

“But love ye your enemies, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing again; and your reward shall be great.” (Luke 6.35)

In 2021, a PhD candidate from Brazil published her research about the effects of “malicious envy” in advertising, and how if the advertisers are not careful, the very tactics they use could backfire on them. International luxury brands of cosmetics, cars, and clothes have been using envy and covetousness in their advertising campaigns for years, but the research showed that levying the consumer’s desire to *buy* beauty or status could turn the consumer to actually hate the very thing they were meant to be attracted to. This is especially true when the consumer ties the product to a competitor they don’t like – such as a student experiencing malicious envy when seeing a classmate that they perceive as lazy being accepted into a prestigious university they both applied for. Their envy for the classmate could turn into a hatred or dislike of the school the student once thought was celebrated.

This envy noted in the research is not unlike the envy Cain had for his brother Abel. The children of Adam and Eve, Abel was a shepherd who tended his flock, while Cain was a farmer. When Cain brought an offering of his work to the Lord, his brother brought the firstborn of his flock – which was perceived as very valuable – and the Lord favoured Abel’s offering while giving Cain “no regard” (Gen 4.5). Cain was furious and jealous of his brother for winning favour with the Lord. Had he not done as much, or more, work than his brother? Had he not deserved at *least* recognition for this hard work? The Lord spoke to Cain and said, “If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door” (Gen 4.7). Cain then went off and killed his brother in cold blood, and then lied to the Lord when asked the whereabouts of his brother. God cursed him from working the ground – the very essence of his identity as a farmer – and caused him to be a wanderer.

This episode in Genesis is meant to show how the Original Sin of Adam and Eve was passed on to the next generation. Cain was overtaken by sin to the point where he killed his brother over what seemed to be a petty spat of jealousy. But what was Cain jealous of? Was he concerned with the “glory” that came with being better than his brother in the eyes of the Lord? Was he trying to please God first, or was he trying to be best? Was Cain’s sacrifice ever *really* about offering praise to God, or was it just a hollow offering to God and strictly a competition with his brother? God seemed to acknowledge that Cain’s offering was not being made with his heart but with his goods only, when he said he would be accepted if he “did well”. When God confronted him before the murder, he offered him a way out. He said: be careful of sin crouching at the door, be its master or it will master you. When God cursed Cain, Cain’s immediate concern was that he was being cut off from the land, not that he was being cut off from God. That part seemed to be an afterthought. His work, his connection to the world, was more important to Cain than a relationship with God or his brother.

Abel, himself, is seen as a “type” of Christ – a foreshadowing of sorts. His offering of the firstborn lamb is particularly poignant, as he was put to death due to the sin of his brother, just as Christ was put to death for the sins of all. But, unlike Christ, Abel’s death to sin showed that sin was the master of Cain, whereas Jesus’ resurrection broke the chains of death and instead made him the master of sin. The creeping sin which overtook Cain caused him to be cursed and separated from God, whereas the sin which overtook those who put Jesus to death allowed countless others to become closer to God through Jesus’ resurrection. But, in both cases, God is a God of mercy. He opens a door for Cain to make the right choice and reconcile with him, even though the malicious envy had already set in. But when Cain rejected him, and lied to him, and showed no remorse for his brother’s killing, he was justly punished for his deeds.

Likewise, God's mercy is extended to those who put Jesus to death – both Gentile and Jew – to give all people the option to choose to love and believe in him and reap the rewards. Jesus teaches those listening to his Sermon on the Plain that loving one another is one of the markers of a good relationship with God. Rather than act on envy, we are to love those who anger us, to reconcile with those we have wronged, and to promote peaceful relationships rather than violence. He urges his followers not to retaliate, but instead to show grace and mercy to their neighbours, just as God is merciful first. To love those who do not first love you is a great act that is counter to the ways of the world, because it runs against the ways of sin. It is not an easy road to take, because the easiest road is usually the one where we retaliate or dwell in the sinful situation. We repay envy for envy, violence for violence, slander for slander, and on the endless cycle goes. But we are urged to break the cycle, and if we do, we are sure to reap the reward, for we will then be children of the Most High; "for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked" (Lk 6.35).

Cain may have been enslaved by Sin, but Saint Paul tells the Romans that through Christ, our bondage is no more. Through our baptisms we are buried with Christ into death and then risen again to new life – a life clean of the stain of slavery to sin. The mastery of sin has been broken since the old sinful self, the Old Adam, was crucified and buried, and the New Adam rose from the dead. For we are members of the new creation, the one where Sin was defeated on the Cross, and this was all accomplished by the mercy and grace of God. The Rev'd. E.B. Pusey, writing in the 19th century, noted that all the verbs in St. Paul's Epistle here are passive – the actions are done *for us* or *to us*, and we are not doing them ourselves. He wrote, "*we did nothing for ourselves; we were baptized, buried, planted, crucified; the very language marks that all this was God's doing, in us, and for us...Our part begins with our new life in Christ, which we have received in Baptism; when in Him we have died, then begins that other death, which through Him we must continually die.*"

God, in his great mercy, does all the work for us and in us. He allows us to love our neighbours and our enemies. He causes us to be buried and risen with Christ in new life. But, like with Cain, he continues to allow us to choose for ourselves how we behave, and whether we choose to follow his commandments. He does all these great things for us, but only if we open ourselves to his influence. This is why in our collect today we acknowledge that God has prepared "such good things as surpass our understanding" for those who love him. That, if we do love him and follow his commands, we may obtain all that he has promised us – which exceeds even our greatest desire. Those who do not love God will not be capable of enjoying his eternal salvation because of their own hardness of heart. If we reject God, we, like Cain, will receive our fair punishment, but if we accept and love him, our reward will be great, and we will be adopted like his own children. We must always remember that our love for God does not come from ourselves, but from God himself. God is the source of all goodness and love; love is a gift from God. St. John puts it clearly when he says: "We love him, because he first loved us." (1 John 4.19).

Cain cared more about his earthly things – his farming, and the offering he presented – more than he cared about God. When God cursed him, he was more upset that he was unable to cultivate the ground than he was to be further alienated from God. Our collect and Epistle today teaches us to love God above all else and to leave behind the love of earthly things so that we might know and yearn for the risen life of Jesus Christ.

We all need and long for love. We want to be loved and we want to love. We see it in our movies, and shows, and in almost everything we do. But rather than misplace our love in earthly things, we are urged to find the true model of love given to us by God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That we love God first, and from there all other love flows. And we know the love that God has for us, and we will soon be reminded of that love in the Blessed Sacrament of the altar.

"Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 6.11).

Thanks be to God. Amen.