

they used to throw us to the lion

There was nothing the ancient Roman rabble liked more than a day at the circus. And though today most are squeamish about wild animals trained for human entertainment, organisers of Roman circuses had no such scruples. Wild circus lions were kept hungry to ensure a truly bloody spectacle as they tore unfortunates to pieces. And many of these unfortunates were Christians.

The Roman powers-that-be often didn't need

much pretext for making Christians scapegoats. Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus (AD 155–240) – Tertullian for short – was a prolific early Christian author. In a famous passage he lamented how Christians were always deemed to be in the wrong. With his tongue firmly planted in his cheek he wrote: 'If the Tiber rises too high for the walls, or the Nile too low for the fields, if the heavens do not open, or the earth does, if there is famine, if there is plague, instantly the howl is, "The Christians to the lion!"' What, all of them, to a single lion?'

There's debate about just how widespread persecution of Christians was in the early centuries AD. It was patchy; local outbreaks of hostility rather than widespread violence. But it could be vicious. The story of the martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicity (killed in AD 203) is a famous example. Perpetua was a married noble woman, 22 years old and a nursing mother. Felicity, a slave imprisoned with her, was pregnant. They were put to death during games celebrating the birthday of the Emperor Septimus Severus.

What softened the hearts of the Roman world, and led to a genuine conversion of people in the Roman Empire, was not intellectual arguments but practical caring. Widows in the ancient world often faced a life of miserable penury. Supporting them was one of the earliest forms of Christian social service. When a devastating plague hit, pagan households would throw infected people into the streets. Christians, by contrast, were seen caring for them and taking them into their homes. When the Emperor Julian (born AD 332) gave up Christianity and tried to re-institute paganism, he admitted this enterprise would only work if pagans were seen to care more than Christians did. His campaign failed.

Through the centuries, Christians took a lead in offering medical care. Some of Britain's most famous hospitals (Barts, St Mary's,

St Thomas' – to name just three) began as Christian foundations.

These are hard times for Christians in Britain. We hear reports of Christians banned from wearing crosses, or finding themselves on the wrong side of NHS officialdom for sharing their faith with patients or colleagues. Yes, there's more hostility towards the Christian faith in this country today than there used to be but we need to see this in perspective. The Open Doors 'World Watch' list makes sober reading. It lists 50 countries where Christians face daily persecution. Open Doors say there are nine countries where there is 'extreme persecution'. Top of the list is North Korea, followed by Iraq, Eritrea, Afghanistan, Syria, Pakistan, Sudan and Iran. In a further 17 countries the persecution level is rated 'severe'. There is 'moderate' persecution in 14 countries while there is 'sparse' persecution in another ten. See the full list: bit.ly/1zWfwMb

There are two lessons here. First, persecution is a normal experience for most Christians. In the UK we get off light. Secondly, what softens hearts is not arguments but genuine care and compassion. As Desmond Tutu has said, 'God's dream is that you and I and all of us will realise that we are family, that we are made for togetherness, for goodness and for compassion'.

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