Harvest Festival – 2021: Genesis 4. 1 – 12

So today we're celebrating our harvest festival, and I've chosen for our Old Testament reading the Genesis account of the first murder in human history. What's that got to do with celebrating harvest?

Now I say human history, but not many people today take the book of Genesis, or at least not the first part of Genesis, as history. If you read it carefully, there are too many contradictions for it to be historically accurate. So it makes better sense to read it as a series of God-inspired parables. And parables are stories which have one or more important things to teach us. So they contain God's truth, without being literally true.

And that's certainly true of the story of Cain and Abel.

But why have I chosen this passage for harvest festival?

The answer comes close to the beginning of our reading. We're told that, "One day, Cain gave part of his harvest to the LORD, and Abel also gave an offering to the LORD."

Cain and Abel were doing just what people will be doing later today, bringing their harvest gifts to God.

This passage also contains the first recorded harvest festival in human history.

Interestingly, we're not told why Cain and Abel are bringing their gifts to God, but from what we read elsewhere in the Old Testament I think it's safe to say that it's a thank offering. And giving thanks to God in a tangible form for all that he gives us runs right through the Old Testament. So we find in the Book of Leviticus:

> The LORD spoke to Moses: **10** Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: When you enter the land that I am giving you and you reap its harvest, you shall bring the sheaf of the first fruits of your harvest to the priest.

But it's not only at harvest time that we're called to recognise how dependent we are on God for all that we have. In the first book of Chronicles, we find recorded King David's words as he receives donations towards the building of the first Temple in Jerusalem:

> **14** ‘But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able to make this freewill-offering? For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you.... **15**O LORD our God, all this abundance that we have provided for building you a house for your holy name comes from your hand and is all your own.

You may recognise some of those words as ones that we use when receiving the offertory in our Sunday services.

But if Cain and Abel are doing the right thing in bringing their harvest offerings to God, why is it that Abel’s offering is accepted, whilst Cain’s is rejected?

There are some Biblical scholars who say that this is a purely arbitrary action on God’s part. But I don’t believe in a God whose actions are arbitrary.

Where’s the justice in that? I think if you read the beginning of this passage carefully, you can see exactly why God rejected Cain’s offering. In our reading we heard told that:

> One day, Cain gave part of his harvest to the LORD, **4** and Abel also gave an offering to the LORD. He killed the first-born lamb from one of his sheep and gave the LORD the best parts of it.

There’s something a bit casual about Cain’s offering, in comparison with Abel, who offers to God the best bits of the first lambs born that year. This comes out even more strongly in the NIV translation:

> In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD. **4** But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock.

Abel puts God first, before taking anything for himself, and gives God the best that he can. By giving God the firstborn from his flock, Abel is recognising that the success of the lambing season is down to God. Cain, on the other hand, doesn’t appear to have put much thought into his offering: it’s just “some of the fruits.”

So what’s the lesson for us? It is, I think, that we are called to give God of our very best, not only at harvest time but throughout the year.

If we recognise that in all we do we are called to serve God and that only the best is good enough for God, then it can change our attitude to the way in which we live our lives. The Anglican priest and poet, George Herbert, opens a hymn with which many of you may be familiar:

> Teach me, my God and King,
> In all things thee to see,
> And what I do in any thing,
> To do it as for thee:

And he goes on to say:

> A servant with this clause
> Makes drudgerie divine:
> Who sweeps a room, as for thy laws,
> Makes that and th' action fine.

Now we may not always manage to live up to this high standard, but had we read on in the Cain and Abel story, we would have heard that despite the fact that Cain shows no remorse for having killed his brother, God takes steps to protect him from the vengeance of others. God's love for Cain remains.

And we know from what Jesus did on the cross, that if we show remorse for our failings that God is ready and eager to forgive us.

So, then, at harvest time in particular, but not solely, we are called to recognise how dependent on God we are for all that we have, especially food, clothes and shelter, and to be thankful for all that he gives us.

We're also called to always strive to give of our best and do our best, but knowing that when we fall short, we have a loving and forgiving God.

And one final lesson: we heard at the end of the reading that Cain was told: " If you try to farm the land, it won't produce anything for you." Similarly, earlier on in Genesis, after the disobedience of Adam and Eve, God tells them:

> Cursed is the ground because of you;
> in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
> **18** thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;
> and you shall eat the plants of the field.

19 By the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread.

Now again, whether you take Genesis literally or as myth or parable, any farmer, indeed any gardener, will tell you how much truth this contains. So at harvest time, as well as giving thanks to God for the harvest, we should also thank him for the farmers who, by "the sweat of their face" ensure that we will have full plate to enjoy when we sit down to our Sunday lunch.

And as you give thanks, offer up a prayer for those who will be the recipients of our harvest gifts. Amen.