

Journey to Easter

Stories of Hope for Lent



A Biblical and Theological Basis for Ending Violence Against Children

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This theological framework has been created with our key church partners—World Evangelical Alliance, Anglican Alliance, Micah Global, Caritas In Veritate, and World Council of Churches—for the 'It takes a world to end violence against children' campaign. This narrative reflects on how Jesus survived the threat of violence as an infant by becoming a refugee. We know later Jesus was arrested, beaten and crucified on a cross for us. We are reminded that as the Church we are called to protect the innocent, especially the children. To stand against injustice and violence upon them through prayer, advocacy, defending their rights and taking direct action. God's Word calls the Church to be the voice of the child when they have been silenced, to act for them when they are powerless, and to work for communities which will protect and care for them.

Alan was a migrant, fleeing the violence of a brutal civil war. Like many hundreds of thousands of people, Alan left his home and his country behind him, setting out on a perilous journey, seeking peace. His journey did not end well. Alan Kurdi was found dead on a beach in Turkey in September 2015.

Alan Kurdi was just three years old.

For another small boy, age about 2 years old, the story ended well. His father had a dream in which he was told to take his child and escape the deliberate and ruthless violence targeted upon infant boys. ¹ He fled by night from an occupied country in the Middle East, run by a brutal, vicious dictator. In this story Joseph, Mary and Jesus survived.

The Human Cost of Violence

Both are stories of the human cost of violence: powerful people waging war, with the little people being caught up in it. Violence against children is still too common. It is an offence against God and an indictment against societies that allow it to continue. It includes overt violence in war, human trafficking of minors, hazardous and forced labour, sexual exploitation and slavery; gang-related violence; child marriage, female genital mutilation, rape and sexual harassment; domestic violence, neglect, all forms of abuse in the home or elsewhere – including the

¹ Matthew 2:13-15

Church at times; physical, verbal and cyber bullying; exclusion, etc. Violence against children requires us to act, with all people of goodwill, and most emphatically to address any issues within our own midst.

Stories of children in Scripture

Scripture tells many stories of such children and their families but the chief among all stories is the story of Jesus. He survived the threat of violence on his infant life by becoming a refugee with his father, Joseph, and mother, Mary. His story is an extension of Israel's. He was familiar with stories of the patriarchs, with tales of adventure, betrayal, blood, and abusive sex;² of Joseph, trafficked as a child by his family and sexually harassed by his employer's wife;³ of Gideon, 'the least in my family,' and other Judges;⁴ of Hannah's prayer for a baby and the growth of the boy Samuel;⁵ of young David, Jesus' own ancestor, youngest of eight sons;⁶ Naaman's wife's servant girl;⁷ of the Israelites being a migratory people⁸ who had found a home through conquest,⁹ and been conquered in turn, dragged away from their homes into exile ¹⁰and by God's grace and patience with them had been able to return and rebuild their city and nation,¹¹ only to be conquered again. And again. We also read of God's concern for the poor and the outcast, illustrated by Jesus' befriending 'sinners and tax collectors' and the emphasis throughout Scripture upon the widow and the orphan.

Jesus saw the coming doom of Jerusalem.¹² He talked of God being a mother hen, gathering her chicks under her wing.¹³ It is a touching, gentle image of parenthood, protection and nurture, and suggests that the same characteristics should be found among his followers. As Jesus talks about this destruction¹⁴ he made special mention of pregnant women and nursing mothers,¹⁵ showing again an awareness of the plight of the most vulnerable members of society. Perhaps also he recalled stories his own mother told him of their forced migration to Egypt.

The longing for justice

These stories of human lives mirror the experiences of people throughout history. We all know stories of violence, of broken lives and human cruelty, of wars and abuse. We may even have experienced such suffering ourselves. We know there is injustice but most of us long for a renewed world characterised by love, justice and peace. One in which people can flourish, where 'no more shall the sound of weeping be heard,' and infants do not die; where people have the essentials of life – a roof over their heads, food to eat, and where work is rewarded.¹⁶ This Shalom is God's desire for all of humanity, including children, and both the Church and just governments are God's instruments in achieving such societies.

We believe

We believe that God the Father, who is holy, just and loving, yearns for such a world, and that Jesus, Son of God, Son of Man and son of Mary, came to initiate this Shalom in the kingdom of God. In the power of the Holy Spirit we – God's migratory people – can work towards it.

