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'The Mark of Cain':

Prologue:

What exactly was the 'Mark of Cain'? (Genesis 4, v 16)

In context:

¹⁰ *The LORD said, "What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground. ¹¹ Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand.*

¹² *When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth."*

¹³ *Cain said to the LORD, "My punishment is more than I can bear. ¹⁴ Today you are driving me from the land, and I will be hidden from your presence; I will be a restless wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me."*

¹⁵ *But the LORD said to him, "Not so; anyone who kills Cain will suffer vengeance seven times over." Then the LORD put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him. ¹⁶ So Cain went out from the LORD's presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden.*

We will never know what 'the mark of Cain' was exactly, but after working on this article I am beginning to wonder whether it was not so much a physically visible indicator but something that may have been or included a behaviour characteristic or personality trait that marked Cain out and kept other people at a distance.

Perhaps it may have been a heightened sense of isolation and rejection that drove Cain's unsettled wanderings because there was no longer a place he felt either welcome or 'worthy'.

It could even have been the feeling that wherever he went, people 'knew' and he would never get any peace or respite.

Perhaps he is the first person in the bible to be recorded as having a form of paranoia. It is hard to say.

Or more simply that he missed being in the presence of God and his constant but pointless wandering/seeking was an attempt to find that 'peace' again, but of course, without contrition and admission of guilt of his crime there would be no rest.

There are many other possible answers/reasons.

A question I want to raise out of interest is 'do we still see this mark or marker in existence in our times, our lives and our churches, in wider society....'

Having given this some thought and consideration, I believe we do.

Genesis 4, v 1 – 12: background.

4 Adam made love to his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain. She said, “With the help of the LORD I have brought forth a man.”² Later she gave birth to his brother Abel.

Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil.³ In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD.⁴ And Abel also brought an offering—fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The LORD looked with favour on Abel and his offering,⁵ but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favour. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.

⁶ Then the LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast?⁷ If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it.”

⁸ Now Cain said to his brother Abel, “Let’s go out to the field.” While they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.

⁹ Then the LORD said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?”

“I don’t know,” he replied. “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

¹⁰ The LORD said, “What have you done? Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground.

¹¹ Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. ¹² When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth."

What a story that demonstrates what happens when jealousy leading to anger is not controlled, and it is a story being re-enacted nearly every day in some form or another, often taking the form of personal attack, dis-creditation, cancelling, verbal assassination, and so on, but the outcome is just as deadly.

Dare I even suggest, even just holding and playing with those kinds of thoughts are just as deadly in their consequence as perpetrating the physical acts?

As God said, 'sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it'. And when it is not ruled over, there is always tragedy.

There are two victims when we talk about jealousy leading to anger, one the target and then the proponent, one a victim of action and the other a victim of sin that has grown beyond control and has eternal consequences.

It is a 'lose, lose' situation in its immediate outcome. No one benefits by it and its consequences go far beyond the two people involved.

You'd think we would learn from this episode and be warned by it, but no, that is not the case.

I want to look at this specifically, and look at one particular aspect of it that comes from within 'the church' itself, and that is 'spiritual jealousy', when a person's ministry is obviously much greater and more naturally successful than another's, possibly an often senior and more 'educated' and 'qualified on paper' rather than a qualified by experience and wisdom person.

There is a group of people in the church/Christian community who find difficulty when someone displays a greater perceived spiritual awareness, holiness, and a closer walk with God than they have. There are four fairly obvious ways forward they can take when they face this problem:

Group 1: face the problem and grow spiritually by learning and watching – that way they both will have benefitted themselves and those around them – and it requires a great deal of spiritual humility to do this and often means individuals admitting

(a) that they don't know it all and

(b) that they can be 'wrong' about things,

Group 2: discredit them and/or try to destroy them, i.e., take their authority or ministry away from them as persons not fit to be in this position,

Group 3: apply rules as a means of taking authority over them,

Group 4: say nothing and do nothing because there is nothing they can do without ultimately damaging themselves.

Group 1:

Sadly there is a shortage of those who will be found in group 1. These are often people with the kind of humility which recognises their own and the personal failings of those around them.

Without ignoring their responsibilities they tend to be less judgemental and less protective of their own authority, position and ministry than others in the church, and certainly think of benefit to others above their own needs.

Personally I think we need lots more of this kind of person in leadership positions of all kinds, and for the purposes of this article, there is little benefit in adding much more.

Group 2:

Group 2 is usually very insecure personally, considers anyone better than they are to be a threat to be removed, reliant on title and position rather than actual gifting, and it considers being discovered to be wrong a weakness of leadership. They can be found amongst the clergy and laity.

