center of the story.

Saints never do.

The hero is self-dependent — formed in virtue, prepared for the decisive moment, the one on whom everything turns.

If the hero fails, all is lost.

The hero therefore cannot fail, cannot crack, cannot be seen to need.

The saint is different.

The saint is not at the center.

The saint plays a small part in a story that is always, fundamentally, about God.

And because it is God’s story, the saint can fail in a way the hero cannot — because even failure becomes the occasion for forgiveness, for grace, for the new possibilities God opens.

Heroes fear failure.

Saints know that light only comes through cracks.

What Blandina witnessed to was not heroism.

Not the triumph of will.

She was a slave.

By every social calculus of her world, she was the least likely to hold.

She held longest.

And the sentence she kept saying — “I am a Christian, and nothing vile is done among us” — was not an argument.

Not a creed.

An identity.

She kept saying back to herself what she was and whose she was, until the hour was over.

Eusebius tells us that she was suspended on a stake and exposed to the wild beasts.

And because she appeared as if hanging on a cross, and because of her earnest prayers, she inspired those watching with great zeal.

They looked on her, he writes, and beheld with their outward eyes the one who was crucified for them.

Not a resemblance of feature.

A resemblance of condition.

A human being so thoroughly given over to God that even her body, in extremity, became legible as his.

The arena was the public disclosure of a private transformation.

The arena did not make her into that.

Prayer had already done its work.

Jesus goes to Gethsemane knowing what is coming.

He takes the inner three, leaves them at a distance, goes a little further, falls on the ground, and prays.

Abba.

Father.

Remove this cup from me.

Yet not what I want, but what you want.

He goes back.

The disciples are asleep.

He returns, prays again.

Asleep again.

Three times.

He is not praying because God did not hear him the first time.

He is praying because the prayer is doing something.

It is working a transformation — from the one who asks that the cup be removed to the one who says, finally, the hour has come, and walks toward it freely.

That is not resignation.

Resignation says: I have no choice.

What Jesus arrives at is willingness.

Willingness says: I have a choice, and I am making it.

Freely.

All the way down.

Not into the void, but into Love — the Love that called him Beloved at the Jordan and would not let even this be the end.

The disciples sleep.

They cannot yet see what is happening in the dark.

The prayer is doing its work without an audience.

The repetition is not weakness.

It is the work.

Most of us will not face what Blandina faced.

But we will face our hours.

We already have.

And our culture will constantly press us to face them as heroes — self-sufficient, composed, the one on whom things turn.

To perform strength.

To treat the need for another way as weakness, and the admission of darkness as failure.

The invitation of the gospel runs the other direction entirely.

Willingness.

Prayer.

Surrender.

Not the collapse of self, but the free, repeated, costly giving over of the self to the God who holds it.

The path of the saint, not the hero.

The path on which you are not the center of the story.

This path has a cost the hero's path does not.

We will find ourselves dying several times before we die.

We will be emptied of things we thought we needed.

We will discover that some of what we called strength was the refusal to be held.

And we will have to keep going back to the garden, again and again, and pray the same prayer in the dark.

On the last day of the spectacle, Eusebius writes, Blandina was brought in like a noble mother who had encouraged her children and sent them ahead victorious to the King.

Beaten, torn, burned with irons, she was wrapped in a net and tossed about by a wild bull.

The spectators were amazed at her endurance.

Remember her not as a hero to admire from a distance, but as a saint to walk beside — encouragement that the path is real, that the transformation is possible, that what prayer does to a person is not nothing.

She kept saying what she was until she knew it all the way down.

We are Christians.

Nothing vile is done among us.

Neither does death frighten us — not finally — because we are held by the one Jesus called Abba.

Willingness.

Prayer.

Surrender.

Pray your way there.

Keep going back.

The repetition is not weakness.

It is the work.

Amen.