

July 11, 2004

Sixth Sunday After Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Not least among the ironies of the Bible is the fact that its very first family was also its first dysfunctional family. For one thing, the boys didn't get along. Fratricide is a useful clue.

The theological source of the problem, certainly, was the sin of the first parents in Genesis 3, though the novelist Jessamyn West did offer her own peculiar slant on the point: "Always thought Adam might've handled his boys better if he'd been a boy himself. . . . Worked under a handicap, as it was."

In regard to these two brothers it is ironical, too, that the first man to die was also the first to be murdered. More ironical still, perhaps, he was murdered for his religious faith. "By faith," Holy Scripture tells us, "Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain," and "Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell." Consumed with rage, he at last "rose up against his brother Abel and killed him" (Hebrews 11:4; Genesis 4:5,8). The first man to die, therefore, perished in testimony to his faith, and it was an angry unbeliever who took his life.

The key to the discernment of the first murder is the prior moral fissure dividing these two men. Murder was the fruit, not the root, of Cain's offense. St. John tells us that "Whoever hates his brother is a murderer" (1 John 3:15). Antecedent to the killing itself, then, the killer was already "of the evil one" (3:12). According to Theophilus of Antioch in the second century, it was Satan who "moved his brother, called Cain, and made him kill his brother Abel. And thus the beginning of death (*arche thanatou*) came into this world" (*To Autolytus* 2.29). In the following century the Alexandrian Origen remarked that "evil did not begin in Cain when he slew his brother." On the contrary, he said, he was a bad man all along, and "God read his heart." It was simply the case that Cain's "evil became manifest (*eis phaneron elthen*) when he slew Abel" (On Prayer 29.18).

While we easily perceive that Cain killed because he was a bad man, it is important to see also that Abel was slain precisely

because he was a good man. His goodness was the very reason that Cain took his life. St. John affirms it: "And why did he murder him? Because his works were evil and his brother's righteous" (1 John 3:12). While it is said of Cain that "he perished in the fury wherewith he murdered his brother" (Wisdom 10:3), of Abel we are told that "he obtained witness that he was righteous" (Hebrews 11:4).

Thus commences the Bible's reading of history as a prolonged chronicle of "all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel" (Matthew 23:35). The saga of persecution begins with "The voice of your brother's blood cries out to Me from the ground" and ends with "How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" (Genesis 4:10; Revelation 6:10).

Abel, then, though dead since the dawn of history, "still speaks" (Hebrews 11:4). Origen commented: "Let us recognize that what was said of Abel, who was slain by the homicidal and unjust Cain, pertains to all whose blood is unjustly shed. We may consider as pertinent to each of the martyrs the words, 'Your brother's blood cries out to me from the earth,' because from the ground their blood shouts out to God" (*Exhortation to Martyrdom* 50).

If Adam is the Old Testament's first type (*typos*) of the Christ to come (Romans 5:14; 1 Corinthians 15:45), the death of Abel is rightly regarded as the first foreshadowing sign of Christ's death on the Cross. Jesus Himself laid the foundation for this symbolism by declaring that "all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel," would come upon the generation of those who crucified Him (Matthew 23:35). For this reason, St. Augustine believed that the death of Christ was represented in the figure of Abel (*The City of God* 15.18).

The author of Hebrews, who described Abel's blood crying out to God from the earth, went on to invoke this same image with respect to Jesus' own blood. The blood of Jesus, he wrote, "speaks better things than that of Abel" (12:24). Whereas Abel's blood cried out demanding revenge, the blood of Jesus, who is called here "the Mediator of the new covenant," invokes the divine mercy for sinners. Such is the blood in which we have access to "the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem" (12:23).

All Saints Orthodox Church
Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America
4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641
Church Office: (773) 777-0749
<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor
phri@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:
www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html
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