Total and unquestioning personal obedience is never openly discussed but is expected/demanded in full at all times from lesser mortals. Leaders (me) are always right even when they are wrong and their word (mine) is to be accepted without question.

Group 2 people are sometimes indicated by their need to unnecessarily wear a clerical collar or other badge or insignia of office or rank, or even to have a clerical collar which is a little deeper than everyone else's, a 1 ¼" when everyone else is wearing a 1" collar for example, a Roman collar perhaps, a larger pectoral cross and/or an inordinate love of purple..... all subtle reminders to others (and to reinforce to self) they have their own God given personal importance and authority and need to be taken notice of/listened to.

Group 2 people are frequently critical and discouraging when it comes to dealing with others, and find praise and encouragement unfamiliar concepts in their daily interactions with others. They use this strategy as a means of projecting and protecting their own authority over others.

The desire to be very so controlling is often a reflection of the lack of control they feel they have in their own lives. They may appear very confident, but in fact they are really quite insecure people.

Their faith can also be quite fragile and they can be over protective of their beliefs and opinions, especially given they feel they do not have the successes other Christians seem to have in their ministries.

Everything seems 'hard' and there are constant difficulties, nothing seems to be easy or straight forward.

Their personal lack of success is also reflected in the putting down of others who appear to have the success they seek.

They find giving praise, even when richly deserved, difficult because they may receive little themselves, and they seek to create situations where they can offer huge amounts of frequently discouraging criticism simply because

(1) it makes them feel powerful and gives purpose to their lives, and

(2) it destroys or damages anyone who is seen as a potential threat.

If they personally are 'not worthy', then no one else shall be if they have anything to do with it.

They almost consider it their God given duty to frequently and publically discourage anyone with any kind of spiritual or practical gift, talent or skill.

They may justify their behaviour on the grounds of 'the need for Christian humility' but this is a deception on their part – they are simply jealous and envious of other people's spiritual gifts and are frightened others will discover what little they personally have to offer or contribute.

God forbid they personally should ever be discovered to be wanting in whatever role they have. In this event, there will be no forgiveness for the person who points this out or even suggests such might actually be possible – their reward will be an immediate and painful retribution and it will be swift and long lasting.

They cannot cope with the idea that anyone else might be their spiritual superior as they often believe only their view of God and life is correct.

In a continual attempt to hide their own failings, group 2 characters will often be very adept at recalling a mostly different, sometimes unrecognisable version of events and associated facts. It will never be their fault if things did not go to plan - it will always be someone else's fault otherwise it just adds to their sense of failure.

In an attempt to gain some sense of worth or value, Group 2 people are often frequent givers of unauthenticated and qualified advice, and consider they have superior knowledge and experience to speak with authority on all manner of things they really know little about.

They often share their opinion or wisdom when it has not been asked for, when is not required and is not appropriate.

They may even openly criticise, contradict or dismiss expert knowledge rather than admit they personally have strayed out of their depth.

Any kind of personal 'disagreement' will be seen as a personal threat and will soon escalate to a deeply personal attack on 'the stability, belief and practice of the entire church', and will not be forgotten.

Every opportunity to get superiority over the person in question will become a life time's mission, and there will be no forgiveness or reconciliation unless they personally will benefit greatly from.

Group 2 people will also use phrases like 'you can't be a Christian if....', 'that's not Christian...', 'call yourself a Christian....' when it comes to discussion on matters theological, scriptural interpretation, canon, tradition, etc.

They often display a great love of 'pro forma' and tick lists, where they can use them as a means of coercion and can exert personal power over people. They are most happy when they can focus on what people can't do rather than what they can do.

They are not 'enablers' but instead are the worst kind of disablers. Even unto themselves.

They will often avoid doing anything that does not have some form of guaranteed success.

They are often outsiders and seek friendships but their critical nature tends to keep people at a distance. Instead they are tolerated at best, and kept at a distance unless it cannot be avoided.

And the saddest of all things is that they have forgotten that God really does love them in spite of all their faults.

Yes, they know it in principle, but what they most desire is to know it as a reality. The love of God is a gift, and contrary to their thinking, it doesn't have to be earned or meet their own exacting and often unachievable standards.

Group 3:

Group 3 are an interesting group but no less dangerous group who tend to believe that rules and regulations are to be adhered to in all circumstances unless they conflict with their own views and practices.

They selectively use canon, tradition, teaching, history, etc., to give weight to their personal opinions and expression of faith and religion, often deliberately making others feel small by their own lack of knowledge, and insisting that others cannot be the 'real thing' unless there is compliance.

They are often jovial, gregarious, and outwardly very likeable.

