

Ash Wednesday: February 17th: Cain – [Genesis 4 v 1-17](#): ‘Am I my brother’s keeper’.



*The Lord's Prayer: Pater Noster
Church, Mount of Olives*

The Old Testament takes a keen interest in fraternal relationships (I grew up with three brothers so have a bit of background here!). Interestingly on a number of occasions it is younger brothers, sometimes deservedly (Joseph) and sometimes by adroit use of skulduggery (Jacob) who gain the upper hand. In the story of Cain and Abel it is God's apparent preference for the younger rather than the older brother's sacrifice that leads to fratricide. Before looking at it more closely, it is worth noting that we shouldn't get too hung up about how literally to take this story; we just end up asking ourselves things like who on earth Cain's wife and the 'whoever' in verse 14 could have been if Adam and Eve were the first two human beings. As we are about to see, the teller of this story is challenging us with some much more significant and relevant questions.

It isn't entirely clear why God favoured the offering of Abel. It could be argued that he had taken a bit more care in choosing some of the very best of his flock to offer but the text offers nothing definitive to back this up. God simply made his choice. It is, however, in the violent response of Cain that much of the warning this story embodies is to be found. He considers himself slighted; hardly surprising when, in the cultural milieu from which this story arose, it was the firstborn son who should have had everything going for him, something we see this reflected at their respective births. When Cain is born Eve expresses a delight (v 1) entirely missing from the birth of her second son Abel (v 2). The continuing use in the context of royal succession of the adage 'the heir and the spare' contains a faint echo of this.

Cain's fury at having been apparently snubbed and his deadly jealousy that his younger brother had, in his eyes, put one over on him reflect a sense of entitlement that we recognise as being very much present in the world in which we live. It often manifests itself in a feeling of superiority leading to an over developed sense of one's own importance, unrealistic demands on other people and an overweening desire for power and influence. It follows that when these needs are unmet there is considerable potential for conflict. Such attitudes exist in government and in all parts of society; they are not entirely unknown in church life.

It is Cain's sense of entitlement, his sense of outrage that God has not recognised his intrinsic superiority as the elder brother and effectively cheated him of the recognition that he believed was his by right that leads him to take the life of an entirely innocent younger sibling. And one terrible mistake then leads to another as he tries to lie his way out of it with his rhetorical and immortalised question, 'am I my brother's keeper?' (v 9 - roughly translated as 'search me, guv').

The point for us is that Cain's deep seated rage, an anger that is a grown up and much more lethal form of throwing one's toys out of the pram, has got out of control and mastered him entirely (v 7). Before continuing one thing needs to be made clear; anger isn't always destructive and self-centred. It can be an appropriate response to injustice. Attitudes and actions involving nations,

communities and individuals that cause poverty, disempowerment, prejudice, despair and death should make us angry enough to want to get out of our seats and do something about it. Jesus got into a furious rage with those who had desecrated the Temple by using it to line their own pockets by extorting money from those already very badly off (Mat 21 v 12-13). He was quite unable to stand to one side and leave it unchallenged. It is surely very appropriate, in the face of global trading arrangements that benefit rich countries over poor ones, elections being rigged so that despots can cling to power, basic human rights being denied to so many and conflict causing such death, destruction and suffering, that we become angry enough to do more than wearily accept that this is 'the way of the world'.

But in complete contrast the destructive and misplaced nature of Cain's anger can achieve no good thing. It is the anger of one who believes that he or she should have got the promotion that another colleague was given and who never forgives them for it, the anger of the person in charge addicted to having it their own way whose authority is questioned, the anger of one jealous as others are praised, the anger of one who considers himself to be better and more worthy than others. Those who allow this kind of anger to become their master hurt other people in all sorts of ways and sometimes end up, as in the case of Cain, finding the intended or unintended consequences a profound cause for lasting regret.

It is worth noting that although Cain does not escape punishment for his violent act he is not as a result placed beyond God's care – indeed the 'mark of Cain' (v 15) protects him from the same fate as his brother (backed by the threat of severe divine vengeance! v 16). It's a reminder that anger does have a habit of multiplying and causing a chain reaction. At the time of writing self-isolation is being used as a way of protecting people from Covid-19 and here God acts to isolate the sin of Cain and to draw its sting knowing its destructive and replicatory force. It's a reminder of the words of Jesus from the cross, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing' (Luke 23 v 34). As those who, however imperfectly, seek to make known the forgiving love of God we too are called to interrupt the chain reaction so often caused by sin, including bitter and belligerent anger, as we work for justice and peace and make the forgiving love of Jesus more fully known.

And if we look into our own hearts we may find some misplaced anger that we are often barely conscious of but which surprises us from time to time with its vehemence. It might even relate to something that happened a long time ago and has never been properly addressed and sorted out. Such anger has the power to cripple us emotionally and spiritually meaning that through prayer, good advice and maybe, if needed, professional counselling, we need to find a way of moving on. It is often in the letting go that we find the path to freedom and new life.

Questions: Have you ever allowed misplaced anger to be your master? Why was Jesus able to forgive those who crucified him?

Prayer: Lord, forgive us when we become needlessly angry and help us to forgive those who have been needlessly angry with us. Amen.