We believe that Jesus 'came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried; and the third day He rose again, according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven.'¹⁷ By his incarnation, as Irenaeus notes, "He was made an infant for infants, sanctifying infancy; a child among children, sanctifying childhood ... a young man among young men, becoming an example to them, and sanctifying them to the Lord."¹⁸ We see Jesus, like Samuel

² See Genesis chapter 12-36

³ See Genesis chapter 37-50

⁴ Judges 6:15

⁵ 1 Samuel 2 & 3

⁶ 1 Samuel 16

⁷ 2 Kings 5

⁸ Exodus

⁹ Joshua

¹⁰ See, for example, 2 Kings 17 & 25, 2 Chronicles 36:15-23

¹¹ See, for example, Ezra & Nehemiah

¹² See, for example, Luke 21:5,6, & 20-24, and Matthew 24:1,2

¹³ Luke 13:34,35

¹⁴ The fall of Jerusalem in 70AD

¹⁵ Matthew 24:19 & Luke 21:23

¹⁶ See Isaiah 65:20-25; also Matthew 25:31-46

¹⁷ <http://creeds.net/ancient/nicene.htm>

¹⁸ H. Bettenson, ed., The Early Christian Fathers: A selection

before him, growing intellectually, physically, spiritually and socially: 'Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour.'¹⁹

Children are a blessing

We believe that children are a blessing from God, a sign of God's presence within God's creation and of hope for the future. This hope is shown in the coming of the King of Kings, for children were important – indeed, central – to Jesus' self-understanding. He was a child, the Son of David, the Son of Man, the Son of God who was and is his father. This relationship was a core value for his life and teaching (and is a central tenant of Trinitarian theology).

It is an intimate relationship, based upon God's love, and is mirrored in the reception the disciples give to a child: "Whoever welcomes one such child in My name welcomes Me; and whoever welcomes Me welcomes not Me, but the one who sent Me."²⁰ "It is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs," Jesus said. "Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."²¹ Jesus blessed the children, holding them up as models of the Kingdom: we should follow his example and learn from them.

Violence against children breaks Jesus' heart

We believe that the suffering of children is close to Jesus' beating heart and grieves him deeply. He gave dire warnings of the eternal damnation of those who caused one of these little ones to stumble,²² as all forms of violence are against the will of God. We, his followers, are called to protect children by standing between them and violent forces that seek to harm them. We are called to stand against the principalities and powers that inflict injustice and violence upon children, through prayer, advocacy, defending their rights and even direct action.

We are to call others to treat them with the inherent dignity that they deserve, for they are created in the image of God and bear that image.²³ We are not to allow that image to become even more tarnished, nor for it to be destroyed through abuse, or by other forms of violence against children. These are a violation of God's purposes who longs for the kingdom to 'come on earth as it is in heaven.' We are to have no part in such evil, but to oppose it as Jesus did,²⁴ for violence against children of any type damages their ability to flourish physically, emotionally, spiritually, psychologically and socio-politically. Jesus, however, went further taking violence upon himself, "so that the Scriptures of the prophets may be fulfilled."²⁵

Redemption is possible even in the midst of violence

The violence of the cross, and the surprise of the resurrection, are the major foci of the life of Jesus as portrayed in the Gospels. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are careful in developing the story line, introducing from an early point the conflict that Jesus caused through his popular teaching and healing ministry. Most of it arises from the jealousy or insecurity of those who oppose him, but there are times when Jesus directly confronts his antagonists. He holds up a mirror to them, allowing them to see themselves as they really are. He is sometimes blunt, even angry, but always loving. His call upon the lives of his followers – then and now – remains the same: to be agents and ambassadors of the Kingdom of God, and to hunger and thirst for righteousness (personally and socially). It is an upside-down kingdom where the first will be last, and the last first,²⁶ the humble are lifted up and the rulers brought low,²⁷ where small things can make a large difference,²⁸ and the greatest is the servant of all.²⁹ The Kingdom of God subverts earthly powers, challenging the men³⁰ of violence, war and greed who commodify things and people – including children – for personal gain, power and prestige.

from the writings of the Fathers from St. Clement of Rome to St. Athanasius (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1987)

¹⁹ Luke 2:52; compare with 1 Samuel 2:26

²⁰ Mark 9:36,37

²¹ See Mark 10:13-16; also

Matthew 18:1-6; Luke 18:16-17

²² See Matthew 18:6; Mark 9:42; Luke 17:2

²³ All humans, including infants and children, bear the image of God through Creation (Gen. 1:27).

