

I. the Coliseum

by Martyrs of the Catacombs

The sermon describes the cruel and violent spectacle of the Coliseum, where Christians were martyred for their faith, and highlights the contrast between the Roman public's love of bloodshed and the Christians' courage and faith in the face of death.

Scripture: Matthew 5:10, Philippians 1:21, Hebrews 11:35, 1 Peter 4:14, Revelation 12:11

Topics: "Christian Martyrs", "Faith And Courage"

Description

The preacher recounts a gruesome scene in ancient Rome where the thirst for blood drew over one hundred thousand people to the Coliseum, showcasing the brutal and cruel nature of the Roman civilization. Gladiators fought to the death, wild beasts were unleashed upon prisoners, and young Christian martyrs faced savage animals with unwavering faith and courage, choosing death over renouncing their beliefs. The story highlights the stark contrast between the cruelty of the Roman spectators and the unwavering faith and bravery of the Christian martyrs, who faced death with songs of praise and worship to God.

Transcript

"Butchered to make a Roman holiday."

It was a great festival day in Rome. From all quarters vast numbers of people came pouring forth to one common destination. Over the Capitoline Hill, through the Forum, past the Temple of Peace and the Arch of Titus and the imperial palace; on they went till they reached the Coliseum, where they entered its hundred doors and disappeared within.

There a wonderful scene presented itself. Below, the vast arena spread out, surrounded by the countless rows of seats which rose to the top of the outer wall, over a hundred feet. The whole extent was covered with human beings of every class and every age. So vast an assemblage gathered in such a way, presenting to view long lines of stern faces, ascending far on high in successive rows, formed a spectacle which has never elsewhere been equaled, and which was calculated beyond all others to awe the soul of the beholder. More than one hundred thousand people were gathered here, animated by one common feeling, and incited by one single passion. It was the thirst for blood which drew them hither, and nowhere can we find a sadder commentary on the boasted civilization of ancient Rome than this her own greatest spectacle.

Here were warriors who had fought in foreign wars and were familiar with deeds of valor, yet they felt no indignation at the scenes of cowardly oppression displayed before them; nobles of ancient families were here, but they could find in these brutal shows no stain upon their country's honor. Philosophers, poets, priests, rulers, the highest as well as the lowest in the land, crowded these seats; but the applauding shout of the patrician was as loud and as eager as that of the plebeian. What hope was there for Rome when the hearts of her people were, universally given up to cruelty and brutal oppression?

Upon a raised seat in a conspicuous part of the amphitheater was the Emperor Decius, near whom the chief people among the Romans were gathered. Among these there was a group of officers belonging to the Pretorian guards, who criticised the different points in the scene before them with the air of connoisseurs. Their loud laughter, their gayety, and their splendid attire made them the object of much attention from their neighbors.

Several preliminary spectacles had been introduced, and now the fights began. Several hand-to-hand combats were presented, most of which resulted fatally, and excited different degrees of interest according to the courage or skill of the combatants. Their effect was to whet the appetite of the spectators to a keener relish, and fill them with eager desire for the more exciting events which were to follow.

One man in particular had drawn down the admiration and applause of the multitude. He was an African from Mauritania; of gigantic strength and stature. But his skill seemed equal to his strength. He wielded his short sword with marvelous dexterity, and thus far had slain every opponent.

He was now matched with a gladiator from Batavia, a man fully equal in stature and strength to himself. The contrast which the two presented was striking. The African was tawny, with glossy curling hair and glittering eyes; the Batavian was light in complexion, with blonde hair and keen gray eyes. It was hard to tell which had the advantage, so nearly were they matched in every respect; but as the former had already fought for some time, it was thought that the odds were rather against him. The contest, however, began with great spirit and eagerness on both sides. The Batavian struck tremendous blows, which were parried by the adroitness of the other. The African was quick and furious, but he could do nothing against the cool and wary defense of his vigilant adversary.

At length, at a given signal, the combat was suspended, and the gladiators were led away, not through anything like mercy or admiration, but simply through a shrewd understanding of the best mode of satisfying the Roman public. It was well understood that they would return again.

Now a large number of men were led into the arena. These were still armed with the short sword. In a moment they had begun the attack. It was not a conflict between two sides, but a general fight, in which every man attacked his neighbor. Such scenes were the most bloody, and therefore the most exciting. A conflict of this kind would always destroy the greatest number in the shortest time. The arena presented a scene of dire confusion. Five hundred armed men in the prime of life and strength all struggled confusedly together. Sometimes they would all be interlocked in one dense mass; at other times they would violently separate into widely scattered individuals, with a heap of dead upon the scene of the combat. But these would assail one another again with undiminished fury; separate combats would spring up all around, the victors in these would rush to take part in others, until at last the survivors had once more congregated in one struggling crowd.

At length their struggles became weaker. Out of five hundred but one hundred remained, and these were wearied and wounded. Suddenly a signal was given, and two men leaped into the arena and rushed from

opposite sides upon this crowd. They were the African and the Batavian. Fresh from their repose, they fell upon the exhausted wretches before them, who had neither the spirit to combine nor the strength to resist. It became a butchery. These two giants slaughtered right and left without mercy, until they alone stood upright upon the arena, and the applause of the innumerable throng came down in thunder to their ears.