Sometimes the male of the species can be recognised by their comfortably worn but tidy sport's jackets, wool checked shirts with tie, light coloured trousers and possibly even brogue shoes which will always seem to be well polished. They are easy to spot as they always attract a small but noticeable crowd and there is frequent laughter. They don't need a badge of office or anything to indicate who they are – it simply oozes out of them by the bucket load.

Their personality exudes confidence in 'the system', they like to be respected because of their vast knowledge and understanding, and they appear to be good listeners and be very supportive.

But this too is a deception.

They rarely seem to speak on their own behalf but will quote canon, tradition, teaching, history, etc., to beat the other into submission often using the sweetest and friendliest of learned tone.

Unlike group 2 people, their argument is never 'personal' because it relies on something that is not of their doing or personal belief, and after all, they didn't create the rules and they are there for a purpose.

They often use phrases like, 'well I don't personally agree with it but we all have to follow what is required....', 'rules is rules whether we like them or not....', and so on. Whilst they have an amazing knowledge base they can draw from, they will often apply it very selectively to suit their own beliefs and personal wishes.

It is never 'their fault' but their actions are just as damaging when it comes to the execution of individual ministry.

They are the spiritual descendants and inheritors of the Pharisees in their love of publicly demonstrations of their knowledge and wisdom whilst shaping the church to their own ends. They love the recognition and power this brings them, and a title like 'church warden' doesn't usually go amiss.

They consider themselves an essential part of church life having the ear of the incumbent and other members of the PCC or governing body, acting as pilot in the tricky navigation of jurisdictions and permissions.

They appear to bring stability and order where others may seek to bring disorder and chaos. Beware, as their motto is often 'know the rules and shape the game'.

As to how they would answer the question, 'am I my brother's keeper,' (more on this later) I suspect they would answer 'I am the keeper and guardian of the rules, and the rules are the keeper and guardian of my brother....'

I get the feeling 'compassion' and 'love' may have to get in the queue when it comes to the rules.

They may be just as much about power and control if left unchecked/untested or to their own devices. Many a servant will become master if left unattended.

Group 4:

Group 4 are made up of individuals waiting to see which side will win before committing itself, and is happy enough to appear to encompass all views in one way or another.

But you wouldn't want one of these people standing by you in court.

It would be useful to spend more time on discussing Group 3 and Group 4 further, but I would like to focus mainly on Group 2 as this group has more in common with the story of Cain and Abel. It's all about fratricide.

However, a general comment before I lead you back into the text source.

What is notable is that there is little mention of God in Groups 2, 3 and 4, and therein lies the crux of the matter.

Ministry is about serving God and community, not about servicing one's own personal needs or agendas. God and community should be first in our minds, not 'self'.

Groups 2, 3 and 4, are symptomatic of the denominational systems they serve.

It is hardly surprising that they create and encourage these character traits in its leadership groups, and one should remember that in practice an insecure leadership is easy to manipulate thanks to its inbuilt paranoia and fear of rejection and loss of its perceived power and/or authority.

The reality is that, whether group 1, 2, 3 or 4, these people do not think of themselves as bad or ungodly people, and they would be horrified to think that they had done any kind of evil in God's eyes or even in the eyes of others.

Just as Cain was probably horrified at the crime he had committed, he was not intrinsically a bad person. It was only that his offering had been rejected in favour of someone else's. And that understandably hurt him.

Even though he had committed such a terrible crime, God did not abandon him but sought to give him time for reconciliation and to put things straight with God, Abel the victim, and their parents.

It is sometimes good to remind ourselves that all sin goes beyond the person and their victim, and deeply affects others.

The bit that I struggle with in the scriptural text is Cain's response to God's questioning where he challenges God and asks, 'Am I my brother's keeper?'

This response from Cain is unfeeling and brutally without compassion.

God did not need to respond to Cain's question. The real answer to this question was so obvious.

Yes, he is 'his brother's keeper'.

And yes, Cain's actions and responses matter.

The Mark of Cain is still amongst us.

We are all 'our brother's keeper', and there is no room for jealousy or selfishness or power seeking or anything else that will destroy, damage or the relationship those people have with God and their subsequent ministries, the very things that God has personally entrusted those things to.

We are called to build up 'the church' and those who belong to it, not destroy.

To destroy them, their ministries or damage the reputations of, or hold back or discredit, is in principle an act of 'assassination', and any kind of 'assassination' or 'intent to do harm to another' is in essence 'murder'.

Remember, '*Thou shalt not kill.....*', not just physically, but mentally, emotionally, spiritually.....

For the sake of the Kingdom and for the sake of those who make up the greater communion of saints we are a part of, we need to put our own needs behind the needs of both God and those we serve.

We either build up the Kingdom, or we destroy it. And if we destroy it in any way, it will suddenly become unproductive and very hard to work and generate any kind of harvest from.