²⁴ See, for example, Matthew 26:51,52: "Put your sword back into its place;

²⁵ Matthew 26:56

²⁶ Mark 10:31; Matt. 19:29-30

²⁷ Luke 1:52

²⁸ Luke 13:18-20

²⁹ Mark 10:43

³⁰ It usually is men!

It was such men who were responsible for the death of Jesus by crucifixion. They perceived that Jesus was a threat to them and feared him,³¹ but wrongly believed that killing him would resolve the issue for them. The reverse happened, for we know the Easter story, how Mary and some of the other women came to the tomb and found it empty! The Resurrection of Jesus is the turning point in history,³² the basis of our hope that the Kingdom of God is a present reality in this life. The coming of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples transformed them into agents of God's kingdom and gives us the power to become so as well.³³ St. Peter made it clear that the Spirit was for all humanity, including children.³⁴

We are called by God

We are called to follow Jesus, leading lives of prayerful and faithful obedience, based upon God's love for us and for the world. Followers of Jesus are not to repay violence with violence, but rather to 'love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you'³⁵ and 'be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world.'³⁶ But there is a place for godly anger at injustice and violence: Jesus was angry and saddened by the hardness of hearts that would allow needless suffering,³⁷ and responded with restoration and healing.

We are all called to continue the work Jesus started: announcing the Good News of the Kingdom, seeking justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with God,³⁸ especially with 'the least, the last and the lost' as our focus.³⁹

We are called by the Father, in the power of the Holy Spirit as we faithfully follow Jesus the Son, to take concrete steps to end violence against children. We must become aware of and raise awareness of these issues; promote the dignity of children and bless them; teach and train them – and their parents and carers. We must work with all people of goodwill, engaging together with spiritual and secular authorities, to protect and care for all the children in our communities, but especially those at risk of harm and those in need of healing. We must stand up for justice and advocating with, for and to children for the glory of God and benefit of all children as a compelling witness of God's love.

Therefore,

We commit to stand with the child: in front to protect, beside to encourage and heal, behind to empower. We undertake to work for the child: to be their voice when they are silenced, to act for them when they are powerless, to work for communities which will protect and care for them.

We promise to witness to the child: being and bringing the Good News of Jesus to them, helping them to hear and experience God's love, offering to them the gift of ever-lasting life that Jesus offers to all. We will invite them to fully participate in God's kingdom, as agents and actors themselves.⁴⁰

³¹ See Mark 11:18; 14:1, 10-11

³² See Ephesians 1:18-32; Colossians 1:15-20

³³ See Acts 1:5,8; 2:1-4; 3:1-10; Romans 1:1-4; 1 Cor. 2:1-5; 2 Cor. 3:12-18; etc

³⁴ See Acts 2:17-18. The Holy Spirit does not discriminate on the basis of age or gender.

³⁵ Matthew 5:38-45

³⁶ Philippians 3:15 NRSV

³⁷ See Mark 3:5, for example

³⁸ Micah 6:8

³⁹ See, for example, Luke 7:22 and Matt. 25:45, and Mark 6:34

⁴⁰ See John 4:14; 7:37-39; 10:10

Prayers

Jesus, Son of God, Son of David, Son of Mary, Son of Man,

Jesus, King of Kings, Lord of Lords and Prince of Peace, who was there in the beginning with the Father and the Spirit, is here now and ever shall be,

Jesus, friend of sinners, friend and brother, Lord and Saviour,

Send us out to live lives worthy of your love, to live in the power and grace of the Holy Spirit, to be your witnesses to the Kingdom and the ways of your Kingdom, that together and in person we may be signs that point towards you, towards peace, towards justice and away from violence to the least, the last and the lost.

Amen.

Jesus, Creator and Sustainer of all things, you are King of Kings and Lord of Lords – nothing escapes your gaze.

Every child is fearfully and wonderfully made in your image. You long for each precious child to flourish in safety and well-being, coming to a full and life giving knowledge of you.

Your heart must break whenever violence is perpetrated against your children. Lord, give us your heart for children and unite us in our effort to be ambassadors for you on behalf of children around the world.

We know it will take a world to end violence against children – here we are, send us, use us. Pour your light into the darkest areas of violence, rescue and protect for your Names sake.

Amen.