

"A GOOD WORD FOR CAIN"

INTRODUCTION Hardly anybody has a good word for Cain. I looked up the word "Cain" in my dictionary and read, "Cain - the brother of Abel; hence, a murderer". I looked up the word "Cain" in my thesaurus and came upon the following synonyms as these - "lose one's temper...explode...raise the devil...raise Cain". I looked up the word "Cain" in my Bible commentary and read paragraphs of judgment upon Cain as a poor and miserable sinner.

Just in case your memory needs refreshing, here again is the story. Adam and Eve, we're told, had two sons at first - Cain, the older, and Abel, the younger. Cain was a farmer, raising crops upon the land. Abel was a shepherd, leading his sheep to green pastures and still waters. One day Cain decided to worship God by offering up some of the produce of his farm, and Abel came and decided to offer up some of the lambs from his flock. The record simply has it that the Lord looked with favor upon the sacrifice of Abel while he spurned the offering of Cain. So Cain became insanely jealous and lost his temper and when it was all over, Abel lay dead on the ground.

DEVELOPMENT Still, I want to try to speak a good word for Cain. Not that I am trying to whitewash him and paint him as a saint. Quite decidedly he was not that. There is just no concealing the fact that his emotions of anger and jealousy ran away with him, and when they had spent themselves, he had taken a human life. BC or AD that is murder - and no amount of declaiming or defending can change that fact. It is not that I am asking you to forget that Cain was a murderer; it is that I am asking you to remember some other things which have been all but forgotten in history's completely black verdict against Cain.

I. In the first place, I think there is another side of Cain. What Shakespeare made Antony to say at Caesar's funeral never fitted anyone better than Cain:

"The evil that men do lives after them;
The good is oft interred with their bones..."

and whatever good Cain did has been completely outdistanced and overshadowed by the evil that he did. Much more so, I dare say, than many other characters in the Bible. David was a bit of a black rascal, really, in some of the chapters of his life. I suspect that in any court of law his premeditated treachery, in which he sent Uriah, the husband of Bathsheba, into the forefront of the fiercest fighting just so he would be killed, would draw as stiff a sentence as Cain's fit of passion in which he killed his brother. But David has a sizeable place in the affections of most of us.

"God" writes James Black in a fascinating volume, Rogues of the Bible, "did not judge David by his one moral crash, but by the whole volume of his life".

We do not know as much about Cain as we do about David, but there is enough to suggest that Cain was not all black either. He was a "tiller of the ground", the record has it, and evidently he was a good farmer because in time he had something to show for his work. And then, mind you, his first thought was of God. He did so much better than most people do in prosperity. He brought "to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground" and in a primitive service of thanksgiving and adoration he offered it unto God.

It was out of that service of worship, ironically enough, that the trouble between the two brothers started. But then, even after that dark scene in which Cain forever stained his reputation, there was a reconciliation of sorts between God and Cain, in which God thought Cain worthy enough of some protection against the vengeance of any who might inhabit the earth with Cain.

II. In the second place, I want you to think for a moment about his motive for murder. It was simply that he felt completely rejected by God. Listen again to the account,

"And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry".

Can you blame him? I find it difficult to believe that God actually did behave in that way - like a sulking, immature parent who plays favorites with his children without rhyme or reason. The fact behind the statement, I should suppose, is that this is a very primitive concept of God, and that the author of Genesis could not rise above the notion that prevails throughout large portions of the Old Testament - that God is a jealous, whimsical God, waiting to be appeased.

At any rate, Cain felt rejected. Everyone of us, I suspect, has some little notion of what it feels like to be rejected. We find ourselves introduced into a group, now and again, where we obviously do not belong and are not wanted - and it's an uncomfortable experience. Or, we form acquaintances which we think are deepening into friendships, only to be rebuffed or ignored - and it hurts. The deeper the relationship, the more devastating the rejection. A rejected suitor sees his world crash around him, and a rejected child tries to find himself through all kinds of unconventional behavior. And here was Cain feeling rejected at the very deepest level - by God himself. Not for a moment does that make right what Cain did, but it helps to explain it.

III! And in the third place, we need to remember that Cain did not know what death, let alone murder, was. Whether you look upon the early chapters of Genesis as literal accounts of the history of the first family upon the face of this earth, or whether you look upon them as traditions which have accumulated and which make Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel representatives of the first human beings - this truth still holds. Once there was a man who for the first time confronted the fact of death in his fellow man. Once there was a man who took out his anger and his jealousy in brute force on a fellow man, and when he had finished, he discovered, quite to his astonishment, that the other person did not get up again. The Bible calls that man Cain.

Again, this insight does not absolve Cain of his guilt, but it does make a little difference in our understanding. If a two year old plays with matches in the house, a parent cannot blame a child as much as he can blame a twelve year old, for the two year old will not comprehend the consequences as much as the twelve year old. And the pioneers in the human race seem to me not to be so accountable for the mismanagement of life as we who have the benefit of centuries of experience, and who know fullwell what the consequences of our misdeeds will be. Cain could not have known from any previous experience the meaning of death or of murder.

WE ARE ALL SONS OF CAIN

If I seem to have appropriated for myself the role of defense lawyer for Cain, it is not just to provide what may be an interesting but irrelevant reappraisal of the first son of the first couple. There are deeper reasons than that. Two of them, at least.

First, I want to say a good word for Cain because we are all the sons of Cain. That is to say, we all stand guilty before God. The Bible is completely realistic about human nature. It doesn't try to gild the lily. It looks down into the very depths of our being and tells us frankly what we are. "None is righteous, no, not one". "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God". "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us."

