

Genesis: Cain and Abel
Friday 14th August 2020



The above image is a 14th century Italian ivory carving depicting the events that will unfurl in our Old Testament text today between two brothers. This week I invite you to read Chapter four from the Book of Genesis.

Prayer before (or after) reading the Holy Bible

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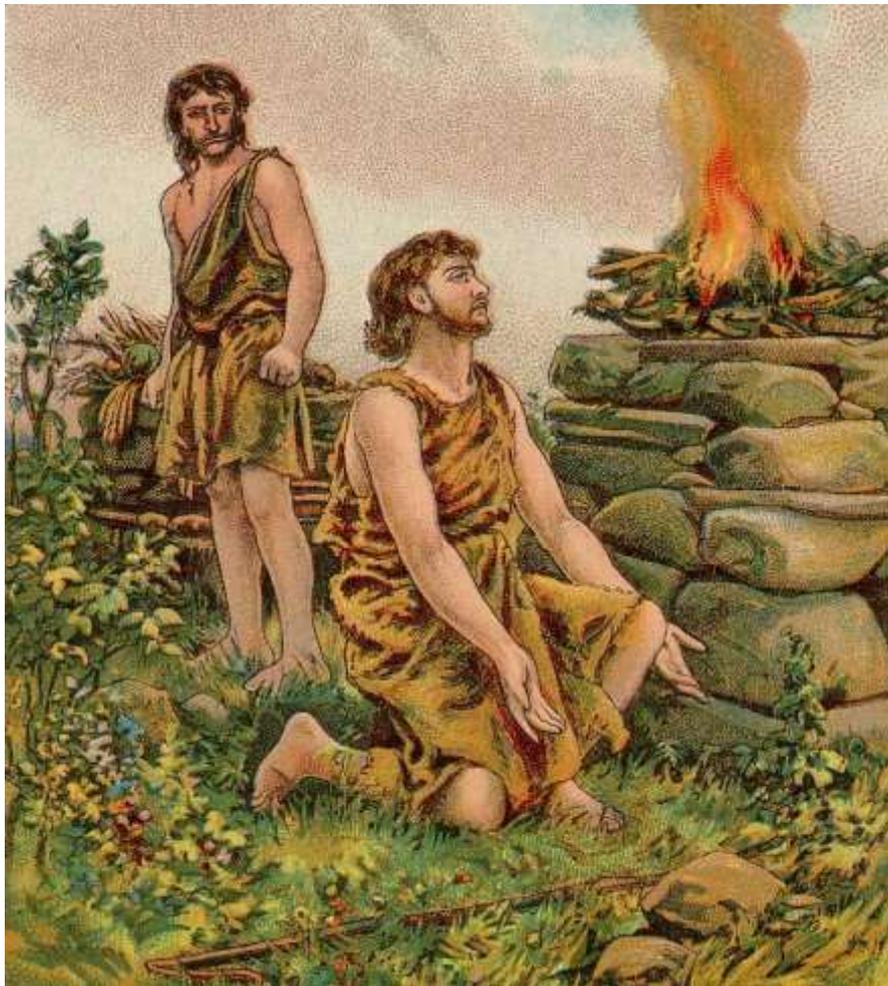
**Come, O Holy Spirit,
and fill us with the gifts of knowledge and wisdom.**

**Strengthen us, we pray, with heavenly grace,
so that we may grasp with our minds,
treasure in our hearts,
and carry out in our deeds,
all the teachings of your Holy Book
which lead to salvation.**

Amen.

Chapter four begins by naming the two sons of Adam and Eve and declaring their occupations. '*She gave birth to a second child, Abel, the brother of Cain. Now Abel became a shepherd and kept flocks, while Cain tilled the soil.*' (Gn 4:2)

The story of these two brothers is fairly simple. Both of them offer a sacrifice to the Lord Almighty, but whereas Abel's offering is accepted and pleasing to God his brother Cain's is rejected.



'But he did not look with favour on Cain and his offering, and Cain was very angry and downcast.' (Gn 4:5)

The early Church fathers taught that Abel was more righteous than his brother Cain and hence the reason why his sacrifice was preferred by God. However, as you will have read today the actual text in Genesis does not state or even imply this. It would seem that God has his own reasons for choosing Abel's offering that we are not privy to. This pattern of God choosing one brother over another is repeated in many parts of the Old Testament.

'...Now Joseph had a dream, and he repeated it to his brothers...And they hated him still more, on account of his dreams and what he said.' (Gn 37:4b-8)

Why Joseph is chosen above his brothers and given the gift of prophetic dreams is not told to us in Genesis, but, God obviously sees a quality and a strength that mere human eyes cannot perceive immediately. We know that the brother's hatred and jealousy leads them to sell their young sibling into slavery and lie to their father claiming he has been killed by a wild beast. Joseph, however, will show compassion to these men in the future and help them out in their time of trial. Initially why God chose Joseph may not have been apparent but later on his good and righteous actions, especially towards his brothers, reveal that God sees more than we do.

The prophet Samuel is commissioned by God to anoint a new king of Israel and is surprised that the young shepherd boy David has been chosen. He assumes it will be David's older brother Eliab but God says:

'Take no notice of his appearance or his height for I have rejected him [Eliab]; God does not see as man sees; man looks at appearances but the Lord looks at the heart.' (1 S 16:7)

Like Joseph and David who will come later on, God favours Abel's sacrifice because he sees something within him that is not immediately obvious to us. God judges what is within a person's heart. When you are next at Mass listen out for that phrase in the Eucharistic prayer that says: *'Be pleased to look upon these offerings with a serene and kindly countenance, and to accept them, as once you were pleased to accept the gifts of your servant Abel the just...'* Hopefully now that you know its context it will make a lot more sense.

Cain's anger turns into hatred for his brother and this festering resentment leads to murder. He invites his brother out into the fields and then kills him.



Cain walks in the same sinful footsteps as his fallen parents Adam and Eve. After murdering Abel he attempts to cover up the crime from God just as Adam and Eve tried to hide their disobedience from the Almighty.

'The Lord God asked Cain, 'Where is your brother Abel?' 'I do not know' he replied. 'Am I my brother's guardian?' (Gn 4:9)

Cain hopes his actions will be a secret, but nothing is secret from God. His punishment is to become a wanderer and like his parents he is cast out into the wilderness. Cain cries out to God that his punishment is far greater than he can bear and pleads for mercy. God, as we know, is merciful and so naturally mercy is given despite Cain's sinfulness – there is hope for us all.

***'So the Lord put a mark on Cain to prevent whoever might come across him striking him down.'* (Gn 4:15b)**

The mark of Cain, in recent times, has been associated with a person who demonstrates evil and is totally unredeemable. This is not our belief as today's Bible reading clearly shows. To have the mark of Cain is nothing to be ashamed of because it is a sign of God's mercy and protection.

The Catholic writer Jim Campbell once wrote:

'We are all tempted by the thought that the good fortune of others means a failure on our part. This can lead, as it did with Cain, to jealous criticism and envy. This not only hurts others but also, as with Cain, leads to self-destruction.'

When was the last time you criticised another? Have you compared others to yourself and destructively said 'Why can they do that? Why can't I do this? Why have they that? Why haven't I got this?' When was the last time you played the role of Cain and gossiped with others about another person and so killed their reputation? When was the last time you committed the crime of judging another and shared your thoughts publicly? Let's all ask God for the mark of Cain so that we can be protected from falling back into past sins that lead to destructive words and actions.

The next stop on our tour of Genesis will be Noah and the flood.

God Bless and keep praying

Fr. O'Brien