We either 'love God and love our neighbour as ourselves', or we love ourselves more than God and our neighbours.

One path leads to God, and the other away from God.

So which shall we consciously make the decision to choose?

And there will be a great harvest if we get it right, just as there will be a heavy price to pay if we get it wrong.

Do we want in our lifetimes to be restless wanderers throughout the earth, no place to call home, distanced from God and those we love, despised and rejected and secretly full of guilt and remorse like Cain, not knowing whether we can ever allow ourselves to be reconciled with God and those we hurt?

Do we really want our ministries to be unproductive and infertile?

Personally, I wouldn't wish this on my worst enemy, let alone choose this way for myself.

As Paul say in Philippians, chapter 2, (NIV and NCV for comparison):

<i>2 Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, ² then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. ³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.</i>	<i>2 Does your life in Christ give you strength? Does his love comfort you? Do we share together in the spirit? Do you have mercy and kindness? ² If so, make me very happy by having the same thoughts, sharing the same love, and having one mind and purpose.</i>
<i>⁵ In your relationships with one another, have the same mind set as Christ Jesus:</i>	<i>³ When you do things, do not let selfishness or pride be your guide. Instead, be humble and give more honour to others than to yourselves. ⁴ Do not be interested only in your own life, but be interested in the lives of others.</i>
	<i>⁵ In your lives you must think and act like Christ Jesus.</i>

Is God to blame for Abel's death?

So the question no one probably wants to be the first to ask is 'was God really to blame and complicit in the death of Abel?'

True, all of this could have been avoided if God had accepted Cain's offering.

But for what reason?

Why should God accept one offering and not another?

Possibly for the same reason we would prefer a gift given out of love rather than duty.

Maybe for the same reason we would prefer a gift that was the pick of the crop rather than just the left overs.

May be even because the gift was given for the wrong motives.....

There was no sense of God being angry with Cain, just that his gift/offering wasn't given in the same way Abel's was. Maybe Cain has something to learn about giving that Abel already knew.

There is no suggestion that Cain was not loved as equally by God as was Abel, or that Cain did not love God.

Whatever it was, this rejection certainly hurt and upset Cain. The result was a misdirected anger towards Abel rather than sorting the issue out with God.

Maybe this flaw in Cain's character was something that was never going to go away and would have re-appeared in any other combination of circumstances.

Not a case of 'if' this would happen, but 'when'.

Perhaps when we feel rejected by God we need to look to ourselves first and not blame others or take out our anger on them - instead to speak to God directly. But that of course requires us to accept our own faults or contribution to the problem, recognise and take responsibility for our own actions, and deal with/reconcile the problem with God Himself and any others involved if possible.

It is not acceptable to blame others for those things caused of our own doing. I particularly am thinking of the group 2 people we talked about earlier. You remember, they are the ones who are jealous of God's blessing on others and their ministries, in just the same way as Cain was of his brother.

Remember, Abel's offering was accepted by God, but Cain's was not.

Remember what Cain did to Abel when he allowed sin to dictate his actions.

Also remember that the consequences resulted in Cain being denied the presence of the Lord, in him becoming a constant wanderer without a permanent home, and ministries that were always hard work without ever seeming to come to fruition.

Do we see or recognise any of these traits within our own communities?

If we do then we should pray for those individuals that they might be reconciled with God, their deepest fears and those they take out their frustration on. These people are still God's children and are still worthy of God's love and ours.

The first thing to say is we are all sinners without exception and we are not called to judge others (that is God's remit, not ours) but instead we are called to offer our support and encouragement.

The first step to overcoming sin is to admit it, but not many people can handle that. So they come up with excuses and try to justify what they did even though they know they are in the wrong. This needs to be faced before reconciliation can take place, but perhaps we need to understand where this trait comes from in our psyche.

The Origins of Denial:

Now at this point I'm going to take a step back to Cain and Abel's parents, Adam and Eve, and look at how they handled their own disobedience and sin when they had to face God.

One might say they were responsible for the whole concept of blame culture, and Cain just built on his parents' creation and took it another step further.

Genesis 3, v 11-13

¹¹ (God asked) "Did you eat from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?"

¹² The man (Adam) said, "The woman whom you gave me, she gave me some fruit from the tree and I ate it."

¹³ So the LORD God said to the woman (Eve), "What is this you have done?"

And the woman replied, "The serpent tricked me, and I ate."

I wonder if we might have still been in the Garden of Eden had they both just been honest and owned up rather than try to wriggle out of the blame.....

That does not mean that they didn't feel guilt or even remorse at what they had done. They were certainly aware of their sin.

