

Sunday 16th September 2018 (Genesis 4:1-16 and Leviticus 19:15-18)

A Dear God letter from Larry: “Dear God, maybe Cain and Abel would not kill each other so much if they had their own rooms. It works with my brother.”

And one from Nan, “Dear God, I bet it is very hard for you to love everybody in the whole world. There are only 4 people in our family and I can never do it.” Don’t you just love family dynamics!

Have you ever watched the sitcom “Modern Family”. The story revolves around three families: The “normal” couple; husband and wife, two daughters and one son; the “gay” couple with an adopted, precocious Asian child and the older man with Sophia Vergara as his trophy wife from Columbia with her son Manny and a new baby. It is very funny. There are every sort of misunderstanding and sibling rivalry. Parents are clueless. And yet, these families, despite all, hang in there and there is something graceful about the resolution.

As of now there has been no fratricide (killing of the brother) as in Cain and Abel but, well who knows.....doesn’t sound too funny though.

Cain and Abel, Adam and Eve – the ancient, “first” family” and all the families of Genesis, have a mini-series feel about them. These families show every sort of mischief, mistake, stupidity, blame, and dysfunction: Shem, Ham and Japheth, Abraham and Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Rachel and Leah. At times they are pretty funny and other times it is very sad. We recognise ourselves in them – even across the millennia.

Perhaps the first thing that we need to get our heads around is this: it is rather profound and charming – God must like imperfect people because God does use them for divine purposes: Liars, cheaters, adulterers, murders and the like. I kind of like that in God because it makes my imperfections less devastating.

Dysfunctional families, horrible situations and horrific deeds don't seem to block God's creative ability to keep to the promise.[love really messes with justice]. And so, as he will do throughout history, God extends grace and mercy. He puts a mark on Cain. Cain's mark is a punishment **and** a protection. It is a mark that proclaims both guilt and grace.

This story of Cain and Abel is amazing; another one of the "Why God?" stories. The narrative articulates the two sidedness of Christian life: we are in jeopardy for disobedience and yet kept safe. God does not let go, even of the rebellious one.

Why does God seem to show favouritism? Why is God so capricious, unpredictable, and unfair? Why did God have regard for Abel's offering and not for Cain's? Well, there have been a lot of debate and varying interpretation; primarily it was because Cain was not so particular about the offering and brought what he wanted – that it wasn't made in faith, it was a difference of attitude in presenting their offerings to God.

It is a tough text to get your head round, there are too many questions and not enough answers.

But I **feel** this story. I **know** this story. And so do you.

A few years ago – while life was generally good to me, I had 4 people within my circle of friends, all of us the same age, die of cancer within months of each other. Why God, did you like my offering and not theirs?

Why are there some children who are sprinkled with the pixie dust of success – everything goes right – and some children who can't get out of their own way?

It is reality, though. And the choice you and I have is the same one Cain had: how are you going to live with this reality?

Jealousy, anger, hate (both self-hate and other-directed hate), are all very real sometimes. Do you let them become the “sin that is lurking at the door?” Or do you master it and move on?

I know people who waste their lives in remorse that someone else got the recognition, the raise, the praise, the love. I don't want to belittle that – it **IS** devastating, it may be unfair – but what are you going to do – have your own spirit shrivel up and be bitter?

Maybe you don't physically kill your sister or brother or parent or child – but something dies: years go by without a phone call or word. Sometimes you don't even know what the cause is.

Sometimes we kill with words and actions and drive people away from church.

Cain had the choice, the freedom of mastering his feelings – it was only one offering after all.

And yet, Cain slays his brother: (“Abel.... Let's go into the field, brother, I have something to show you.”) Then God comes: “Where is your brother Abel?”

“I do not know, am I my brother's keeper says Cain sarcastically?”. Cain murders, lies, and doesn't even care.

That line about being my brother's keeper haunts me a little. The answer is obviously “Yes.”

You **are** your brother's keeper, your sister's keeper, your neighbour's keeper, the stranger's keeper, the enemy's keeper – no matter what has happened to you. And for those of us who follow Jesus and know the answer to that question is in the affirmative.

And the consequences come: Cain will become a marked fugitive and a wanderer. He settles in the land of Nod – which is Hebrew for wandering. Cain believes God's face is now turned from him.

The Adam and Eve story demonstrates when Adam and Eve are punished but clothed, ejected but not rejected. Cain is marked, identified and protected.

And again the divine pattern emerges: In God's apparent capriciousness is God's certain promise; In God's seeming fickleness is God's fidelity. I know that doesn't make sense – but God is bigger than our sense and if we could figure it out – God wouldn't be God.

Cain and Abel, Adam and Eve: a family broken and separated but still part of the drama of grace. They showed how it disrupts relations between God and human beings – shows it destroying bonds of brotherhood, sisterhood, neighbourhoods.....

Bishop Desmond Tutu puts it quite clearly: 'My humanity is bound up in yours, for we can only be human together'. Albert Schweitzer, when he received the Nobel peace prize, said, "You don't live in the world alone. Your brothers are here too".

Jesus said, 'love one another as I have loved you. What is your attitude to God and to your fellow human beings? Is it one of fellowship and love or one of hatred and jealousy?

We have all experienced forgiveness from God, but for many of us, the experience may have lacked the poignancy of being caught red handed, standing face to face with God. If that is so, perhaps we can only come to appreciate such bold grace secondarily. Such poignancy is powerfully captured in Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables*.

We see in this an example of 'am I my brother's keeper'. Jean Valjean, the subject of the novel steals a loaf of bread. As a result he spends 19 years in prison and, when he is finally released, finds it difficult to escape his past. On one occasion, taken in by the kindly Monseigneur Bienvenue, he finds himself unable to resist temptation and, in the middle of the night, steals away with a cache of silverware. He does not get far before being throttled by the police. The next day he is hauled back to the house to return the valuables. He is startled at the Monseigneur's Bishop's response.

"Ah, there you are!" he exclaimed, looking at Jean Valjean. "I am glad to see you. Well, but how is this? I gave you candlesticks too, which are of silver like the rest, and for which you can certainly get 200 francs. Why did you not carry them away with your forks and spoons?"

My friend, resumed the Bishop, before you go, here are your candlesticks. Take them. Trembling in fear, Valjean took the 2 candlesticks mechanically, with a bewildered air.

The Bishop drew near to him, and said in a low voice: "Do not forget, never forget, that you have promised to use this money in becoming an honest man".

Jean Valjean, who had no recollection of ever having promised anything, remained speechless.

The Bishop had emphasised the words when he uttered them. He resumed with solemnity: 'Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to evil, but to good. It is your soul that I buy from you; I withdraw it from black thoughts and the spirit of perdition, and I give it to God'.

This indeed becomes the turning point in Valjean's life and the remainder of the novel traces reverberations of grace in his life. When we read this account of mercy and compassion and see its impact in the recipient's life; we are appropriately bewildered and awestruck. How much more should we be in awe of God's mercy and compassion.

We can never know whether Cain responded with such gratitude to God, though his initial response might suggest not. But it is irrelevant how Cain responded. What is important is how we respond once we are impressed with the power of God's mercy and grace.

You and I are marked and protected, beloved and empowered, free to choose to do well and feel again the divine acceptance that is ours in Jesus Christ, our Lord and brother in this wonderful

Modern Family!

AMEN.