

MORNING SERVICE

15 February 2009, Kilcalmonell, Killean & Kilchenzie

8th Sunday after Christmas

preacher: Rev Martin Grashoff

Welcome & Intimations

Opening Hymn : 'O God, you search me and you know me'

Children's Talk

Children's Hymn : 'I danced in the morning'

Prayer & Lord's Prayer

Readings : Genesis 4:1-16 & Matthew 5:43-45¹

- 1 Now Adam
knows his wife Eve,
and she conceives and bears Cain – *gainings*
saying,
"I have gained a male child with the help of the LORD."
- 2 She then bears
his brother Abel – *vapour*;
Abel becomes a keeper of sheep,
and Cain
a servant of the soil.
- 3 In the course of time,
Cain
brings from the fruit of the soil
an offering to the LORD;
- 4 and Abel, for his part,
brings of the firstlings of his flock,
their fat portions;
the LORD looks with favour
on Abel and his offering.
- 5 But on Cain and his offering
he does not look with favour;
Cain burns with anger
and he looks down.
- 6 And the LORD says to Cain,
"Why are you burning with anger,
and why do you look down?"
- 7 Surely, if you do right, you hold your head high;

¹ OT: *Tanakh*, with adaptations from *New Revised Standard Version*, *New Jerusalem Bible*, *English Standard Version*, *King James Version*, *Naardense bijbel* and *Het verhaal gaat.../The Story Goes...*, all in regard of the Hebrew text. NT: *Good News Bible*.

but if you do not do right
sin crouches at the door,
hungry to get you;
yet, you should be its master.”
8 Then Cain says to his brother Abel...² –
and when they are in the field,
Cain sits upon his brother Abel
and kills him.
9 The LORD says to Cain,
“Where is your brother Abel?” –
and he says,
“Don’t know;
am I my brother’s keeper?”
10 Then he says,
“What have you done?
The voice of your brother’s blood
cries out to me from the soil!
11 Therefore, you shall be more cursed
than the soil, which opened its mouth
to receive your brother’s blood from your hand.
12 Yes, you will serve the soil,
but it shall no longer yield its strength to you;
you shall be a restless wanderer on the earth.”
13 Cain says to the LORD,
“My iniquity is too great to bear!
14 Since you banish me this day from the soil,
and I must avoid your presence
and become a restless wanderer on the earth –
anyone who meets me may kill me!”
15 But the LORD says to him,
“Not at all, if anyone kills Cain,
sevenfold vengeance shall be taken on him” –
and the LORD puts a mark on Cain,
so that no one who meets him would kill him.
16 Cain left the presence of the LORD
and settled in the land of Nod – *land of error*,
east of Eden.

(...)

[Jesus says:]

43 “You have heard that it was said,
‘Love your friends, hate your enemies.’³

² Most translations add something like ‘Let’s go into the field’, but the Hebrew just has this peculiar break without mentioning anything of what was said. After all, as Hamlet concludes after all the killing, the rest is silence, isn’t it (William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 5,2)?

³ Obviously an interpretation of Leviticus 19:18 – *You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against*

⁴⁴ But now I tell you:
love your enemies
and pray for those who persecute you,
⁴⁵ so that you may become the children of your Father in heaven;
for he makes his sun to shine on bad and good people alike,
and gives rain to those who do good and to those who do evil.”

Hymn : ‘Make me a channel of your peace’

Sermon

To find a beginning for this sermon I googled the internet on ‘Cain & Abel’. In less than a second I got over half a million hits⁴ – and there was very little to laugh about. Virtually everything led to – deadly – serious talk or grim pictures. One funny exception was the website which depicts the bible story in Lego blocks – *but* that was the kind of fun I cannot describe here...⁵ And the other funny one was a computer program called Cain & Abel, which was designed to hack Windows passwords...⁶

Last week we learned how realistic the bible is about good and evil. The full emphasis is on the goodness of all creation, and the call to human beings to keep the earth a good place for all. But since we all know that we just cannot live on cloud nine, without warning we were told the story of Adam and Eve blaming others and thinking of themselves as being gods. So they had to leave the Garden of Eden and work for their living, always caught somewhere between good and evil. And that is still our human default position.