So, we are all members of Cain's clan. Not murderers in the sense that he was, but I can't get very smug about that distinction when I remember that in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus pointed out that murderous thoughts are cut of the same cloth as murderous deeds. We dislike someone and we say, "Well, I won't shed any tears at his funeral", or we feel frustrated because things don't change to our liking in our work or in some group of which we are a part, and we express our hostilities by asserting, "What this organization needs is a few good funerals". And that thought of anger or of hate, if I understand the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount, makes us pretty close relatives of Cain himself.

There are so many subtle ways that Cain keeps cropping up. Every time I take advantage of someone who trusts me and use him for my own selfish purposes, do I not trample upon his soul? Every time I insist upon being spiteful or cynical or sarcastic, do I not try to knife and cut my brother's soul. Every time I neglect to write the letter or make the call or say the word that would make some good difference to someone, do I not contribute to his soul's starvation?

So, when I speak a good word for Cain, it is partly because I am related to him.

"I never cut my neighbor's throat;
My neighbor's gold I never stole;
I never spoiled his house and land,
But God have mercy on my soul!

For I am haunted night and day
By all the deeds I have not done;
O unattempted loveliness!
O costly valor never won."

Once I asked a member of AA why he was so ready at all times of night to engage in selfless excursions to bring help to alcoholics in all kinds of desperate, degraded circumstance. His answer was "Because I'm only one drink away from that myself." And some of us cannot study Cain very long without acknowledging that a decision or two, a friend or two, a prayer or two, is all that has separated us from becoming Cain at his worst - and even at that, we are similar enough.

"There's so much good in the worst of us,
And so much bad in the best of us,
That it ill behooves any of us
To find fault with the rest of us."

But I also speak a good word for Cain because we are all sons of God. I fell to wondering what might have happened if the story of Cain and Abel were in the New Testament rather than the Old, and it came to me that I didn't need to wonder because it was there - in a story that Jesus told about two brothers.

They didn't get along either until one day the impetuous one asked his father for whatever money was coming to him and he was off, down the road and out of sight to have a fling at life. In a way he wasn't a murderer like Cain, but in another way he was - for he broke the hearts of his parents and wounded his brother's spirit and crippled so much that was fine in himself. And he went on making a fool of himself until one day - and you know what makes the New Testament story of the two brothers so much greater than the Old Testament story of the two brothers - the fact that a father whose eyes had grown sore with watching caught sight of a dusty traveler coming up the road and ran and embraced him and said, "This is my son...he was dead; he is alive again; lost and is found". And that, Jesus said, is the very nature of God.

You must see this about the Bible - that it is an account of man's growing perception of the nature of God. There's not much in the story of Cain and Abel that would give you an inkling to the love and forgiveness of God. You begin to get it just a little in the story of Moses. You see it a little more in the story of David. But you see it in its full splendor in the coming of Jesus. Too many of the people of his time were still laboring under this Genesis concept of God - that God was a jealous old man who was pleased and appeased by endless motions and rigmarole, and that if you ever got out of line or off limits, you were done for. And Jesus promptly horrified them by calling Zacchaeus down out of a tree, and Simon Peter from his fishing nets, and Matthew from his tax collectors job, and Mary Magdalene from walking the streets and by quietly telling this strange collection of tattered and torn lives that they nevertheless were one more hope that God had for his world.

FORGIVENESS OF GOD

So I can never be quite content to leave Cain in the Old Testament. I must bring him up and set him in the light of the New Testament - where there is a clearer picture of the mercy and the forgiveness of God. And the wonder of it is that every one of us is set in the light of the New Testament, as well - that whatever mistakes we have made and however dissatisfied we may be with the record, God at least has not given up on us and keeps pursuing us with an infinite love and an indestructible hope.

Remember that popular song of two or three years ago, "Tie a Yellow Ribbon Around the Old Oak Tree". It's based on a true story that Wallace Hamilton once told. It's one of the loveliest parables outside the Bible that I know. A boy in his late teens was riding on a train and fell into conversation with a fellow passenger who happened to be a minister. The boy was upset and eager to talk. "Are you acquainted with a little town named Springvale?" he asked the minister.

"Well, not exactly. I know of it. It's the next stop, isn't it?"

"Yes" said the boy. "We'll be there soon. I used to live there. My father and mother live there still, just a mile this side of town. Three years ago I had a quarrel with my father. I said, 'You'll never see me again' and I left. Three years and they've been three difficult years. Sometimes I wrote to my mother. I wrote her last week and told her I would be on this train passing through. I told

her I would like to come home just once and asked her if it would be all right for me to stop, to hang something white outside the house so that I would know that Dad had agreed to let me stop. I told her not to do it unless he wanted it".

The boy looked out the window and turned quickly back to the minister. "Look, sir, my house is just around the bend, beyond the hill. Will you please look for me and see if there is anything white? I can't stand to look".

As the train made the slow curve, the minister kept his eyes on the round of the hill and then he fairly shouted, "Look, son, look!" - for there was a little farmhouse all but obscured under a blanket of white. The parents must have taken every sheet and pillow case and tablecloth and towel and handkerchief and hung them out on every bush and tree. And the boy was out of the car and up the hill before the train had really stopped.

CLOSING Some of us need to be reminded again that the white sheets are out on the eternal hills of God. Some one present today may need to hear that word...that glorious word of God's love, God's forgiveness.

PRAYER Help us, O God, always to remember through the example of Jesus,
That what we keep we lose, that only what we give remains our own.
May the spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ in the days of this coming
week:

Be near to us to defend us,
within us to possess us,
around us to preserve us,
before us to guide us,
behind us to justify us,
above us to bless us.

Amen