

PRIZE-FIGHTING

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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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No reader of the daily papers during the last fortnight can have been unaware of the heavy-weight Prize Fight which took place in the United States before an excited audience and which was, of course, widely televised.

Christians need to ask themselves whether Prize Fighting is a proper form of entertainment for them to watch. Some defend the entertainment because of the enjoyment they say they derive from the skill displayed by the fighters. But it is doubtful whether this is really the source of the entertainment for the vast majority of those who watch it, especially as excitement becomes intense not when the height of skill is displayed but rather when the punishment becomes intense, and the more blood that is drawn in the boxing ring the more frenzied the shouts of the spectators.

Not all entertainment is the sort that Christians can share in. For example, up till 1853 the execution of criminals was held in public; doubtless this was intended to serve justice; but if a person went along to see his fellow man put to death on the gallows as a pleasurable entertainment, as many did, this we ought to recognise as disgraceful and a perversion, a form of sadism to be shunned by Christians.

Similarly, our forefathers used to amuse themselves by bear baiting. The spectators urged on dogs to tear a bear to death, while the bear tried to tear the dogs to death. It was an exhilarating exhibition to those who had acquired a taste for that sort of thing, but very debasing to those amused themselves by watching it. But those who enjoyed watching bear baiting could not see it in its true light. They had become addicts. We need to remember that there is a streak in the nature of all of us that likes watching blood spilt and cruelty being inflicted.

The classic example is the gladiatorial shows of ancient Rome when slaves were put up by their owners to fight one another to death in the amphitheatre which was crowded with spectators shouting and screaming at the sight of blood. Nowadays, we can recognise how perverted gladiatorial entertainments were and similarly we recognise the debasing character of bear baiting, and most of us would also agree that bull fighting, so popular in Spain where men risk their lives in order to entertain the spectators by fighting a bull and killing it, is not the sort of entertainment that is right to indulge in. The Spaniards enjoy bull fighting and cannot see how debasing it is because they are involved in it. And this is the situation in our own community with regard to Prize Fighting, in which two men use their bodies in the attempt to smash each other to pulp, while the crowd is stimulated with watching the punishment, especially if blood is drawn.



Prize Fighting is a murderous sport and that is why we ought not to amuse ourselves by watching it. It not infrequently happens that as a result of a prize fight a boxer dies from his injuries. It is true of course, that accidents can happen in all sports. However, we ought not to deceive ourselves by pretending that the death and injuries that result from prize fighting are no different from the accidents that might happen on any sports field. In prize fighting a man deliberately intends to hurt his opponent, knowing that he may very well die as a result, as many have, while others have been permanently debilitated, "punch-drunk" as we say.

In ordinary life if a man deliberately intends to hurt someone else and as a result of that action the injured man dies, the aggressor is charged with murder. And yet, our community is so blinded to the real character of prize fighting and so addicted to its enjoyment (just like the Romans were to gladiatorial shows) that we seem unable to see the thing in its true light.

Our bodies are to be used honourably, for fellowship with each other and not for knocking each other about. When St. Paul was urging his Christian friends to avoid fornication and premarital sexual intercourse and whoredom, he reminded them that their bodies were the temple of God's Spirit. He wrote: "The body is not meant for immorality but for the Lord. Glorify God in your body." (I Cor. 6). God Himself indwells us and we are to treat our bodies and the bodies of one another with honour and respect. We are not to use them for perversion, which is really what prize fighting is.

It is perversion of fellowship, to begin with, for two people to fight each other; but an even more evil perversion is the desire to entertain ourselves by watching it as spectators. It is in fact a form of the sexual perversion called sadism in which we get a kick from cruelty. The rising crescendo of frenzied shouts as the fighting becomes more severe and blood is copiously drawn so that in the end a limp body is pulped to the ground, I say that crescendo of shouts shows that the spectators are obtaining a kick from blood lust. It is a disgraceful thing that our community should tolerate such shows, let alone headline them and write them up so fully in the newspapers. No Christian ought ever to take pleasure in prize fighting or attend as a spectator, but should oppose the whole thing, as the early Christians opposed gladiatorial shows. He should make clear his aversion to it, as every other form of sexual perversion and misuse of God's gift of the body. This is not wowserism, as some non-Christians may jibe. Christians enjoy sport and the churches are foremost in organising sport for their members, whether cricket or football, tennis or skiing; but true sport is the enjoyment of God's gifts according to their purposes, not the enjoyment of a perversion of those gifts. Our bodies are intended for use in



personal fellowship. Fighting is the opposite to fellowship, and to take our entertainment by watching other people fight and draw blood is a disgraceful perversion, a blot on our community just as bullfighting or bear baiting or gladiatorial shows are blots on other communities.

