

Candlemas 2021

Sibling rivalries can be a really difficult thing. I can remember some real hum-dingers between me and my brother. He is six years older than me, and when we were young the temptation for me to play tricks on him often got the better of me. This usually resulted in me coming off the worse for wear. We have always been quite close, but there were some questionable moments down the years. I remember once, for example, him pushing me in the river because I wouldn't stop annoying him. When we became adults, we would often play football on opposing teams and the rivalry reached another level. It was not rare for one or other of us to come away with a few bruises.

One of the greatest rivalries in history, has to be that of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4). Most famously it all ends in tragedy when Cain turns on his brother Abel and kills him. But the event which begins building the tension between the two brothers, is less about anything that either of them does to the other, and more about how Cain interprets the way God is treating each of them. He feels he is being treated unfairly and that jealousy leads to his irredeemable act of murdering his brother.

It comes to a head with God's rejection of Cain's offering. Have you ever wondered why God would reject Cain's offering in that way? Well, it is rejected because, what Cain offers are not his first fruits. God offers the bothers the prospect of blessings and prosperity. Abel regards his relationship with God above all else and, as he's a shepherd, gladly gives God his first-born lamb as an offering. But Cain doesn't hold God in such high regard. He is a farmer and takes all that he wants first. Only then does he offer God a portion of what he has left over. God is only an afterthought. Cain is reluctant and resentful that he should have to give back to God some of the produce that God has blessed him with though his work. So, because his heart is filled with ill motives and misaligned intentions, God cannot accept Cain's offering. He thus becomes separated from God and there is a severing of the sacred bond. This leads to his murderous actions and his ultimate banishment.

It is so easy to become more like Cain than Abel. So often we cling selfishly to the things we receive as a blessing from God's bounty – money, possessions, time... Cain's sin escalated from his refusal to treat God with respect. It leaves us all having to ask the question; does God come first for us? Do we always offer him a little of what we have first, or is it a reluctant and resentful second, third, fourth... tenth?

This is a message that continues throughout the Bible.

At the fall of Jericho, which we find in the book of Joshua (13), God gives strict instructions that no-one is to take from the spoils of Jericho after they have captured the city. Jericho is the first city of the new kingdom and so everything should go towards God's work in building up the new kingdom – the Community of the People of God. When they steal the offering, it is no longer any good to God, because their hearts and their faith are impure and disturbed by wicked and selfish intentions.

There was, however, far more than money at stake when Abraham offered his first-born son Isaac (Genesis 22). He did not wait to have 12 more sons before offering one to God. When God asked for his Son Isaac to be sacrificed, Abraham was distraught at the thought of the huge cost. But Abraham offered his first-born son despite his anguish at having to do so. Of course, we never thought for one moment that God would allow Abraham to go through with it, and he doesn't - he provides a ram at the last minute to take Isaac's place. But it was Abraham's unshakable selflessness, faithfulness and trust in God that saw God intervening and also resulted in God blessing Abraham and all his descendants, that would outnumber the stars.

Then, in the first book of Samuel (1 & 2), we are told how Hannah cannot have children. She is barren. God nonetheless hears her prayers and sees her faithfulness. He chooses to bless her with a son. In gratitude for being blessed with a child, Hannah offers her first-born son, Samuel, to God's service in the Temple. Samuel begins a life-long learning to be a priest. God is so pleased with Hannah's faith and wholeheartedness that she is then blessed with three further sons and two daughters.

Today, is of course Candlemas, more formally known as the Presentation of Christ at the Temple. Just like Hannah, who offers Samuel to God's service, Mary brings Jesus to the Temple to be placed in God's service as her first-born son. It is a place where Jesus will dutifully return for worship and teaching throughout his life, following the traditions and customs of his religion. But this is a first-born son with a very different fate. Jesus' fate is not beyond Mary's insight, certainly not after Simeon tells her that 'a sword will pierce her soul too'. But Mary is nothing if not wholehearted in her devotion to God and her faith remains steadfast throughout. Throughout the Gospel narrative, we see Mary supporting her son's mission, walking as a silent observer during the most difficult moments and never letting her own doubts or anguish get in the way.

Mary allows her son to fulfil his divine destiny, and God gives his Son in faith to us. God gives us Jesus. He gives his firstborn to repair the sacred bond and move us closer in relationship to him. God gives Jesus in faith in the hope that we might respond by giving our lives completely to him. The gift of his Son came first, but the blessings are left incomplete in us until we respond. Not reluctantly or resentfully like Cain, but wholeheartedly and gladly, full of faithfulness and trust, just like Abel, Abraham, Hannah, Mary... God himself.

We give in faith - giving the first fruits of what we have, be them time, money, resources; giving our whole lives. This says to God, "I recognise you first. I recognise all that you have done. I realise that without you I would not be alive at all. I am awestruck that you would be willing to give so much on the cross for me. And so, I am putting you first in my life and I trust you to take care of the rest, in ways that you know best. Just as you have always done."

Amen.

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