

SERMON – 27/8/23**'Consequences'**

Genesis 4:1-16

“Then the LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry? Why that scowl on your face? Because you have done evil, sin is crouching at your door. It wants to rule you, but you must overcome it.”
(Genesis 4:6,7)

Have you ever played the party game known as 'Consequences'? It's years and years since I played it but it brought a smile to my face as I thought back to uproariously funny times at family Christmas parties or late at night in student halls of residence. For those of you who perhaps don't know what on earth I am talking about, the game involves everyone being given a piece of paper and at the top of it they write a man's name – it could be someone at the party, it could be a famous person, it could even be a cartoon character. They then fold the paper over to hide the name they have written and pass the piece of paper round to the next person. On your new piece of paper you then write a woman's name, fold it over and pass it on. The next thing you write is what he said to her; then what she said to him; and the final one is the Consequence – what happened next. The pieces of paper are then unfolded and the ridiculous made-up stories are read out. Donald Trump met Irene McFarlane. He said to her 'Do you know what the wifi code is?' She said to him, 'There's a terrible smell in here.' And the consequence was that Baynes ran out of Scotch pies. Or something equally daft.

Rather more seriously, we are all too aware that in real life our actions have consequences. One person says or does something wrong and sometimes it can come back to bite them while at other times someone else suffers for it, or both. The news is full of Yevgeny Prigozhin and Vladimir Putin, and of Luis Rubiales and Jenni Hermoso – actions and consequences and never-ending ripples. There are of course much more positive stories of lives changed for the better by the sacrificial service of others but for some reason the media like to focus more on the bad news than the good.

These last few weeks we have been reading the opening chapters of the Bible – it starts with incredibly good news, the awe-inspiring celebration of the creation of all things in the poetry of chapter 1, and the reflection through a very different lens in chapter 2 on what it means to be human, followed by the bad news – the misinformation and the blame game as the man and the woman choose to believe the snake's spin on God's Word and to disobey the Lord. The consequences of that Fall are almost literally earth-shattering, as Adam and Eve are shown the door in Paradise and cast out into a world marked by toil and pain and a death and separation from God that had had no place in the Lord's original purpose for humanity.

As we turn into chapter 4 we find ourselves in a much more domestic context where we probably find the scale of things more relatable. We have moved from the cosmic celebration of the creation of the universe, the philosophical question of what it means to be human and the more representative figures of Adam and Eve to what could be an ordinary tale of people like you and me. Although the outcome of the story is on the more extreme end of things – murder – thankfully that is a very rare thing in the world even though we hear about it almost every day on the news.

The story of Cain and Abel begins with what happens when they come to worship God. They both bring different offerings – Cain, the farmer, brings some of his harvest while Abel, the shepherd, brings the first lamb born to his sheep. We are told that the Lord was pleased with Abel and his offering but that He rejected Cain and his offering and here perhaps the questions begin to rise in our minds. On the face of it God's reaction is arbitrary and even spiteful (and I've even heard preachers trying to justify such a thing) but actually if we drill down a bit it becomes clear that it's less about outward appearances and more about the attitude of heart and the motives of the two brothers.

Cain, we're told, brings 'some of his harvest' – it almost feels as if he has brought the equivalent of a petrol station bunch of flowers as a token gift for God just to go through the motions rather than a genuine expression of his gratitude and worship and as the story unfolds, we find Cain with a scowl on his face that mirrors

the state of his heart before God. In sharp contrast, we find Abel not only choosing the firstborn lamb from his flock to offer to God but giving the best of what he has to the Lord, the cuts of meat that he might rather have preferred to enjoy himself. Much, much later the prophet Hosea will proclaim the Word of God to the people of Israel: "I desire mercy not sacrifice and the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings." It's not so much *what* we bring to God by way of an offering as the attitude and spirit in which we worship, which itself is a challenge to each one of us this morning. We may be singing our hearts out here and we may have given sacrificially in the offering plate and preparing ourselves for a week of service to others in Christ's name, but where is your heart and mind before God today? Is there anything there in which the Lord may take pleasure? Does the beatific smile on your face hide the inner frown or scowl of your spirit?

Cain's offering is rejected and from that (and indeed from the attitude of mind in which he came to worship) there flows a devastating catalogue of consequences. We read here of Cain becoming furious and scowling with anger; we read the telling phrase: 'Sin is crouching at the door' wanting to rule over him; and it is *that* slippery slope that leads Cain shockingly and jealously to turn on his brother and kill him. Jesus speaks in the Sermon on the Mount about name-calling being tantamount to murder and lustful glances equating to the committing of adultery, because He recognised that sin begins with an attitude of heart which leads to disastrous consequences. In a number of places, the New Testament goes on to give us a similar description of the slippery slope. The apostle Paul writes to the Romans: "Sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death." (Romans 7:11) And James writes: "Each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death." (James 1:14).

"Then the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why that scowl on your face? Because you have done evil, sin is crouching at

your door. It wants to rule you, but you must overcome it." Here lies the challenge of this morning's passage – what is it that God desires of us in worship and in life, and how are we to overcome the inner scowl that we may smile upon God and know God's smile upon us?

The New Testament refers back to this story of Cain and Abel a number of times – John speaks in his first letter about Cain belonging to the Evil One and murdering his brother because the things he himself had done were wrong while the things Abel had done were right. The writer to the Hebrews includes Abel in his list of those who lived by faith: "It was faith, he writes, that made Abel offer to God a better sacrifice than Cain's. Through his faith he won God's approval as a righteous person because God Himself approved of his gifts. By means of faith Abel still speaks even though he is dead." (Hebrews 11:4) And in the following chapter he goes on to address the following significant statement to all who read his words: "You have come to Jesus, who arranged the new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that promises much better things than does the blood of Abel." (Hebrews 12:24)

As so often in Scripture we are offered two ways to live: we can take the way of Cain who went through the motions of religious observance, turning up before God to worship but with an inner scowl and a perfunctory offering, who allowed sin to rule him and who calculatingly took the life of his own brother; or we can take the way of Abel whose trust and delight in God's grace and generosity led him to bring a sacrificial offering, the very first and the very best of what he had, to honour the Lord.

Here, we are encouraged to take sin seriously and to recognise that if we give our sinful nature an inch it will take a mile. Sin is crouching at the door and it wants to rule over us. We may not always be able to overcome and it is only by the grace of God that any one of us is prevented from sliding to the bottom of the slippery slope with Cain, but Jesus has overcome for us and through consciously putting our trust in Him and in His victory for us we can overcome with Him and be transformed by the renewing of our minds, as Paul will later say, and offer our whole

self as a living sacrifice of worship, dedicated to God's service and pleasing to Him in the way of Abel.

And the consequences of *that* are truly mind-blowing. For Cain, and with him so many of our fellow human beings there is only the land of Wandering, east of Eden, so near and yet so far. But for those who by faith like Abel are beneficiaries of the perfect sacrifice of Christ, there is paradise restored. Which path will you take?