If we indulge in this sort of blood lust it grows on us and destroys our character. I give an interesting illustration of this from Augustine's Confession, Book 6 chapter 8, where he tells the story of a young friend Alypius who had made a resolve not to attend any more gladiatorial shows. However, and I quote from Augustine, ".....One day he met by chance a company of his acquaintances and fellow students returning from dinner; and with a friendly violence, they drew him, resisting and objecting vehemently, into the amphitheatre, on a day of those cruel and murderous shows. He protested to them; 'Though you drag my body to that place and set me down there, you cannot force me to give my mind or lend my eyes to these shows, thus, I will be absent while present, and so overcome both you and them!' When they heard this they dragged him on in, probably interested to see whether he could do as he said. When they got to the arena, and had taken what seats they could get, the whole place became a tumult of inhuman frenzy". But, says Augustine, "Alypius kept his eyes closed and forbade his mind to roam abroad after such wickedness. Would that he had shut his ears also! For when one of the combatants fell in the fight; a mighty cry from the whole audience stirred him so strongly that, overcome by curiosity and still prepared (as he thought) to despise and rise superior to it no matter what it was, he opened his eyes and was struck with a deeper wound in his soul than the victim whom he desired to see had been in his body. Thus, he fell more miserably than the one whose fall had raised that mighty clamour which had entered through his ears and unlocked his eyes to make way for the wounding and beating down of his soul, which was more audacious than truly valiant - also it was weaker because it presumed on its own strength when it ought to have depended on Thee (O Lord). For, as soon as he saw the blood, he drank in with it a savage temper, and he did not turn away, but fixed his eyes on the bloody pastime, unwittingly drinking in the madness, delighted with the wicked contest and drunk with blood lust. He was now no longer the same man who came in, but was one of the mob he came into, a true companion of those who had brought him thither. Why need I say more? He looked, he shouted, he was excited, and he took away with him the madness that would stimulate him to come again: not only with those who first enticed him, but even without them; indeed, dragging in others besides. And yet from all this, with a most powerful and most merciful hand, thou (O Lord) didst pluck him and taught him not to rest his confidence in himself but in Thee - but not till long after."



Augustine tells how some time later God had mercy on this man and brought him back again from this vice into which he had fallen of battenning on blood thirsty spectacles. Our nature is no different to Alupius. There will be a side of it which is attracted by this sort of thing and which is being catered for by prize fighting, with its publicity in newspaper, television and radio. We ought to do what we can to discourage it and finally abolish it in our community, in the same way as bear baiting has been abolished.

When we contemplate the depravity of human nature which we ourselves share and which shows itself in so many different ways whether in blood lust as in gladiatorial shows or prize fighting or in other forms of sexual perversion, or in simple downright dishonesty, unkindness, criticism, selfishness, laziness and so on - when we contemplate our nature as it is when left to itself we cannot help but marvel at the longsuffering of God Who, as the Bible says, endures such contradiction of sinners against Himself; and who continues to show love and kindness, making the sun to rise on the evil and the good and sending rain on the just and the unjust, as Jesus reminded us.

God's longsuffering is for the purpose of giving us an opportunity of being saved by repenting and believing, turning to Him and putting our trust in the Saviour. Had we got what we deserved, we would have all been judged and punished long ago, but God's long-suffering postpones the day of reckoning to give us an opportunity of being saved. We ought not to despise the longsuffering of God by continuing on in our self-sking ways, or treat his longsuffering as though it will go on for ever, because it is plain that it will not be so. The day of judgement will come and that will mean that the present day of grace and salvation will have ended.

"Now is the day of Salvation", God loves men and women and invites them lovingly to return to Him. Let us see to it that we renew our love for him and show our obedience to His will by using His gifts of the body, and all His other gifts in a way that honours the gift as well as the Giver.

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