These two again attacked each other, and attracted the attention of the spectators while the bodies of the wounded and slain were being removed. The combat was as fierce as before, and precisely similar. The African was agile, the Batavian cautious. But finally the former made a desperate thrust; the Batavian parried it, and returned a stroke like lightning. The African sprang back and dropped his sword. But he was too late, for the stroke of his foe had pierced his left arm. As he fell a roar of joy arose from one hundred thousand human beings. But this was not to be the end, for even while the conqueror stood over his victim the attendants sprang forward and drew him away. Yet the Romans knew, and the wounded man knew that it was not mercy. He was merely to be reserved for a later but a certain fate.

"The Batavian is a skillful fighter, Marcellus," said one young officer to a companion among the group which has been alluded to.

"He is, indeed, Lucullus," replied the other. "I do not think that I ever saw a better gladiator. Indeed, both of them were much better than common."

"They have a better man than either inside there."

"Ah! who is he?"

"The gladiator Macer. I think he is about the best I have ever seen."

"I have heard of him. Do you think he will be out today?"

"I understood so."

The short conversation was interrupted by a loud roar which came from the vivarium, a place where the wild beasts were confined. It was a fierce and a terrific roar, such as the most savage beasts give when they are at the extremity of hunger and rage.

Soon iron gratings were flung open by men from above, and a tiger stalked forth into the arenas. He was from Africa, whence he had been brought but a few days previously. He had been kept three days without food, and his furious rage, which hunger and confinement had heightened to a terrible degree, was awful to behold. Lashing his tail, he walked round the arena gazing with bloodshot eyes upward at the spectators. But their attention was soon diverted to another object. From the opposite side a man was thrust out into the arena. He had no armor, but was naked like all gladiators, with the simple exception of a cloth around his loins. Bearing in his hand the customary short sword, he advanced with a firm pace toward the center of the scene.

All eyes at once were fixed upon this man. "Macer, Macer," was called around by the innumerable spectators.

The tiger soon saw him, and uttered a short savage growl of fearful import. Macer stood still, with his eyes calmly fixed upon the beast, who, lashing his tail more madly than ever, bounded toward him. Finally the tiger crouched, and then, with one terrific spring, leaped directly upon him. But Macer was prepared. Like

a flash he darted to the left, and just as the tiger fell to the earth, he dealt a short sharp blow straight to his heart. It was a fatal stroke. The huge beast shuddered from head to foot, and drawing all his limbs together, he uttered a last howl that sounded almost like the scream of a human being, and fell, dead upon the sand.

Again the applause of the multitude rose like a thunder peal all around.

"Wonderful!" cried Marcellus. "I never saw skill equal to that of Macer!"

"Without doubt he has been fighting all his life," rejoined his friend.

But soon the carcass of the tiger was drawn away, and again the creak of a grating as it swung apart attracted attention. This time it was a lion. He came forth slowly, and looked all around upon the scene as if in surprise. He was the largest of his species, a giant in size, and had long been preserved for some superior antagonist. He seemed capable of encountering two animals like the tiger that had preceded him. Beside him Macer was like a child.

The lion had fasted long, but he showed no fury like that of the tiger. He walked across the arena, and then completely around it in a kind of trot, as though searching for escape. Finding every side closed, he finally retreated to the center, and putting his face close to the ground, he uttered a roar so deep, so loud, and so long, that the ponderous stones of the coliseum itself vibrated at the sound.

Macer stood unmoved. Not a muscle of his face changed. He carried his head erect with the same watchful expression, and held his sword ready. At length the lion turned full upon him. The wild beast and the man stood face to face eyeing one another. But the calm gaze of the man seemed to fill the animal with wrath. He started back with his hair and tail erect, and tossing his mane, he crouched for the dreadful spring.

The vast multitude stood spellbound. Here, indeed, was a sight worthy of their interest.

The dark form of the lion darted forward, but again the form of the gladiator, with his customary maneuver, leaped aside and struck. This time, however, his sword struck a rib, and fell from his hand. The lion was slightly wounded, but the blow served only to rouse his fury to the highest point.

Yet Macer lost not one jot of his coolness in that awful moment. Perfectly unarmed, he stood before the beast waiting his attack. Again and again the lion sprang, but each time he was evaded by the nimble gladiator, who by his own adroit movements contrived to reach the spot where his weapon lay and regain possession of it. Armed with his trusty sword, he waited a final spring. The lion came down as before, but this time Macer's aim was true. The sword pierced his heart. The enormous beast fell, writhing in pain. Rising again to his feet, he ran across the arena, and with a last roar he fell dead by the bars at which he had entered.

Macer was now led away, and the Batavian reappeared. The Romans required variety. A small tiger was let loose upon the Batavian and was vanquished. A lion was then set upon him. He was extremely fierce, although of only ordinary size. It was evident that the Batavian was not at all equal to Macer. The lion made a spring and was wounded, but on making a second attack, he caught his opponent and literally tore him to pieces. Upon this Macer was sent out again, and killed this lion easily.

