

Xiii. the Death of Pollio

by Martyrs of the Catacombs

The sermon tells the story of a young boy's bravery and faith in the face of death, serving as a powerful witness to the truth of Christianity.

Scripture: Acts 7:59, 1 Corinthians 15:55, Philippians 1:21, Revelation 2:10, Revelation 6:9

Topics: "Martyrdom", "Eternal Reward"

Description

In the midst of the brutal spectacle at the Coliseum, the story of Pollio and the Christian martyrs unfolds, showcasing unwavering faith and courage in the face of imminent death. Despite the bloodthirsty demands of the crowd, the martyrs, like Pollio and Marcellus, stood firm in their devotion to God, willing to sacrifice their lives for their faith. The seraphic expression on the face of the boy facing the tiger reflects a deep spiritual connection and readiness to meet death with heavenly anticipation. The ultimate victory of these martyrs lies not in earthly survival but in the eternal promise of a crown of life from God for their faithful endurance unto death.

Transcript

"Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life."

The sentence of Pollio was swift and sure. On the following day there was a spectacle at the Coliseum. Crowded to its topmost terrace of seats with the bloodthirsty Roman multitude, it displayed the same sickening succession of horrors which has been before detailed.

Gladiators again fought and slew one another singly and in multitudes. There was every different mode of combat known in the arena, and of these the most deadly were sure to find the most favor.

Again were the ever-recurring scenes of blood and agony presented; the fierce champion of the day received the short-lived congratulations of the fickle spectators. Again man fought with man, or waged a fiercer contest with the tiger. Again the wounded gladiator looked up despairingly for mercy, but received only the signal of death from the pitiless spectators.

The satiated appetites of the multitude now demanded a larger supply of slaughter. The combats between men who were equally matched had lost their attraction for that day. It was known that Christians were reserved for the concluding spectacle, and the appearance of these was impatiently demanded.

Lucullus stood among the guards near the emperor's seat. Yet his brow was more thoughtful, and his olden gayety had all departed.

High up among the loftier seats behind him was a pale stern face, that was conspicuous among all around it for the concentrated gaze which it fixed upon the arena. There was an expression of deep anxiety upon that face which made it far different from all within the vast inclosure.

Now the harsh sound of the gratings arose, and a tiger leaped forth into the arena. Throwing up its head and lashing its sides with its tail, it stalked about glancing with fiery eyes upon the vast assemblage of human beings which hemmed it in.

Soon a murmur arose. A boy was thrust into the arena.

Pale in face and slight in limb, his slender form was nothing before the huge bulk of the furious beast. As if in derision, he was dressed like a gladiator.

Yet in spite of his youth and his weakness there was nothing in his face or manner that betrayed fear. His glance was calm and abstracted. He moved forward quietly to the center of the arena, and there, in the sight of all, he joined his hands together and lifted up his eyes and prayed.

Meanwhile, the tiger moved around as before. He had seen the boy, but the sight had no effect. He still raised his bloodshot eyes toward the lofty walls and occasionally uttered a savage growl.

The man with the stern sad face looked on with all his soul absorbed in that gaze.

There appeared to be no desire on the part of the tiger to attack the boy, who still continued praying.

The multitude now grew impatient. Murmurs arose and cries and shouts with the intention of maddening the tiger and urging him on.

But now, even in the midst of the tumult, there came forth the sound of a voice deep and terrible:

"How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not avenge our blood on them that dwell upon the earth?"

A deep stillness followed. Every one in surprise looked at his neighbor. But the silence was soon broken by the same voice, which rang out in terrific emphasis:

"Behold, he cometh in the clouds,

And every eye shall see him,

And they also which pierced him,

And all the kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him.

Even so. Amen!

Thou art righteous, O Lord,

Which art, and wast, and shalt be,

Because thou hast judged thus.

For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets,

And thou hast given them blood to drink,

For they are worthy.

Even so, Lord God Almighty,

True and righteous are thy judgments!"

But now murmurs and cries and shouts passed around. Soon the cause of the disturbance became known.

"It is an accursed Christian"--"It is the fanatic Cinna"--"He has been confined four days without food"--"Bring him out"--"Throw him to the tiger!"

