

Today's sermon for Candlemas 2015

In the 4th Chapter of Genesis we are told the story of Cain and Abel. Most famously Cain turns on his brother in the end, but the event which begins building the tension between the two brothers is God's rejection of Cain's offering. Have you ever wondered why God would reject Cain's offering? Well, it is rejected because they are not his first fruits. Abel is a shepherd and gladly gives God his first born lamb, as a thank you for his many blessings and his promise of prosperity. But Cain takes what he wants first and then only offers God a portion of what he has left over. He is reluctant and resentful that he should have to give back some of what God has given to him. So because his heart is disturbed with ill motives and misaligned intentions, God cannot accept what Cain offers. He thus becomes separated from God and there is a severing of the sacred bond. This of course leads to his murderous actions and his banishment.

It is so easy to become more like Cain than Abel? Does God comes first? Do we always offer him the first of what we have, or is it a reluctant and resentful second?

This message continues throughout the Bible.

At the fall of Jericho, which we find in the book of Joshua chapter 13, God gives strict instructions that no-one is to take from the spoils of Jericho. Jericho is the first city of the new kingdom and so everything should go towards God's work in building the new kingdom – the Community of the People of God. When they steal the offering, it is no longer any good to God, because their hearts and their faith are impure and disturbed by wicked and selfish intentions.

There was, however, far more than money at stake when Abraham offered his first-born son Isaac in Genesis chapter 22. When God asked for his Son, Abraham was distraught at the thought of the huge cost, but he did not wait to have 12 more sons first before offering one to God. Abraham offered his first son despite his anguish at doing so. Of course, we never thought that God would allow Abraham to go through with it, and he doesn't - he provides a ram to take Isaac's place. It was Abraham's unshakable selflessness, faithfulness and trust in God that not only saw God intervening to save Isaac, but also resulted in God blessing Abraham and all his descendants. It was Abraham's faith that God respected and blessed.

Then, in the first book of Samuel chapters 1 and 2, we are told how Hannah cannot have children, but God hears her prayers and blesses her with a son nonetheless. In in gratitude for being blessed with a child, Hannah offers her first-born son, Samuel, to God's service, and Samuel begins a life learning to be a priest of the Temple. God is so pleased with Hannah's faith and wholeheartedness that she is blessed with three further sons and two daughters.

Today, is of course Candlemas, or the Presentation of Christ at the Temple. Just like Hannah, who offers Samuel to God's service, Luke's Gospel tells us of how Mary brings Jesus to the Temple to be placed in God's service as her first-born son. It is a place where Jesus will dutifully return for worship and teaching throughout his life. But this is a first-born with a very different fate. Jesus' fate is not beyond Mary's insight, certainly not after Simeon tells her that as a result of this young boy's destiny a sword will pierce her soul too. But Mary is nothing if not wholehearted in her devotion to God and her faith remains steadfast.

Mary allows her son to fulfil his divine destiny, and God gives his Son in faith. God gave us Jesus. He gave his first in the form of his Son. His first and only begotten Son who was given to us while we were still sinners. God gave Jesus in faith so that one day we would return the favour by giving our lives completely to him. The gift of his Son came first, but the blessings he brings are still left incomplete in us until we respond. Not reluctantly or resentfully like Cain, but wholeheartedly and gladly, full of faithfulness and trust, just like Abel, Abraham, Hannah, Mary,.. God.

Before we see the blessings of God, we give in faith. Giving the first fruits of what we have, be them time, money, resources; giving our whole lives, says to God, "I recognise you first. I realise that without you I would not be alive at all. I am awestruck that you would be willing to give so much on the cross for me. And so I am putting you first in my life and I trust you to take care of the rest, in ways that you know best. Just as you have always done."

Amen.

