

RETELLING THE NARRATIVE OF GENESIS 4

By the end of Genesis 3 earth creature Adam and mother of all living Eve have joined the real world. It is the world we know, a mixture of blessing and curse. Blessed in its potential for good inter-connected earth-based living and God's continuing care. Cursed in the disruption to God's original dream as – we soon find out - relationships break, crops fail and violence terrorises.

We are not to dwell on the experience of Eden, whether error or the next step in human learning. It is hard labour outside Eden and even the land finds it costly to sustain life. But the first verse of Genesis 4 alerts us that the original blessing of the life-giver “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen 1:28) still holds. Conception and birth make their first appearance: two new lives, Cain and Abel.

In adulthood Cain and Abel represent two ancient - and modern - ways to live off the land: Abel, the keeper of sheep, and Cain, the tiller of the soil; stock and crop; animals and plants. Both growers of food.

In the course of time these two people assess their achievements. It seems it has not been an easy year. (What year is?) We are not told the lambing percentage but it was probably not a good one; we sense that the yields of grain and seed are poor in quantity and quality, a struggle to get harvested and needing extra dressing (cleaning) to ready it for use as food and next season's seed. But in the nature of stock farming it is possible to select out your best from the flock and be take some satisfaction in it even in a poor season. There are sure to be some prime lambs. However, with field crops, it shows up in the whole crop that then has to be rated at a lesser grade.

“It's not fair,” says Cain the agriculturalist. “Abel is better off than I am.” (Doubtless if there were a dairy farmer within range, that one would have been keeping very quiet about even better fortunes!) Now in a good year there might be no issue. When everyone is prospering, all can feel positive and confident of their worth as a farmer. But in poorer years, envy, self-pity and self-doubt are inclined to enter the scene – “sin is lurking at the door” (v.7). It's like the farm dog sitting waiting for us while we have smoko, a domesticated animal, well-trained, but with instincts for the wild that mean it must be watched or it will be away worrying sheep.

“But you must master it,” says the voice of wisdom (v.7). Keep your eye on it, or tie it up. Be aware of what you're doing, that your face has fallen and unhealthy feelings are stirring up in you. God is trying to get Cain to face the reality of life outside Eden. He needs to lift his head up and look for options for the future and not get hung up on the problems.

Cain cannot get the point. He reacts to what has happened to him by taking the way of least resistance – lashing out. Part of what he felt when God took no notice of his efforts is sure to have been shame, *whakamā*. Shame has us withdraw and separate ourselves from what's around us. And it's a short step to feeling everything's against it and we'll only survive if we go *whakahihī* and arrogantly rise up. So all Cain can do is take a swing at the world that is not has hurt him.

When God moves in to raise questions about the violent act that ensues, Cain's arrogance contains as he makes a joke of God's first question: does my brother, a keeper of sheep, need a keeper? In fact, he has proved himself to be no brother to Abel and there can be no escaping the consequences of such a disconnected, uncaring act. Abel's blood has been poured onto the soil, the very earth that early had no life because there was no water to pour into it and no creature to till and keep it. With blood trickling into the soil, it brings not life, but a cry from the earth itself. Cain's act of violence is so contrary to God's original vision of life – as an interconnected giving and receiving from earth and human companions – that Cain cannot now return to normal life. Violence has knocked him out of the loop so he becomes a placeless person, a constant wanderer, with no roots and no base. (In fact he builds a city! But there lies another retelling.)

Still God's care continues. The mark of Cain is expresses God's commitment even to the vagrant, indeed to all outsiders of society's norms and systems. There is therefore no need to fear what is perhaps the ultimate fear, namely of being totally alone, cut off and unwanted.

Perhaps that was Cain's problem: perhaps he feared rejection most of all. He thought he had been rejected because his farming efforts were not as good as Abel's, and his uncontrolled reaction led to him disposing of his competition. If only he had known what he found out when it was too late to make a difference, after violence had taken over. If only he had known that he was not in competition for God's favour. It's just that it comes in different ways at different times and for different people. In good seasons it can be felt in the satisfaction of doing a good job as a farmer, at one with the work and the land. In bad seasons it can be known in the God who hangs in there with us, listens to our grumbles and laments, draws us out of ourselves and encourages us to look to the new season just round the corner.

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