Shouts and execrations arose on high and mingled in one vast roar. The tiger leaped in frenzy around. The keepers within heard the words of the multitude and hurried to obey.

Soon the gratings opened. The victim was thrust in.

Fearfully emaciated and ghastly pale, he tottered forward with tremulous steps. His eyes had an unearthly luster, his cheeks a burning flush, and his neglected hair and long beard were matted in a tangled mass.

The tiger saw him, and came leaping toward him. Then at a little distance away the furious beast crouched. The boy arose from his knees and looked. But Cinna saw no tiger. He fixed his eyes on the multitude, and waving his withered arm on high he shouted in the same tone of menace:

"Woe! woe! woe to the inhabitants of the earth--"

His voice was hushed in blood. There was a leap, a fall, and all was over.

And now the tiger turned toward the boy. His thirst for blood was fully aroused; with bristling hair, flaming eyes, and sweeping tail he stood facing his prey.

The boy saw that the end was coming, and again fell upon his knees. The crowd was hushed to stillness, and awaited in deep excitement the new scene of slaughter. The man who had been gazing so intently now rose upward and stood erect, still watching the scene below. Loud cries arose from behind him which increased still louder, "Down," "down," "sit down," "you obstruct the view!"

But the man either did not hear or else purposely disregarded it. At length the crowd grew so noisy that the officers below turned to see the cause.

Lucullus was one of them. Turning round he saw the whole scene. He started and grew pale as death.

"Marcellus!" he cried. For a moment he staggered back, but soon recovering he hurried away to the scene of the disturbance.

But now a deep murmur broke forth from the multitude. The tiger, who had been walking round and round the boy, lashing himself to greater fury, now crouched for a spring.

The boy arose. A seraphic expression was upon his face. His eyes beamed with a lofty enthusiasm. He saw no longer the arena, the high surrounding walls, the far-extending seats with innumerable faces; he saw no more the relentless eyes of the cruel spectators, or the gigantic form of his savage enemy. [See Frontispiece.]

Already his soaring spirit seemed to enter into the golden gates of the New Jerusalem, and the ineffable glory of the noonday of heaven gleamed upon his sight.

"Mother, I come to thee! Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!"

His words sounded clearly and sweetly upon the ears of the multitude. They ceased, and the tiger sprang. The next moment there was nothing but a struggling mass half hidden in clouds of dust.

The struggle ended. The tiger started back, the sand was red with blood, and upon it lay the mangled form of the true-hearted, the noble Pollio.

Then amid the silence that followed there came forth a shout that sounded like a trumpet peal and startled every one in the assembly:

"O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? . . . Thanks be to God who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

A thousand men rose with a simultaneous burst of rage and indignation. Ten thousand hands were outstretched toward the bold intruder.

"A Christian"--"A Christian"--"To the flames with him"--"Throw him to the tiger"--"Hurl him into the arena!"

Such were the shouts that answered the cry. Lucullus reached the spot just in time to rescue Marcellus from a crowd of infuriated Romans, who were about to tear him in pieces. The tiger below was not more fierce, more bloodthirsty than they. Lucullus rushed among them, dashing them to the right and left as a keeper among wild beasts.

Overawed by his authority they fell back, and soldiers approached.

Lucullus gave Marcellus in charge to them, and led the company out of the amphitheater.

Outside he took charge of the prisoner himself. The soldiers followed them.

"Alas, Marcellus! was it well to throw away your life?"

"I spoke from the impulse of the moment. That dear boy whom I loved died before my eyes! I could not restrain myself. Yet I do not repent. I, too, am ready to lay down my life for my King and my God."

"I cannot reason with you. You are beyond the reach of argument."

"I did not intend to betray myself, but since it is done I am content. Nay, I am glad, and I rejoice that it is my lot to suffer for my Redeemer."

"Alas, my friend! Have you no regard for life?"

"I love my Saviour better than life."

"See, Marcellus, the road before us is open. You can run quickly. Fly and be saved."

Lucullus spoke this in a hurried whisper.

The soldiers were some twenty paces behind. The chances were all in favor of escape. Marcellus pressed the hand of his friend.

"No, Lucullus. I would not gain life by your dishonor. I love the warm heart that prompted it, but you shall not be led into difficulty by your friendship for me."

Lucullus sighed, and walked on in silence.

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