Having eaten of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge they now knew the difference between good and evil, sin and loving obedience, and they also knew what its consequences would be. They even knew that God was already aware of what had happened and there was no escaping it.

Denial was pointless but for whatever reason, they still felt there was a futile and pointless need to justify and give reason as to why they personally were not to blame and another party was guilty as charged and should take the rap.

I suppose you can understand why Adam and Eve might not have wanted to face the music and lessen their own individual part in this wilful misdemeanour, but that doesn't make it any better.

So no surprise when their children are guilty of the same and worse - children learn from what they see and experience in their parents, the only difference is they have had additional time to develop, perfect and diversify on a theme.

Perhaps you can see from this that 'sin' doesn't just affect the person sinning but it is like a virus in the way it affects the lives of others. The infection spreads unseen but it leaves its mark – we do not know where it will appear next but we can clearly see where it has been by the damage it has caused.

So when it comes to Cain answering God's question, 'Where is your brother?' Cain's answer is not an attempt at denial, but instead a distraction, a play for time to avoid facing the truth – in effect a 'not my problem, go look for Him yourself!'

But God already knew what Cain had done – He just gave Cain the opportunity to admit to his anger and jealousy and what he'd allowed his sin to grow into. Whilst there was no admission of guilt on Cain's part, there was nothing further that God could do to help Cain.

Simply, if we refuse to admit our sin/guilt then we cannot be forgiven of it.

In Genesis 4, verse 13, we can see Cain's suffering is both clearly visible and painful but there is no remorse, only self-pity.

He knows he cannot undo what he has done and he is overwhelmed:

¹³ Then Cain said to the LORD, "My punishment is too great to endure!"

In spite of this Cain still refuses to help himself.

By verse 16 we see that Cain has chosen his own path. His unrepentant nature and stubbornness denies him the reconciliation with God he really seeks, and he turns his back on God and walks away:

¹⁶ Then Cain went out from the presence of the LORD....

Is this a warning we could all learn from, what happens when we try to pull the wool over God's eyes and present a version of the truth that has no substance?

But in spite of his sin and punishment, that did not mean Cain was forsaken by God. No one is ever forsaken by God – God always leaves the door open for those who would truly seek His presence.

As later chapters of Genesis show, Cain went on to have children of his own and many generations to his name, though whether he ever chose to be reconciled to God that remains an unknown.

That is for God to know and for us not to worry about.

A way forward:

So how do 'the marks of Cain' manifest themselves?

Indicators may be comprised of (m)any of the following:

1. jealousy and anger towards other Christians who have successful ministry
2. feelings of failure, disappointment and unworthiness in both Christian life and ministry
3. feelings of rejection by other Christians
4. feelings of growing isolation in the Christian community
5. feelings of being abandoned by God
6. feelings of being abandoned by other Christians
7. a growing inability to accept help and/or advice
8. being increasingly critical and dismissive of others
9. finding difficulty in giving other people deserved praise
10. an increasing inability to offer constructive encouragement and support
11. not attempting things for fear of failure
12. seeing only problems in starting new ventures
13. finding increasingly diminishing success in ministry and greater work load
14. constantly finding fault rather than finding positives
15. an inability to accept responsibility when things go wrong
16. constant blaming of others
17. worrying about what people think of you

18. being over-critical about your own faith and ministry
19. worrying about what other people think about your own faith and ministry
20. constantly feeling you never meet God's expectations or standards
21. feeling powerless and hopeless if we feel threatened
22. frequently feeling disappointed about your own faith and ministry
23. over-reaction to the comments of others
24. feeling unappreciated and under judgement by others
25. unwilling to accept help or support
26. constantly putting others down
27. bigging yourself up at the expense of others
28. denying or changing fact rather than admitting error
29. spiritual stubbornness even to the point of telling God He has got it wrong
30. an inability to listen to your own heart, conscience, intellect or even God
31. anger management is becoming increasingly difficult
32. feelings of jealousy and envy that won't dissipate but just fester away and get worse
33. an unwillingness to talk to God about all these things
34. an unwillingness to admit these thoughts to other Christians/close friends

- 35. a willingness to 'hope all these things will just go away' rather than face them
- 36. constant 'it should have been me' thoughts
- 37. a fear of being 'found out' and being discovered to be 'a fraud'
- 38. telling/advising other people how to live their lives and/or interfering in the ministries assigned to others rather than dealing with the problems in your own life
- 39. a growing inability to enjoy or accept the success of others
- 40. feelings of resentment when other people seem to be more successful than you are
- 41. an unwillingness to be reconciled when we pull back from others
- 42. a denial that any kind of reconciliation by ourselves is actually required or necessary.

This is major stuff and if left unchecked it will end in tears.

So how do we help those trapped in the cycle of despair that has been created?

