

A Sermon Preached at St. Christopher's Episcopal Church,
Oak Park, IL on Good Friday
April 6, 2012 by Peter B. Thompson

In 1960, the big blockbuster movie of that year was *Spartacus*. It was nominated for nine Academy Awards, and won four. Distributed by Universal Pictures, it starred Laurence Olivier, Peter Ustinov, Charles Laughton, Jean Simmons, Tony Curtis and Kirk Douglas. For you young folks in the congregation, Kirk Douglas was the father of Michael Douglas, and Tony Curtis was the father of Jamie Lee Curtis. Other big movies that year were *The Alamo*, starring John Wayne, Richard Boone, and Frankie Avalon; and *The Apartment*, starring Jack Lemmon, Shirley McLaine, and Fred MacMurray. But I digress.

The movie tells the story of a Thracian slave who was forced to become a gladiator. Revolted by the indignity and injustice, Spartacus organizes the slaves into a mutiny and challenges the might of the Roman empire. The penalty for challenging the might of the Roman Empire was crucifixion. We have a depiction of that penalty here in the sanctuary. We don't like to think about crucifixion: it was a brutal torture, designed to inflict as much pain as possible over the longest period of time, so that the victim came to wish for his own death to relieve the suffering, while at the same time clinging to a vain hope of rescue. And of course, neither would come soon enough. So the torture was not only physical, it was also psychological. And it was public. On a hill, or a highway. And the victim was naked—not primly covered as we see in Christian art. Everything to produce as much shame and humiliation as possible—a warning to others not to challenge the power of Rome.

Spartacus almost won his freedom. His slaves defeated several Roman armies, until the Roman senate sent out forces large enough to defeat them. Because this is Hollywood, there are moments of beauty and joy and even humor, so the audience becomes emotionally attached to the freedom fighters. I sure did. As a sophomore fifteen year old, I could identify with their armed

resistance to unjust authority. Probably something akin to the feelings of Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, and Thomas Paine in 1776. But I digress.

In the end, most were killed, but about 6,000 slaves were captured. Ultimately, all were crucified, lining the Appian Way all the way to Rome. While they awaited their fate, the Roman general, Crassus, played by Olivier, struts over to the captives and demands, "Which one of you is Spartacus?"

Now, let me tell you about Tony Curtis' character. In an early scene, Spartacus frees Tony, a slave, and invites him to join the slave army. "What weapons can you use?" he asks. "None," says Tony. "What work can you do?" "I am a singer of songs." Kirk shoots him an exasperated look. "Well then, sing us a song!" Which Tony does—although Tony would rather fight. His song is not exactly warlike, but the slave gives it everything he's got. He wants desperately to be a fighter, to avenge the indignity and helplessness of slavery. He joins the mutiny, with the job of entertaining the warriors at night around the fire after the battles, but practices fighting during the day.

So back to the Roman general who gave the surviving slaves a choice: give up Spartacus, or all of you will be crucified. "Which one of you is Spartacus?"

Antonitus (that's the name of Tony Curtis' character) stands up and says, "I am Spartacus." Then one by one, all the other fighters stand up and identify themselves as Spartacus. Kirk Douglas is speechless.

Leaving the RKO 86th Street movie theater I was speechless, totally wiped out. What a movie! Doesn't it bring to mind the words, "Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends?"

Which brings me to Jesus.

Like the slaves, the Jews were ruled by the Roman Empire. As long as they paid their taxes, supplied food and raw materials, and caused no trouble, the Romans left them alone. The Romans even allowed them to have a king—you remember King Herod—and to worship their God. All the while though, the Jews hoped

for a messiah to deliver them from the imperialists. A messiah is a *military* leader. They wanted a tough guy, a warrior like Spartacus, to show up and kick out the Romans.

Now, Holy Week is a tough time for me. In one of the hymns, we sing the words, “I crucified Thee.” And in the dramatic reading of the Gospel, the whole church congregation is supposed to shout “Crucify Him.” This ritual is designed to remind us of the choice we have to keep the faith, to be courageous, to be loyal. Or to run the other way, like Peter. I identify with Peter. All of this stuff makes me feel guilty and inadequate. And don’t remind me of Doubting Thompson—I mean Doubting Thomas. Yes, Peter is the first one to figure out just how special Jesus is. He says, “You are the Messiah, the Christ.” But, he was thinking of the *military* leader the Jews were hoping for. So when Jesus reveals that he is to die at the hands of the Romans, Peter is appalled, and rebukes Jesus—who rebukes him back.

Because—Jesus is planning to do something completely unthought-of of, radical, totally unexpected, new, different, not to mention ‘logically counterintuitive.’ Reframing the whole debate, as it were. Jesus is going to conquer the Roman Empire with—*love*.

Peter never really gets his mind around this idea of love. In one of the gospels we learn that he pulls his sword and cuts off the ear of the high priest’s slave. (Get that—his slave!) Who knew that the disciples were carrying weapons? Didn’t Peter see the movie? Not exactly a loving act. So he gets rebuked again. And later on, he denies any knowledge of Jesus. This time the rebuke comes from a—rooster. A bad day for the disciple. Yet, Jesus was no singer of songs like Antonitus—he was a soldier, but without a sword—armed with an astounding idea.

To be sure my memory hadn’t failed me, I rented the movie and watched it again for the first time in 52 years. More than once, I was like Peter, hoping someone would stick a sword into Sir Laurence. I wasn’t thinking of Christian love.

Another reason Holy Week is tough for me—especially Good Friday—is that some have used the Easter story to persecute the Jews. It is totally unchristian to blame His death on a whole people. Instead, blame it on the politicians, the power elite. Extraordinary power was in the hands of the temple priests, who had worked out a pretty good deal for themselves with the Roman occupiers, as Paris pointed out in her Palm Sunday sermon. It wasn’t the Jews who killed Jesus. The Romans wished to avoid another Spartacus, whose crucifixion had occurred only a hundred years before. By this I mean: don’t blame the ordinary people; instead, point your finger at those who had the most to lose, the ones with power, position, and wealth. *They* tricked the Romans into murdering Jesus, and the Romans had every reason to be tricked. These were the same people who enslaved Spartacus.

Did God bring down the Roman Empire by force? Or by sticking a sword into General Crassus? No, instead, God did something shocking. He gave us an impossibly extravagant, totally committed, utterly surprising demonstration of love: *I am Spartacus*.

How could this happen?

The big blockbuster movie of 1965 was *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, directed by George Stevens. At the end of the picture John Wayne makes a cameo appearance as a Roman soldier. Looking up at the crucified Christ the Duke says, “Truly, this man was the Son of God.”

Amen.