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Looking into the Face of Savagery

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For out of the heart come evil thoughts – murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.

Matthew 15:19

Dear Students, Parents and Carers

Most of our community would be all too aware of the tragedy which has unfolded, and is continuing to cause immense mourning and distress, at my last school as Head - St Andrew's Cathedral School. I have certainly been affected by these awful events, and I am very grateful to the parents, staff and students who have asked me if I am OK. The extreme violence was inexplicable, incomprehensible, unimaginable. Why did it happen? In fact, no one can give a reason. The Police Superintendent in charge of the case has declared this horrific situation to be random in the sense that it is completely unpredictable and hence impossible to have prevented.

At the risk of brooking controversy, I have a probably very unpopular alternative question; why does this kind of event not occur more often in our world? In one sense it does through much of the world, but not in the lived experience of many Australians. We are helpfully insulated. Currently this level of violence is seen on many continents. One needs only to mention Ukraine and Russia, Myanmar, South Sudan, Syria, Iraq, Palestine (Hamas/Israel), Hezbollah, Islamic State, Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, Chad and on we may go. Some of these humanitarian crises include genocide and so called ethnic cleansing. Many don't loom large in our awareness as they rarely have footage for television and many are culturally alien and therefore ignored as 'the other'.

In fact, most of recorded history has featured extensive barbarism enacted by some people against others, often fuelled by egotistical power lusts by rulers. The ancient world (one of my teaching areas) manifested extensive horrors including child sacrifice to appease pagan gods, early examples of genocide and ethnic cleansing, torture and killing, sanctioned or otherwise, on an industrial scale, ritual temple prostitution as a mode of worship. Lives were short and brutal for men (warfare was almost a constant, right through until early modern times). It was no better for women given that their mode was generally to be confined, powerless and oppressed in all senses. Rape was a corollary of warfare. Piracy and the slave trade were extensive industries. At the pinnacle of barbarity stood the ancient Assyrians, who impaled their victims through the throat on stakes, and the Mexican Aztecs who sacrificed to their gods by literally tearing the hearts out of living prisoners.

Into the ancient world came Jesus. His ethic was completely counter-cultural. Into a Greco-Roman world where arrogance was expected and prized, and the disabled and underprivileged were regarded with contempt, and where serving was regarded as servile, Jesus preached love to one's neighbour (that is, everybody), service and laying down one's life for one's friends. This ethic has profoundly shaped the western world. Tom Holland's magisterial book, *Dominion*, is the most recent exploration of this theme. Even now, in a post-Christian society, the afterglow of Jesus' mission and ethic is still partially determinant of our mores. However, Jesus does not let us off lightly. He said, as confronting then as it is now, "*For out of the heart come evil thoughts – murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander*" (Matthew 15:19). Here is the point; we all have a capacity for evil on some level. To put it in the language of Conan Doyle in his *Sherlock Holmes*, while we are largely Dr Jekyll, we all have the capacity to be Mr Hyde, at least by reversion at times. Jesus is, in effect, saying to us that if we want to see the face of savagery within, we only need to hold up a mirror. Of course, this doesn't imply we will all go to the extremes, it simply asserts that the principle of evil is ubiquitous across all humanity. Jesus does not allow us to have half Jesus or 'Jesus-lite', he insists we embrace all of him or nothing. Deleting parts that may be disagreeable was not on his radar.



The Western World remains very much in thrall to the Enlightenment Project, that is, a secular humanist alternative to Jesus' analysis of human nature. This project assumes human nature will steadily improve through education and access to the necessities of life, such that a better human kind will emerge. The recent evidence is to the contrary; at its pinnacle, two World Wars which butchered people (combatants and non-combatants) by the millions, and the appropriation of science towards an arms race which has the capacity to extinguish life on this planet. Rather than going ever upwards and onwards, the dream of utopia is in fact a mirage. Jesus' analysis is much more compelling for it is sadly consistent, and accords with the evidence, from a local to a global scale.

What is chilling about the tragedy which unfolded at St Andrew's, the shock and grief of which will cascade for a long time, is that the young man concerned was, in everybody's estimation, an absolute delight. I knew him years ago as a fine student, a Prefect, a role-model. This is what makes the situation chilling, in that on every indicator, he appeared to be just like the best of us. An hour before he committed the atrocity, he was speaking in a relaxed, friendly mode with staff at that school. Now two young lives are destroyed in their prime, two families have had their lives upturned in the most blistering manner in a way which will never really recede, and multiple friends, relatives and staff in two schools have been left in deep turmoil. He was not a monster; rather, in the last five hours of his life, he committed a monstrous act which was in complete contradiction to what everyone who knew him observed in the rest of this short life. What led to his mental disintegration? Was it a psychotic episode which was deeply out of character? The literature on pornography for boys and young men says that many see this kind of appalling sexualised violence on the screen, which some, amidst the greatest tragedy, act out in real life. Does any of this apply to him? We will never know.

There are a number of ways to apply this to Shore: it is essential that parents know what their sons are viewing on their devices while at home or even in the social space beyond home. Our boys need to understand clearly that women are not property. Domestic violence is never OK. In later teen and early adult years when young people are assessing if a current relationship will be permanent, young men and young women need permission to end relationships without reprisals. Revenge is a base motive which is unworthy of us. Forgiveness literally is from the Divine. The extreme mode of ending a relationship where, sadly, usually a male will decide that if he cannot 'have' this woman, no one can, is at the pathological end of the spectrum and is always going to lead to enormous grief amongst a number of people. Where young men exhibit such tendencies, help is available and needs to be accessed quickly.

As we proceed through our *Building Good Men* programme, we need to ensure that these elements of respect for other people, and oneself, need to be prominent as we endeavour to help our boys build the kind of characters that will be regarded as exemplary by men and women. We earnestly desire to build, in conjunction with parents, young men of broad perspective and character who will be, in the deepest sense, beautiful men.

Dr John Collier
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Sydney Church of England Grammar School acknowledges and pays respect to the traditional owners of the land on which it is built; the Cammeraygal people of the Guringal tribe of the Eora Nation. Sydney Church of England Grammar School also acknowledges and pays respect to the traditional owners of the land and water throughout Australia where its activities occur. We pay our respect to the Elders, past, present and emerging.