

**Sermon on Genesis 4, 1-16, 10.09.2006**

*The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Love of God and the Communion of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.*

**Text:**

*1)Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have gotten a man with the help of the LORD." 2)And again, she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground. 3)In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the ground, 4)and Abel brought of his firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, 5)but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. 6)The LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it." 8)Cain said to Abel his brother, "Let us go out to the field." And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him. 9)Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" He said, "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?" 10)And the LORD said, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground. 11)And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. 12)When you till the ground it shall no longer yield to you its strength; you shall be fugitive and a wanderer on the earth." 13)Cain said to the LORD, "My punishment is greater than I can bear. 14)Behold, thou hast driven me this day away from the ground; and from thy face I shall be hidden; and I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will slay me." 15)Then the LORD said to him, "Not so! If any one slays Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold." And the LORD put a mark on Cain, lest any who came upon him should kill him. 16)Then Cain went away from the presence of the LORD, and dwelled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.*

Dear Congregation,

there are things which in the context of this story preoccupy me very much: The first is, that the men connected with the murder and offering are "pious" men. The first murder of mankind is not a story in which a robber, a fiend, a swindler, a man of whom one would perhaps expect nothing more, murders someone, but a man who is just as pious as his brother, or at least wants to be.

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It almost seems as if this story is also a test for Cain to ascertain whether he is truly pious, or whether he only pretends to be. For what we learn here about a pious life is, first of all, that someone is able to reign over sin. Anger, disappointment, the feeling of being disadvantaged, envy, are entryways for sin, as it is written here. "Sin is lying in wait outside the door", says God, "and you should very carefully think whether to let it in."

The author Ida Görres has in a brief article, published in 1964, expressed the idea, how it would be if someone would invent a button, small and inconspicuous, with which we could simply by pressing it, make a person disappear, who annoys us, gets on our nerves, makes us angry. One thinks of the person, concentrates on him, presses the button and suddenly without him foreseeing or sensing or feeling it, he is gone. Without anything remaining, without a cry, without a sign, simply gone, in a fraction of a second.

What she then says is interesting: “And now the question, which really no one should be allowed to ask another, only himself: If this were possible, would I have never made use of it in my life?”

The inhibition threshold decreases, as soon as emotions, which we all possess, truly take hold of us. None of us is free of negative feelings for others, even though we want to be as pious as possible. Am I right?

I am glad that I have not had this button and admit, that I would have pressed it at times. I would also not be surprised if I were not the only one who would have done so. But what did Mrs. Görres say? This is something one does not ask others but can only ask oneself.

You and I would perhaps not commit murder, as Cain does. But the starting point is the same for all of us. Someone else gets the job which we would have liked to have. Someone is publicly recognized, we are not. We are being turned away, rebuffed, rejected. These are all things that happen every day, and have happened in your life as in mine. The question is not, whether it happens, the question is: If it happens, how do we deal with it?

The first eleven chapters tell the truth about us human beings not in the sense that they intend to be accurate reports on the development of humankind at the time. What we read here, the creation of people, the expansion of life, the development of culture, like cattle breeding or farming, have taken thousands of years. This story about Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel and Noah are not important because they relate when something happened, but because they intend to relate what and who we humans truly are. This is, indeed, what we are, could be the heading of each paragraph we read here.

We should not say: What an impossible person Cain is, but we should say, I could, at any time, be just like Cain. When the atrocities in the Balkan war became public, many asked themselves anew, how people can be so cruel. I have been involved with a few victims, but also offenders, and must admit, these were people like me, who have, under certain circumstances, lost all values and acted solely as avengers. That could and can happen to us, too, when we open the door to sin, drop all inhibition thresholds and allow, without consideration, our true instincts to run free.

Erich Kästner wrote in his poem “About the Development of Mankind”

*Once upon a time, these guys crouched in trees,  
hairy and with nasty visages.  
Then out of the jungle they were lured,  
and the world was covered with asphalt and buildings  
30 stories high.  
There they now sat, escaped from the fleas,  
in centrally heated rooms.  
There they now sit by the telephone.  
And reigning is still the same tone  
as in those days in the trees.*

We have not evolved much since Cain killed Abel. This is the sad truth. We think that we have produced and achieved wonders, but the killer instinct has remained the same, even though we have tamed it somewhat and do not simply kill someone because he annoys us. We have found more subtle ways to repay others. But is this right? Should we not, according to this text, act in an alternative manner, which is also written in this text, which is, unfortunately, seldom part of a sermon, because we are, first of all, only dismayed, because Cain is such a miserable type, and therefore the other is overlooked?

Everything depends on the question, which Cain, after killing Abel, answers evasively: *Where is your brother Abel?* Where – is – your – brother – Abel? Answer: “I don’t know! Why should I take care of him! Why should Abel be important to me, even though he is my brother?”

Five years ago tomorrow, 3000 people died in the World Trade Center, an event which totally changed the lives of all people in North America, in Europe, but more so in Afghanistan and Iraq. Everything began, as I understand it, when this same question, which God asks here, was answered in the very same way as Cain did. What has Abel to do with me? – When the Taliban and Muslim terrorists and as a reaction to this, the western world tried to kill each other, all that has to do with this question, how both sides answer the question, where is your brother Abel.

It is about the concept, that God has actually intended mankind as a group which takes care of each other. Which asks with caring and honesty and full of interest: Where is Abel, what does he do and how does he actually do? God intended us to regard each other as brothers and sisters, as family. The story of Cain and Abel is not that of a person murdering a totally unfamiliar victim. It is a family story. In God’s view it is always a family story, when his children, for whatever reasons, are killing each other.

We shall be the keepers particularly of our brothers and sisters, that is the very point! You see, my natural brother is different from me. He has different interests and abilities, he looks different and is much taller than I am. So what? Our siblings in this world look different, have a different faith, lead different lives, but does that matter, when we all struggle with the same basic problems, namely that we all, except a few lunatics, want to live in peace, want to see our children grow up protected, provided for and having enough to eat. We want to love and be loved, have a place to sleep and don’t want to be worried about what to eat and drink tomorrow. And we must remind ourselves again and again, that, as different as we are in God’s family, we actually all want the same. And if we are in a position where we have everything that we need, we should help others. *Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground.* We don’t just live side by side, we are dependent on each other. And the more differentiated our world is, the more dependent we are on each other. Indeed, the evil-doers take advantage of that, because they know when they injure one member, all others will suffer. However, they forget that, in the end, they themselves will suffer; you can measure this against the number of victims in Iraq and Afghanistan daily.

How is your brother Abel? That is the question which Jesus has formulated anew, by culminating it in connection with the parable of the good Samaritan, in answering the question of the scribe, who is my neighbour, and letting him first quote the Old Testament: “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself.” – After telling him the story of the man – you know it – who had been robbed and finally been brought back to health through the care of the hated foreigner, the Samaritan, Jesus asks once again: “Who do you think proved to be the neighbour of him who had fallen among the robbers?” – And the Pharisee answered: “The one who showed mercy on him.” And then Jesus says: “Go and do likewise.”

In a world full of brothers and sisters, God’s question to everyone of us remains. *Where is your brother Abel?* In the end, we will not be measured for the creativity of our excuses, but to what extent we have been merciful. Amen.

***And the Peace of God, which passes all understanding, may keep our hearts and minds in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.***