

## **Sermon**

Genesis 4: 1-16; Psalm 133; Matthew 5: 21-26

From 1995 to the year 2000 Sue and I lived in a relatively posh part of Bootle, a fairly rough area on the North side of Liverpool. Not that Bootle was without the sort of amenities that make life comfortable. To take shopping as an example, if you wanted M&S or one of the other national high street brands then they were located just a ten minute walk away, in the Bootle Strand shopping centre. On your walk there – not directly en route, but only a short detour away – you could choose to pass by the South Sefton Magistrates Court, a modern red brick building down the road from the national headquarters of the Health and Safety Executive and just across the way from Hugh Baird College of Further Education. Whether you realise it or not, if you own a television or read a newspaper, then almost certainly you have seen pictures of all these buildings during the last couple of weeks.

Of all of these pictures the most chilling, to anyone, though perhaps particularly to those who are the parents of a child who is or has been two years old, is the CCTV image from the shopping centre security camera of the young James Bulger being led away, hand in hand with one of his ten-year-old killers, Robert Thompson and Jon Venables. All of this is back in the news, of course, because Jon Venables, given a new name and identity upon his release from detention, has been returned to prison for

reasons not to be divulged by the government, though widely speculated upon in the press. Each time I see that picture, taken at a spot I presume I have walked by on several occasions, I can feel the hairs rise on my neck and I experience an acid feeling in the pit of my stomach.

I've got to say I feel little better, watching some of the other footage from that time, particularly the pictures of crowds of enraged people, outside the court building, pelting the vans carrying the two ten-year-olds with bricks and stones and attempting to stop the vehicles, possibly with the intention of inflicting summary justice upon these boys. This is but a public, physical manifestation of how local people felt as I encountered them in the years just after the killing and during the time of the trial. If recent television interviews from Bootle Strand are anything to go by feelings still run high, emotions still run deep with regard to Robert Thompson and Jon Venables.

Jon Venables is, as Cain was, a marked man. Unlike Cain, the biblical murderer of a younger child, Venables relies most immediately not upon God but upon Jack Straw, the **Justice** Secretary, to protect him from those who would murder him because he has murdered another. As Cain would put it, "I shall be a wanderer, a fugitive on the earth, and I can be killed at sight by anyone." (4: 13) Although I chose tonight's Genesis reading some months ago it has become alarmingly relevant to recent

events. The challenge to us from the biblical text is not to acknowledge that one person, even a young person, might murder another: this is **not** news to us. Only one verse amongst sixteen needs to be devoted to **that** piece of information: “Cain said to his brother Abel, ‘Let us go out into the country.’ Once there, Cain attacked and murdered his brother.” (4: 8) No, the dilemma facing us relates not to the fact of murder but to what should happen to the murderer; what should happen to the one who transgresses against his brother, against his fellow human being. What is an appropriate response to a Cain, this representative human figure? What is the appropriate response to a Jon Venables, an individual human being who has killed another human being?

And lest we fall into the comfortable illusion that this is only about other people, Jesus, taking these verses from Genesis – and I’m sure he **must** have had them in mind – after quoting the commandment against murder goes on to declare, “Anyone who commits murder must be brought to justice. But what I tell you is this: anyone who nurses anger against his brother must be brought to justice. Whoever calls his brother ‘good-for-nothing’ deserves the sentence of the court; whoever calls him ‘fool’ deserves hell-fire.” (5: 22) On that basis we can only hope that we do not end up getting what we deserve for thoughts about and attitudes towards our brothers and sisters over the years, for in this regard, at one time or another we would all be found guilty.

Now my initial response to what Jesus says here is to think that he has missed an important point. As the saying goes, sticks and stones may break my bones but words can never hurt: that there's a significant difference between thinking the thought or making the threat and carrying out the action. That crowd outside the magistrate's court failed to stop the vans carrying the two boys. As a result, they did not kill anyone and will never appear in that court accused of murder, much to everyone's relief. My second thought though, is that Jesus is concerned to point us to something that is at the heart of this Genesis story, which is of vital importance to understanding our human predicament: that we need to be aware of the forces which drive us as we make awesome choices about how we relate both to God and to our human sisters and brothers. As the voice of God to Cain puts it in Genesis, "If you do well, you hold your head up. If not, sin is a demon crouching at the door; it will desire you and you will be mastered by it." (4: 7) For Jesus, murder, hatred and slander, though in themselves differing in significance for us, are all, equally, **symptoms** of a deeper, underlying profound problem; that force, that sin which, so to speak, lies in wait for the occasion to destroy us.

We might be tempted to read Genesis chapters three and four as distinct accounts of reality; the first telling us about the breakdown in the vertical relationship, that between God and humanity, with its story of forbidden

fruit, a serpent and a tempting offer accepted; then chapter four, tonight's reading, about the disruption in the horizontal relationship, that between people, between brothers, between sisters. It's not that simple because God not only declines to be left out of the story but is central to it: "The Lord regarded Abel and his offering with favour, but not Cain and his offering." (4: 4, 5) In the story it is **God's** action which rouses Cain to fury, not anything Abel has done. We might assume that Cain had done something wrong and thus deserved his rejection but that's something we have to deduce without any explicit backing from the text. No, like us, Cain is faced with a world in which bad things happen, sometimes to us, and we can find no totally convincing explanation for why this should be. Is it that God is not in control? Is it that God allows these things to occur or even, as Genesis hints here, is the author of our misfortunes? We really don't know but we do know that it matters how we respond to such experiences.

Whatever it is that drives Cain to this act; whatever part family background or life experiences or any other factor may play in his decision to kill his brother; whatever **explanation** may be offered, none of it **excuses** him from facing judgment: "The Lord said, 'What have you done? Your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground. Now you are accursed and will be banished.'" (4: 10, 11) In our own time we know that explanations for how people act today are tied up with other

aspects of their life over which they had little or no control. To take one example that affects us all, although we may instinctively resist the idea it seems clearer by the day that our genetic inheritance plays a significant role in who we are and what we do with who we are. Alternatively, from practical observation and research we know that many of the adults who abuse children were themselves abused when they were young people. Although our nature and our sometimes twisted nurture may explain our actions, however, they never serve to **excuse** for wrongdoing: justice and judgment still matter.

Yet, even as God's judgment is pronounced on Cain – accursed and banished from the land as he is – God's grace is also at work: Cain is marked as a murderer but that very mark is put on Cain, “so that anyone happening to meet him should not kill him.” (4: 15) In his violent response to God's rejection Cain may have been mastered by sin but through God's grace his sin will not lead to his destruction. Cain lives! It is not a resurrection but it's a hint of what's to come. And I need that hint to make the story complete; to speak a strong word of hope to me. **I** would never turn up outside a court house, baying for the blood of the accused, but that's just because I'm temperamentally more liable to preach about it than do something practical about it, not because I am innately more moral or less sinful than someone who would. On the other hand, if someone did to my son what was done to the unfortunate James

Bulger I **know** that, given the chance, I would try to kill them. “Sin is a demon, crouching at the door” of my life, awaiting the opportunity to master me as I seek to live with others; live with my human brothers and live with my human sisters. Thank God, then that even when sin **does** master me God’s grace and God’s love accompanies God’s judgment. As far as sin is concerned, like everyone else I’m a marked man: as far as God is concerned I’m judged and yet I live:

“For I am convinced there is nothing in death or life, in the realm of spirits or superhuman powers, in the world that is or the world as it shall be, in the forces of the universe, in heights or depths – nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

(Romans 8: 38-39)