

SERMON: Good Friday 19 April 2019 – Rev Alistair Cowper

**“The Cross and the Death of Evil”
(John 18:1-40 and John 19:1-42)**

[SLIDE]

I read the most moving story this week - a very contemporary version of the story of the lost son and the father who ran to meet him.

After more than five years of sleepless nights, Australian grandmother Karen Nettleton has finally had a chance to embrace her orphaned grandchildren – the children of Australia’s most notorious ISIS terrorist, Khaled Sharrouf.

Zaynab, Hoda and Hamza were 12, 11 and 3 when they were taken to Syria with their parents. They are now 17, 16 and 8 and 17 year old Zaynab is pregnant with her third child. All they want to do is to come home and live a normal life.

The way the grandmother ran to greet her children in that squalid refugee camp, smothering them with kisses, was a sight to behold.

And in those moments you could see the effects of evil begin to crumble in that woman’s embrace. And there was a glimmer of hope that a new beginning might just be possible for these poor children and their ageing grandmother.

So, is this how God deals with evil?

The Bible tells us that Christ,

“having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.”

(Colossians 2:15)

Soon after Jesus’ death then, the cross is seen as the victory of Christ over evil.

Thomas Aquinas was once asked about the presence of evil and suffering in the world, to which he said, “God permits evil in order to draw forth a greater good”.

So does God makes use of evil in order to bring forth his purposes?

Or, do God's purposes prevail despite the presence of evil?

Or, does God act in love so that all evil is absorbed by love, because love is greater in power, in longevity, in everything.

Barbara Brown Taylor wrote a book in 1998 called "God in Pain". In it she says this, "If the cross was in any sense the defeat of God's will, then it was also the perfection of it, as one beloved human being chose to bear the consequences of being who he was and died with the same integrity he had lived. Insofar as it was the will of God that he live like that, then God's will included the possibility of his death – not as something God desired but as something God suffered."

She goes on to say "By entering into the experience of the cross, God took the man-made wreckage of the world inside himself and laboured with it - a long labour, almost three days – and he did not let go of it until he could transform it and return it to us as life. That is the power of a suffering God, not to prevent pain, but to redeem it, by going through it with us."

That gives us a way of seeing Christ as Redeemer, buying back, restoring, reconciling, retelling things as they ought to be.

On Monday of this week Richard Rohr posted a meditation on the death of Jesus and he asked this question:

How does Jesus the victim transform us? How does the lamb of God "take away" our sin (John 1:29)? How does Jesus "overcome death and darkness,"? Is it a heavenly transaction on God's side, or is it more an *agenda that God gives us for our side*?

Jesus is, in effect, saying, "*This is how evil is transformed into good. I am going to take the worst thing and turn it into the best thing, so you will never be victimised, destroyed, or helpless again! I am giving YOU the victory over death.*"

Jesus takes away the sin of the world by dramatically exposing the real sin of the world (which is ignorant violence rather than not obeying purity codes); by

refusing the usual pattern of revenge, and, in fact, “returning their curses with blessings” (Luke 6:27-28); and, finally, by teaching us that we can “follow him” in doing the same.

There is no such thing as redemptive violence. Violence doesn’t save; it only destroys—in both short and long term. Jesus replaced the myth of redemptive violence with the truth of redemptive suffering. He showed us on the cross how to hold the pain and let it transform us, rather than pass it on to others around us.

Jesus is not changing his Father’s mind about us; he is changing our mind about what is real and what is not.

Jesus on the cross identifies with the human problem, the sin, the darkness. He refuses to stand above or outside the human dilemma. Further, he refuses to be the scapegoater and instead becomes the scapegoat personified.

In Paul’s language, “Christ redeemed us from the curse . . . by being cursed himself” (Galatians 3:13); or “God made the sinless one into sin, so that in him we might become the very goodness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

The cross shows us that, in order to get to that place of goodness, death and resurrection must be the pattern for all of life - evil must die within us by the cross of Christ at work in us, but that same cross gives us the power to stand against evil, to refuse violence and to absorb pain.