Today’s story even goes a step further. Evil is done willingly and bloodily. Of course this too is a myth – a story going beyond what we usually call facts, thus revealing the deeper layers of our human existence. This story is about *us* – how *we*, literally or not, make someone else’s life impossible. It is about the killing that is so much part of our daily life, that we would rather not see it. That is actually an important issue in the story of Genesis: which way we choose to look, or not. Again the myth is more real than life.

So, this raw story of Cain and Abel asks the tough question if we can really be brothers and sisters to each other. Obviously that is not something we can take for granted.

Cain – his name means ‘gainings’ – is the elder brother. Like his father he tills the earth, becoming *a servant of the soil*. Abel – his name means ‘vapour’ – becomes a shepherd, *a keeper of sheep*. So both take care of God’s creation. Both know that they do not own the earth, because

*the earth belongs to the LORD
and all that it contains.*

Together they offer God from the first fruits of their hard work. So far, so good.

any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the LORD.

⁴ Over 645,000 results in 0.09secs.

⁵ http://www.thebricktestament.com/genesis/cain_and_abel/gn04_01a.html

⁶ http://majorgeeks.com/Cain_and_Abel_d5062.html

But then the story takes a different direction. As will be the case many more times, God does *not* do what we would think to be the most 'natural' thing. God *looks with favour on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he does not look with favour*. God reverses the roles: the first becomes the last and the last the first. "God has a weakness for the weak, for people in the shadows and in the darkness, for the virtually nameless who are disregarded by the great names."⁷ That's against our natural inclinations, but the bible always wants us to look differently at *the earth and all its people*. With a sharp eye for justice, peace and wholeness, for truth and Spirit, for steadfast love.

Mind that there is not a word about punishment in the story. The *curse* on Cain God speaks of is in the first place the logical consequence of his own evil deed, not something God does to Cain. Nor does the story explain anything about why God looks upon Abel's offering and not upon Cain's. Nowhere is it said that Cain was evil – he was *burning with anger*. Probably we have heard stories about smoke rising to heaven or falling down to earth, or about Abel's offering being better and Cain being jealous. None of this is in the story itself. All we are told is that God does look upon the younger and not upon the elder.

The underlying problem is quite clear: *anger*. We all know that often we don't need a particular reason to get angry. It is something that can come over us, sometimes from very deep sources. Afterwards we can try to learn from it, so the next time we can manage our anger a bit better. The ultimate risk of anger is to kill someone. That's is not something reserved for those who are already bad, it is something we can all do. *Yet, [we] should be its master*. That is what God says to Cain.

After he has killed his brother, Cain looks the evil in the face. First he *looks down* instead of looking at Abel, then he tells God that he surely doesn't have to look after his brother. But God asks this awful question: *Why??* Then Cain does see the full impact of his evil deed, and he accepts it. Bearing the consequences of that is a *curse* indeed, and Cain knows he cannot bear it.

But again, God acts contrary to what we would 'naturally' do. We would lock the convict in – and unfortunately that is often the wisest thing to do if we want to avoid future killings – but by doing that we also avoid looking into our own ability to kill. However, without any hesitation God protects the offender. It is told in the language of ancient culture in which vengeance was important, but the focus is not on that, but rather on the protection Cain receives.

The questions bounce back to us. What does anger do with us? How does it make us look the wrong way? When does it make us dangerous? There are lots of reasons to be angry. Our parents, brothers and sisters, our neighbours, colleagues and friends, our teachers, bosses and rulers – they all can and do make serious mistakes. Society often is not fair and disasters can always hit us. But it's just like Cain and Abel: it

⁷ Nico ter Linden, *The Story Goes...* 1: The Stories of the Torah; London: SCM Press, 1999, p23.

happens without telling why, but we need to work on the anger to avoid getting to the point of killing each other.