Group 2 people in particular should be encouraged to take on board that, in spite of the way they have treated others, they are not lost but still loved, and that they still have a valuable contribution to make to the life of the church.

They are both needed and necessary, and that it is the coming together of the whole Christian community, not just part of it, that is where its strength and success lies

There is no need therefore to be fearful of rejection and no need to try to be something they are not, rather just be the person God intended them to be.

Just as God accepts and loves them for who they are then the path to follow is that of learning to love the person they really are.

They were created by God's design, not by self-will, for both purpose and ministry, to be workers in the church's great harvest.

They are indeed essential to the church's success, something perhaps we need to be reminded of.

That will take a lot of support and encouragement from those around them because it won't be easy to break the habits and practices of a lifetime.

It means opening up the welcoming hand of Christian love and friendship to break that repeating cycle of rejection and isolation.

This is not 'quick fix' stuff and requires a full on, resilient, God centred commitment by all the parties involved. It will sometimes feel like trying to stroke a badly treated Rottweiler for the first time, and there is always the risk of getting bitten, but someone has to make the first move.

It all comes down to whether we and they are ready and willing to support and encourage one another without being judgemental, dragging up old hurts or resorting to blame culture as a means of protecting ourselves.

It depends whether we feel it's worth the effort. And if we feel it isn't worth making the effort then it begs the question, do we truly love

The 'Mark of Cain' has no place in the church other than as a warning of what happens when

1. jealousy, envy and anger,
2. a denial of culpability (a refusal to seek reconciliation and forgiveness)

are both allowed to come to fruition.

We need to face up to it and deal with it before it does serious and lasting damage. If we don't then we should accept what comes our way without complaint and accept we have become part of the problem and not part of the solution.

We can't have it both ways we shall be judged according to our choices.

We shall also reap a harvest befitting our choices.

Which outcome would you prefer?

+Ian

Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth.".... and I will be hidden from your presence

Now you are blessed and this shall be your foundation, the place where you stand in my presence where peace shall reign. When you work the ground it shall yield its crops manifold for you. You shall become a great and respected nation and all shall seek the comforts of your walls. I will stand amongst you and you shall know me.

St. Luke 14. 16-24: What's Your Excuse?

+David, OSJ (Wales)

A CERTAIN man made a great supper, and bade many; and sent his servant at supper-time to say to them that were bidden, Come, for all things are now ready. And they all with one consent began to make excuse. The first said unto him, I have bought a piece of ground, and I must needs go and see it; I pray thee have me excused. And another said, I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to prove them; I pray thee have me excused. And another said, I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come. So that servant came and shewed his lord these things. Then the master of the house being angry said to his servant, Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in hither the poor, and the maimed, and the halt, and the blind. And the servant said, Lord, it is done as thou hast commanded, and yet there is room. And the lord said unto the servant, Go out into the high-ways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled. For I say unto you, That none of those men which were bidden shall taste of my supper.

I must confess when I began preparing for this service, I looked at the text and the theme came to me, "What's Your Excuse?". That is certainly an implied question in the parable. Then I noted the way the lessons began. It begins with the word "but".

Odd word to begin a reading with. "But He said to him."

Well, that made me curious.

Why "but", and who was the 'him' Jesus was talking to?

So I looked. It turns out that Jesus was at a dinner hosted by a Pharisee, and He was talking about humility - because He was seeing just the opposite in the behaviour of the others invited to the same dinner - and living for others - and for their welfare - which none of us are terribly good at. All of a sudden, one of those listening pops up with this pious pronouncement, "Blessed is everyone who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God!"

This is, of course, true. Who would argue with the idea that going to heaven is a good thing? It is to this pious outburst that Jesus responds - and Luke begins the description of the response with the famous , "But He said to him."

His answer to the man's comment was the parable in our Gospel lesson of the dinner to which no one seemed to want to come. Mind you, they all had their reasons. The reasons even had a ring of plausibility to them. One had to inspect some newly purchased real estate, another had to try out some new farm implements - five yoke of oxen - and the third had just gotten married. The day of the big dinner comes, and no one wants to take the time to take part.

Of course, it struck me that the reasons they were skipping out on the banquet were all the abundance of blessings by God. They were too successful, too rich, and too happy to take time for the dinner of Salvation. If the parable were coming out of the blue to modern Britains, we might wonder what one thing has to do with the other.

In Israel at the time of Jesus, however, no one had to even guess. The host of the dinner is God. The dinner is the heavenly feast of salvation. It was made all the more clear by this being spoken in response to someone talking about the blessedness of eating bread in the kingdom of God!