And now, while Macer stood there the recipient of unbounded applause, a man entered from the opposite side. It was the African. His arm had not been bound up, but hung down by his side covered with blood. He staggered toward Macer with painful steps. The Romans knew that he had been sent out to be killed. The wretch knew it himself also, for as he drew near to his antagonist he dropped his sword, and cried out in a kind of desperation,

"Quick! kill me, and put me out of pain."

To the amazement of all, Macer stepped back and flung down his sword. The spectators stared and wondered. Still more amazed were they when Macer turned toward the emperor and stretched out his hands.

"August Emperor," he cried, "I am a Christian. I will fight wild beasts, but I will not raise my hand against a fellow-man. I can die, but I will not kill."

Whereupon a mighty murmur arose.

"What does he say?" cried Marcellus. "A Christian! when did that happen?"

"I heard," said Lucullus, "that he was visited in his cell by some of these wretched Christians, and joined their contemptible sect. They are made up of the offscouring of man kind. It is very probable that he is a Christian."

"And will he incur death rather than fight?"

"That is the way with these fanatics."

Rage took the place of surprise in the fierce multitude. They were indignant that a mere gladiator should dare to disappoint them. The attendants rushed out to interfere. The fight must go on. If Macer would not fight he should take the consequences.

But he was firm. Unarmed, he advanced toward the African, whom he could have slain even then with a blow of his fist. The face of the African was like that of a fiend. Surprise, joy, and triumph gleamed in his sinister eyes. Seizing his sword in a firm grasp, he struck Macer to the heart.

"Lord Jesus receive my spirit--" The words were drowned in a torrent of blood, and this humble but bold witness for Christ passed away from earth to join the noble army of martyrs.

"Are there many such scenes as this?" asked Marcellus.

"Often. Whenever Christians appear. They will fight any number of beasts. Young girls will come firmly to meet lions and tigers, but not one of the madmen will fight with men. The populace are bitterly disappointed in Macer. He is the very best of all the gladiators, and in becoming a Christian he has acted like a fool."

"It must be a wonderful religion which could make a common gladiator act thus," said Marcellus.

"You'll have a chance to learn more about it."

"How so?"

"Haven't you heard? You are appointed to unearth some of these Christians. They have got down in the Catacombs, and they must be hunted up."

"I should think they have enough already. Fifty were burned this morning."

"And a hundred were beheaded last week. But that is nothing. The city is swarming with them. The emperor has determined to restore the old religion perfectly. Since these Christians have appeared the empire has been declining. He has made up his mind to annihilate them. They are a curse, and must be dealt with accordingly. You will soon understand."

"I haven't been in Rome long enough to know," said Marcellus meekly, "and I do not understand what the Christians really believe. I have heard almost every crime imputed to them. However, if it be as you say I will have a chance of learning."

But now another scene attracted their attention.

An old man entered upon the scene. His form was bowed, and his hair silver white with extreme old age. His appearance was hailed with shouts of derision, although his majestic face and dignified manner were only calculated to excite admiration. As the shouts of laughter and yells of derision came down to his ears he raised his head and uttered a few words.

"Who is he?" asked Marcellus.

"Alexander, a teacher of the abominable Christian sect. He is so obstinate that he will not recant--"

"Hush, he is speaking."

"Romans!" said the old man, "I am a Christian. My God died for me, and I gladly lay down my life for him--"

A loud outburst of yells and execrations from the fierce mob drowned his voice. Before it was over three panthers came bounding toward him. He folded his arms, and looking up to heaven, his lips moved as if murmuring prayers. The savage beasts fell upon him as he stood, and in a few minutes he was torn in pieces.

Other wild animals were now let in. They bounded around the inclosure, they leaped against the barrier, and in their rage assailed one another. It was a hideous scene.

Into the midst of this a helpless band of prisoners were rudely thrust. They were chiefly young girls, who were thus sacrificed to the bloodthirsty passions of the savage Roman mob. The sight would have moved to pity any heart in which all soft feelings had not been blighted. But pity had no place in Rome. Cowering and fearful, the poor young maidens showed the weakness of human nature when just confronted with death in so terrible a form, but after a few moments faith resumed its power, and raised them above all fear. As the beasts became aware of the presence of their prey and began to draw near, these young maidens joined hands, and raising their eyes to heaven, sang out a solemn chant which rose clear and wondrously sweet upward to heaven:

"Unto Him that loved us

To Him that washed us from our sins

In his own blood;
To Him that made us kings and priests,
To God and the Father;
To Him be glory and dominion
Forever and ever.
Halleluiah. Amen!"

One by one the voices were hushed in blood, and agony, and death; one by one the shrieks of anguish were mingled with the shouts of praise; and these fair young spirits, so heroic under suffering and faithful unto death, had carried their song to join it with the psalm of the redeemed on high.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/martyrs-of-the-catacombs/i-the-coliseum/>

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