

brave man; they considered those who sought out death for the faith as in a way suicides.

They also admired the 'confessor for the faith', a man or woman who faced death with courage, but then escaped execution thanks to a pardon or a change in official policy. Confessors had power in the congregation, and if they disagreed with some pronouncement of the bishop they were listened to. In every century of Christianity there were to be disputes between persons who had 'official' authority because the Church chose them to be clergy, and those who had 'unofficial' authority because the people revered them. The quality which made a martyr was not the same quality as that which made the head of a community.

The spread of the churches

Why did the faith spread so fast? The faith of the Jews in one God who made and guided the world, and who demanded that men and women do right and honour their parents; the faith that protected women by making men faithful to them, and required that the poor and the weak, the sick and the widows and the orphans be cared for – this faith of the Jews was the faith of the Christians. Its clarity cut through the chaos of religions in the Greek and Roman world, the innumerable cults of mystery and legend.

Whether the promise of a future life attracted converts is not easy to discover. The usual pagan view was that there was an after-life of sorts, but only as a gloomy shade in Hades. The Jewish Sheol was hardly a more

attractive place; but the Pharisees hoped for something better. Whether the discovery by the apostles that the tomb of Jesus was empty, and their awe at his presence among them, made the belief in a future life still more immediate is impossible to know. Religious feelings are not usually moved by a historical event; though that is not true of the Jews after the Holocaust, nor was it true of the earliest Christians because they were constantly reminded of the crucifixion by the sight of the cross in their churches. But the incoming convert must have been more drawn by the sensation of hope at Christian funerals.

If death was one fact near the soul of religion, the sense of guilt was another. Sometimes that was allied to death, for guilt is a part of mourning: 'Could I not have done more for them while they lived?' It seems unlikely that many converts entered the church for this reason alone, because the average man and woman are not often troubled by deep feelings of guilt or a need for forgiveness. But famous converts, Paul and Augustine among them, came that way.

In an unjust world, the sense of justice to be found in a future world was a belief that could draw souls. 'Come,' they prayed, 'come the future kingdom, come peace, come justice, *maranatha*' – they kept this Aramaic word in their prayers, meaning 'Come, Lord'. Later, when they no longer expected a quick end to the world, they thought that *maranatha* must mean 'The Lord has come'.

* Tertullian's most famous remark was his account of a pagan exclaiming, 'See how these

From a sarcophagus,
Christ seated and
teaching.

