

May 9, 2004

Sunday of the Samaritan Woman

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Genesis does not tell why God rejected Cain's sacrifice while accepting that of Abel. The answer to that question is intimated, however, in Hebrews 11:4: "By faith Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts." Cain, we are given to understand, was deficient in faith, so he could not please God, because "without faith it is impossible to please Him" (11:6).

Lacking faith, Cain was likewise wanting in insight with respect to his real spiritual state. Cain was under attack and did not know it. God warned him that evil was "lying at the door" (Genesis 4:7). The Hebrew participle for "lying" here, *robesh*, is better translated as "crouching." It is related to the name of a wily spirit known as "Rabishu" in Assyro-Babylonian literature which describes him as crouching along the road, endeavoring to waylay the traveler. Temptation was portrayed, then, as lurking for a man, stalking him as it were, and Cain was exhorted to vigilance, lest he be taken down.

Thus, Cain was warned not to fool with temptation; it is dangerous. His mother, after all, had made the big mistake of dialoguing with the snake. Satan invariably conquers those who discuss things with him. Or, as we read in Sirach 21:2, "Flee from sin as from the face of a serpent, for if you come too near to it, it will bite you."

Cain was heedless, nonetheless, and went on to kill his brother (4:8-10). The original sin of the parents in Genesis 3 led directly to the sin of the child in Genesis 4. The jealousy and violence of Cain were the proper products of that original act of infidelity. The first human being begotten of human parents was also the first murderer.

Cain's murder was not committed in a fit of passion. It came, rather, at the end of a slower spiritual deterioration.

Lacking faith, he began by hardening his mind against God. "Am I my brother's keeper?" (4:9) Cain haughtily inquired of the Almighty, demonstrating by this irreverence that he had closed off his conscience. This disrespect for God was the foundation on which his murder was based. Cain would not have killed, had he not isolated his spirit from the divine light and voice.

Moreover, by this murder Cain alienated himself from the very earth on which he walked: "So now you are cursed from the earth, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it will no longer yield its strength to you. A fugitive and a vagabond you will be on the earth" (4:11-12).

Cain had begun as a farmer, but now he was estranged even from the soil. He assumed, by his sin, the contradictory task of being a wandering farmer. However, the foundational reason for Cain's alienation from the earth and his fellow men was his alienation from God: "Cain went out from the presence of the Lord" (4:16).

And, because violence breeds vengeance, this was not the end of Cain's story. He became afraid of the retaliation that might be visited on his head because of his murder of Abel (4:14). Ironically, God's reply, though reassuring to Cain himself, extended yet further the domain of violence: "Whoever kills Cain, vengeance will be taken on him seven-fold" (4:15).

Such was the context of the world's first city (4:17), Enoch, which was founded by Cain. Yes, this first great effort of social cooperation was inaugurated by a murderer!

The first city was founded, moreover, by the first fratricide, a fact that became the most ironical of archetypes. Its irony was certainly not lost on St. Augustine, who commented at some length on the manifest travesty that such a great enterprise of brotherly cooperation should be undertaken by a man that killed his brother. In his lengthy *The City of God*, the saintly bishop of Hippo compared Cain's founding of the city of Enoch to the founding of the city of Rome by Romulus, who also had killed his own brother Remus.

Sinful man's efforts, that is to say, are constructed with the components of their own deterioration. Cain's original failure

of faith lay at the heart of the problem. Merely human exertions do not improve man's true plight; at best they but disguise it for a while. The heart of all evil is unbelief and alienation from God, so a society thus founded has drunk the poison already. Like Adam and Eve, it will surely die.

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