Jesus was telling the man who spoke so boldly about the blessedness of going to heaven that none of them were going. This wasn't the "none" in the absolute sense that no Jew was going to go to heaven, but the "none" of 'very few, and probably none of those present at the meal' because the nation of Israel as a race had turned away from God. Jesus was accusing them - no actually, He was judging them - of having taken the rich and abundant of blessings of God in their lives as the excuse to forget God and reject His invitations. Moreover, Jesus was saying that those who had no standing, no worth or value, and no reason to be included in the great goodness of God, were going to be compelled into the banquet to keep out those wretches who had spurned the invitation.

Every Jew knew that Jesus was talking about the Gentiles. God was going to pick up the Gentiles as His favoured people, and leave them - the Jews - out in the cold. Their failure was, having received the favour of God and accepted the blessings He bestowed, that when He came, and the feast of Salvation was set before them, they preferred the status quo to whatever it was that God was offering them. Their lives under God's abundant blessings had become the rationale for ignoring God.

What about us?

Of course, we are those Gentiles - the poor, crippled, blind and lame - that Jesus described. We have been dragged into the dinner undeserving and often unwilling. It is by grace you are saved. So how could I ask the question, "What's Your Excuse?" You see, that invitation to salvation came a long time ago. It was thrilling for the first Gentiles to be invited in.

Now, 2,000 + years later, we are quite accustomed to being on the inside. We have watched as former members of this little congregation have just walked away. There was too much else in life that they wanted to pursue. There were too many blessings in the world to be enjoyed to take time to attend the banquet of the One who gave them all their blessings. There was too much wealth, too many toys, too much we could be doing instead, to take the time to hear and accept the invitation of the Lord.

So, some left because they did not have the commitment they understood that being a Christian required - and that was their explanation for why they left us, not mine. Others didn't say why they left, but it has become evident that some of them did not want to support the congregation to the extent they could, and they understood they should. Others wanted their old friends back more than they wanted the seat at the banquet.

When we walk away from God and faith and commitment for the same reasons as the men in parable, do you imagine that we do not fall under the same judgment of God?

That is why I ask the question, "What's your excuse?" I am not saying that you need one - or that you have turned your back on the invitation to the heavenly banquet. The possibility exists for every one of us, however. Think of Demas, a fellow worker with the Apostle Paul. He is mentioned three times by Paul; first in Colossians, where Paul includes Demas among those sending greetings to the Colossians, then in Philemon, where Demas is also among the workers who send their greetings, and finally in Second Timothy, where Paul writes, "for Demas, having loved this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica." If it could happen to Demas, who worked side-by-side with Paul, no one is immune. So we need to exercise care.

Asking "What's your excuse?", helps us consider the things that threaten us by being too attractive, or too important, or too demanding in our lives, or in our minds.

Nothing is worth the loss of this one thing, for what shall it profit a man to gain the whole world, and to lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give for his soul?

And what is this "one thing"? Christ. He is the author of our salvation and the giver of our hope. He died in your place, and paid for your sins, and now promises forgiveness of sins, and resurrection from the grave, and everlasting life in glory to all who trust in Him to give us what He has promised - and believe that He has won all these things for you.

We have Christ and all His blessings by grace through faith. We receive Him through His Word preached, and we receive Him through the Sacrament of His body and blood. But how easy it is to begin to depend on, and place our trust in our own resources, our doctors, our health and strength, our income, our own dreams and ambitions for our lives - or what is left of our lives. Thousands of former Christians who do not trust in Jesus Christ, and no longer believe, are unaware of it. They remember believing. They don't feel any different. They seamlessly make the transition from genuine faith to something else.

The man who could not come to the dinner because He bought land did not say He did not want to come - he was just busy. He got distracted, and had a schedule conflict, and had to make a choice. Some of the people who left us, left us for other congregations. Does that mean that they cannot go to heaven as members in those congregations? Not at all. What is telling is how they left, and why. When they leave to escape the church, to avoid the Word too clearly preached, and to facilitate withdrawing their commitment to support the Word of God in the world, that suggests that they got distracted, lost sight of what was going on, and made choices that placed the priority of the invitation to the great dinner behind the business or the pleasures of life in importance.

It was like sending a note, "Please, consider me excused."

Have you done that? I hope not! I don't think so. But it seems appropriate to be circumspect, and to look and see if there is anything that might be distracting you, or something that is rising up to take the place in your heart which only Christ and the Gospel of forgiveness, life, and salvation should hold. Forewarned is forearmed, they say.

You cannot make the faith and the Gospel your number one priority. God does that through the preaching of His Word, and the gifts He gives in the Sacrament. So, naturally, you want to be careful to keep that first in your hearts and lives. The Holy Spirit works faith and every good plan and desire, through the Word. But you make choices every day. Some turn you toward the faith and toward depending completely on God, and some tend to lead you away. You want to consider what the things you do and the choices you make mean, and where they may lead you, and endeavour to be deliberately and faithfully Christian.

