

Am I my brother's keeper?

Genesis 4

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The person who edited the stories of the book of Genesis, did not want to give us a history lesson, just so that you know what happened.

Genesis presents to us the stories of the beginning, to that we know how to live today. We have seen how God made this Universe as the Temple where he rests. He is very close to us.

And he made us his priests, to serve in this Temple of the world. Not because he needs our service, but because we need to keep our world in good shape and develop it.

We also saw how by the Declaration of Independence of Adam and Eve, darkness entered into our world. Even the best things now have a dark edge.

And then, in Genesis 4, we see what this Declaration of Independence resulted in.

1. Cain becomes a murderer

Human beings, I believe, have a natural tendency to seek God. Good people, bad people, all sorts of people are seeking God, or at least, 'something higher, beyond ourselves'.

Cain and Abel believed in God so they sacrificed to Him. But 'the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard.'

Cain noticed that Abel was closer to God, and that made him angry. Maybe this was caused by jealousy. He was seething. We read that Cain's face fell.

God tried to make Cain reconcile with his brother, and said to him: 'if you do well, your face may be lifted up. Your joy will return.'

'But "if you don't do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it."



Adam and Eve had been created by God to rule over this wonderful world. As responsible people. We have not been made to be ruled over.

Cain was about to be subjected to his anger, and was about to do something very bad. See how quickly mankind, after having left its perfect relationship with God, became murderous.

This is our sort of mankind. None of us is immune from the temptation to do bad things. We only have to look around us. Follow the world news. Or just the news of our cities here.

Where does this tendency to do such bad things come from? Our first forefathers have left God. And after that initial breach of the relationship, even religious people who sacrifice to God, can be very unwise.

We can be so bad. Cain and Abel were celebrating their eucharist, if you like, and there Cain decided to kill his brother. What murderous thoughts do you presently cherish?

Jesus tells us that if we bring our offering to the altar of God, and we know that we have a problem with someone, we must sort that out. Sort it out. Do not let anger simmer....

This is why we greet one another with a sign of the peace before we celebrate eucharist. To symbolise that our relationships must be well. For our own benefit really. Before our anger boils over.

Sin is crouching at our door as well. It tries to subdue you, but you must rule over temptation. We were created for ruling, for managing, not for being subjected to the things we should be ruling over.

After Cain killed Abel, God asked him, 'Where is your brother'. Cain thought he could hide his sin from God. I guess he learned that from his parents, who tried to do the same. Cain answered: 'I do not know where my brother is. Am I my brother's keeper?'

Am I my brother's keeper... As if Cain says to God: 'It is your business to care for him. If something went wrong, it is your fault. You are the cause of misery in this world.'

Mistake. Humankind created the mess.

And we all know the response to the question of Cain. God did not answer Cain, but we all know what the answer is.

'Yes, you are your brother's keeper. Yes, you are your sister's keeper. Yes, human beings have a responsibility to take care of one another.' That is how God created us. To live in harmony, and love, and caring for one another.

But Adam and Eve decided to make up their own mind, independent of God. They thought they knew better.

Cain becomes a killer and is punished for it. His work on the land will be harder than it already was, and he will be a wanderer, a fugitive. And fear creeps into him. He is afraid he will also be killed in his turn.

2. Cain built a city

Cain left the original area where his parents had lived, Eden. He wandered around; a global nomad. A bit like an expat.

He may have moved around for a while, but then he built a city. As all expats need an anchor somewhere.

Do not think that the city Cain built, was anything like our modern cities here in The Netherlands. Our cities are well organised, clean, safe, compared to cities in antiquity.

You can imagine what the impact was of hundreds and thousands of people living together on a small plot, with no central government, no sewage systems, no running water, no medical care.

Those cities were dirty ratholes.

So why did people crowd together?



A city, in those days, was defined by its city walls. Maybe made of stone, maybe wooden poles. But groups of people were prepared to live on a small, germ-infested piece of land, to protect themselves against other people. The people outside.

I was reminded of the Greek border this week, where thousands of people tried to enter Europe from the Turkish side.

Mankind created itself cities as castles to keep some people in, and to keep others outside.

It seems that we need walls. We love them. They help us define who we are - the insiders - and they keep unwanted people away from us.

Sociologists have all sorts of theories of how we deal with 'Others'. The Other is any individual who is seen by the group as not belonging, as being different in some fundamental way.