Anger is so visible, although we don't like to see it. It's in hatemails, in f-words on the bus, in domestic violence, in substance abuse, in youth gangs, in road accidents, in suicide attacks, in the wars that go on around the world. Once we cannot avoid seeing this anger and this killing, we tend to locate it somewhere else, for example in others. We love to make it comprehensible by dividing the world in (good) victims and (bad) offenders. It starts in school and in families, we cultivate it during football matches and in the same move we apply it to, for example, the war in Gaza. Yet, like Cain we should first ask ourselves questions.

[Now I'm tempted to say more about Gaza, but I won't. The subject is too complicated for a one-directional communication such as a sermon.]

Jesus is incredibly radical. He comments on an interpretation of the command in Leviticus that says we should love our neighbour as ourselves.⁸ Obviously that was interpreted as loving your friends, but not your enemies. Which is, of course, exactly in line with our most natural inclination: locate the good things in your friends and the bad things in your enemies. But Jesus says: *Love your enemies*. Now that really is a hard one, and certainly not something we will master tomorrow. In fact, Jesus had to go all the way to the cross and beyond to show he really knew and meant what he said.

To love our enemies – that does raise a few questions. How *can* we, if we don't manage our anger first? *Should* we, if things are truly unforgivable? How *could* we, if we don't know how to love ourselves? How *dare* we, since we know we cannot be saints? I don't have answers to this, but there is a way forward.

First, like Cain, we will have to learn to look the right way. Look our brothers and sisters in the face, instead of looking away or looking down. See evil, hear evil – and do something about it, starting with our own anger. Once we have said what is wrong, and more particularly what our own part is in that, we will have to face the question beyond all questions: Why?? This start is probably painful, but we will have to bear our own cross.

How wonderful will it be when we can honestly connect to the love Jesus is talking about. That includes compassion, care, patience, humility and all these fruits of the Spirit we have heard about. It is the love that makes us accept ourselves as the no-saints we are, and once we have done that, we will find that a lot of anger is simply gone. We are no saints, and we are not supposed to be saints. And if we are not, then others aren't either. But each for ourselves and all together we should reach out to build on that spark of God's light in us.

Rabbis tend to read the Torah very carefully. Long ago they noticed something odd in the story of Cain and Abel. The Hebrew text does not say, *the voice of your brother's*

⁸ Leviticus 19:18.

blood cries out to me from the soil (as we read it too), but *your brother's bloods* (plural!). What would that mean? That means, says the Talmud, that whoever kills a person, also kills all those who would have come after him or her. In other words, who destroys one life, destroys a whole world – and vice versa, who saves one life, also saves a whole world. (By the way, this rabbinic teaching is also quoted in the Quran, so muslims know about it.)⁹

We are not expected to be the saints who save the world (we can safely leave that to our Prime Minister, anyway), but if we manage to save one life once in our lifetime, we have actually saved a whole world. Loving one enemy, saving one child, forgiving one offender – can we do that? Yes we can.

Amen.

Hymn : 'The one who longs to make us whole'

Offering brought forward

Prayer of Intercession

Closing Hymn : 'May the God of peace'

Blessing

⁹ *Babylonian Talmud*, Mishnah, Sanhedrin 4:5 –

“For this reason, man [i.e. the first human being] was created alone to teach that whoever destroys a single life is as though he had destroyed an entire universe, and whoever saves a single life is as if he had saved an entire universe. Furthermore [the first man was created alone] for the sake of peace among men, so that no one could say to another, “My ancestor was greater than yours” . . . [Yet another reason] was to proclaim the greatness of the Holy One, blessed be He, for when a human being strikes many coins from one mould, they all resemble one another, but the supreme King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He, fashioned every man in the stamp of the first man, and yet not one of them resembles his fellow.” (<http://www.chief Rabbi.org/dd/sources/source85.html>)

I accidentally found out, much to my surprise, that the *Quran* refers to this Talmudic interpretation in Sura 5:32. It's a pity the Christian tradition lost it long ago.