I wrestle with these things in my life - and sometimes I am aware (after the fact, of course) that I have made different decisions than I think I should have. Those are the moments I thank God for knowing that I can repent, and that He does forgive.

Those are the moments I become most acutely aware of my need for His guidance, and strength, and blessing. If I have those moments, I am confident that you also have them. So I know I need to remind you that your sins are forgiven, and that God still loves you with a great love.

Our Gospel lesson urges each of us to consider the plight of those characters in the parable, and to examine our own lives to see if we are drifting toward the same sort of trouble.

One way to approach that is to ask yourself,

"what's your excuse?"

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Prayers by +David

Lord we come to you in silence knowing you do not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but you Lord look at the heart.

We come before God to pray for ourselves and our world, knowing that the Lord sees our hearts and knows our needs. We therefore bring our prayers with confidence in our Heavenly Father.

Lord, in your mercy.

All: hear our prayer.

That the Church in this country may rediscover her origins in the Holy Spirit, that the King as governor of the Church and head of the government may be blessed by God's Holy Spirit; And that God may help the leaders of the Churches especially our archbishops, our Bishops and all the priests, deacons, and volunteer helpers;

Lord, in your mercy.

All: hear our prayer.

We pray for strength to follow Jesus. Saviour, we hear your call.

Lord in your mercy

All: Hear our prayer.

We pray for all Christian people, especially remembering today those around the world, who are persecuted for their faith. Give them courage in times of trial and the gift of faith in times of doubt. May we follow their example and be bold in proclaiming the Gospel. Saviour, we hear your call.

Lord in your mercy.

All: Hear our prayer.

We pray for the leaders of the nations, and for those in authority under them, especially as they face difficult decisions during the current world difficulties and warring factions. Give them the gift of wisdom, and a right discernment in all things.

May we all play our part as responsible citizens for the common good of all. Saviour, we hear your call.

Lord in your mercy.

All: Hear our prayer.

We pray for our communities; for those who live and work there, especially during this time of strikes and unease. Speak your word of peace in our midst, and help us to serve one another as Christ has served us.

May we see our community through your eyes, alert to where we can offer support to friends and neighbours. Saviour, we hear your call.

Lord in your mercy.

All: Hear our prayer.

We pray for those bowed down with fear, sickness or grief, bringing to God those known to us. Reach out with your arms of compassion to bring strength and healing to all those in need.

May we bear one another's burdens and speak words of comfort and peace. Saviour, we hear your call.

Lord in your mercy.

All: Hear our prayer.

We give thanks for all those who have died in the faith of Christ and we rejoice with all your saints, trusting in all your promises. Saviour, we hear your call.

Lord in your mercy.

All: Hear our prayer.

Make us one in heart and mind to serve you with joy for ever. Amen.

Merciful Father

Accept these prayers for the sake of your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ.

+David, OSJ (Wales)

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Post Script Re: 'The Mark of Cain'

Just prior to publication I had the distinct impression I had omitted any kind of reference to one of the threads running through the story of Cain and Abel.

There is the possibility that within the story there is an oblique reference to the crucifixion of Jesus, although it would not have been visible at the time of the writing of the story.

It is only now, looking back through history that in hindsight it may be evident.

Scenario 1: supposing Cain, the elder brother representing the Jewish community, jealous of the younger brother (representing the emerging Christian faith), tried to bring it to an early end in the persecutions and martyrdoms of members of the early church.

Scenario 2: similarly, supposing Abel was the fore-runner of Christ, was killed because of the elder brother's (the established, self-interested and legalistic Jewish community) jealousy and anger, loss of power and authority.

Both scenarios come down to whose offering was acceptable to God, and whose was rejected.

This in turn is less about the theology of atonement and more about the practicalities of a working daily relationship with God. In fact, one might question the theology of atonement as a later creation in this context.

This in turn has an implication as to who holds the power and authority as the accepted and true representative of God. This to me seems very exciting and open for discussion.

Clearly this has implications as to who inherits 'the faith', and I sense the 'elder brother', the historical denominational churches, will be disappointed.

By rights it should be the elder brother who is the inheritor, but what happens now when the elder brother's offering is not accepted by God but the younger brother's is?

It will produce a lot of hurt, a great deal of damage and upset, and it will take some resolving, even if there is a willingness to seek a resolution. We have no choice that a resolution has to be found, and a split in the church almost seems inevitable if it has a future

It's an interesting piece of theology we should consider carefully, but in the end it is of little consequence. What matters is our immediate and personal relationship with God.

This is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. That is what matters.