The group sees itself as the norm and judges those who do not meet that norm as the Other. And that Other is usually seen as an inferior being and is treated with contempt.

Otherness takes many forms. The Other may be someone who is of a different race, a different nationality, a different religion.

It seems that we feel insecure, we feel like wanderers, if we do not brand some people as Other, in order to define who we ourselves are. 'We are not like them!'

If we lose God, if we lose our relationship with God, if we no longer see our universe as his temple and ourselves as his priests, we are lost. And we seek our security behind walls. Walls between people.



Cain built a city with strong walls. The Europeans Union builds walls. The United Kingdom builds walls. The USA is trying to build a wall.

Jesus told us to love our neighbors. And when asked who that neighbor is, he told the story of the Good Samaritan. That man from Samaria helped a man who lay naked on the road.

He was naked, so it was not clear what the nationality or religion of that man was. He could be that scary, dirty Other'. But the Samaritan took care of him anyhow. Irrespective of what group the man in need belonged to.

That is the love Jesus asks of us. Through Adam we are all brothers and sisters. Am I my brother's keeper? Well, yes, you are. So we hate no-one, we do not hold grudges against any-one. We take care of people.

And here is our sad dilemma. We do need walls. We do need to lock our front door. We do need to close the city gates.

Because we live in a world full of troublemakers. One of the posterity of Cain, Tubal Cain, made 'instruments' of bronze and iron. Instruments is a kind word. As soon as mankind knew how to work bronze and iron, we made ourselves weapons.

So we had to build even higher walls, and we created better weapons. And the paradise where are forefathers grew up, seems ever further away.

3. What other options could we have?

But what options do we have?

The world is full of people like Lamech. He was bragging. Anyone who killed Cain, even though Cain had killed someone, would be avenged seven times.

Lamech bragged that he had killed and wounded two people, but that anyone who dared to touch him, would be avenged 77 times. A murderer being proud of his crime.

We live in a world with some people overflowing with lust, power, pride, violence.

The idea that we are our brother's keeper seems unknown to many. The idea that we should care for others is not so popular.

We need to protect our lands. We need doors with good locks. We are entitled to a government that protects us, against thieves, against evil people, yes and also against unregulated migration.

But by protecting ourselves we always choose against others. And this is a dilemma. A dilemma that, as Christians, we should suffer from.

This dilemma is a result of mankind having turned its back on God. This is not how it should be. Walls and weapons are the opposite of what Jesus Christ asks from us.

I recognise that governments have the task sometimes to build walls and weapons, but as a church, we seek our brothers. We do not mark people as Other. Our door is open. Our heart is open.

And we look forward to the new Jerusalem - when paradise will be restored. In the Book of Revelation, it is specifically mentioned that the New Jerusalem is a city with walls, yes, but the gates are always open. Welcoming.

And there will be no more war. And weapons will be melted down to instruments that are useful for humanity - like ploughs. And, by the way, there will be no temple, because the whole world is God's perfect temple again.

As church, we enjoy a foretaste of the good things that are coming. In Jesus Christ there is no Other. People from all races, economic backgrounds, languages, men, women, young and old, we all drink from the same cup and we eat from the same bread.

As we eat from the same bread and drink from the one cup, we all connect tightly with Jesus Christ. He makes us one people, one body, one flock.

And as a foretaste of the perfect times to come, we care for each other as brother and sister. Whatever your background.

And the people outside the church? They are not our brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ - but we do share the same humanity. We are all created by the one God, and so where we can, we also care for them.

The church is a sacrament for the world. We are God reaching out to people. So as a church, we cannot erect walls to keep people out.

The church is not defined by the walls we create to keep people out. We are defined by the one in the center of our worship, Jesus Christ

Conclusion

And Jesus Christ welcomed all people, cared for all people. He ate with the hated tax collectors. He healed the pagan Romans. He touched impure women. So the leaders of Israel hated him. Because he broke down their walls.

And we, as Christians who reject the Declaration of Independence of Adam and Eve, we try to undo the damage done in this world by their declaration.

We reject the walls created by national, cultural, linguistic, religious, or racial differences and we stand with Jesus Christ to be with all people who are hurt or violated. As Christ has loved us, so we love others.

Please, care for your brothers and sisters. When confronted with people and their needs, say to the Lord, "Yes, I am my brother's keeper." And then act.

+ Amen