

Sunday 12th September 2021

Genesis 4:17-26 God and Civilisation: Presence, Partnership and Promise

Hi Everyone, It's good to be with you this morning. For those of you who don't know me, I'm Jean Palmer and I'm an assistant minister here at Holy Trinity Richmond. It's my privilege this morning to open God's Word with you. Let's pray.

Prayer

Lord, may your Word be alive and active, a two-edged sword that goes deep into us and transforms us so that we may live as your people in our world today. Amen.

Intro

This morning we are continuing our series on the early chapters of Genesis. We have seen how God, the Creator, formed and filled the Earth as a home for humankind; how men and women were made in His image and given the responsibility to people the Earth and act as God's stewards in tending and caring for it. But we have also seen how things began to go wrong when humanity chose to go its own way and disobey God. Then last week John shared with us how damaged relationships resulted in Cain killing his brother Abel. This morning we are going to look at what happened to Cain and his descendants in their land of banishment, and as we do so we will look at God's presence, God's partnership and God's promise.

Genesis 4:17: God's Presence

Cain has become a fugitive and a wanderer in the Land of Nod – a place of aimless drifting. He has lost the security of home and family; he has to work even harder to get a living from the land; and all the time he has this sense of separation from God. Cain decides to replace what he has lost. Instead of being a restless wanderer he starts a family and builds a city to live in which he names after his son 'Enoch.'

Now, the word 'city' can be used for a settlement of any size that has fortified buildings so it represents a place of safety or refuge.. Even though God has put his mark on Cain as a guarantee of divine protection, it seems that Cain doesn't trust God – he wants to construct his own form of protection - so he builds himself a city. Maybe Cain also wants to make a name for himself – a memorial – something solid and permanent in the land of drifting.

Derek Kidner suggests that this “gives a first taste of a self- sufficient society which is the essence of what the NT calls the 'world.'” – Humanity is seeking to build a world independent of God.

But before we judge Cain too harshly maybe we should ask ourselves: What do we construct to keep us safe, to give us security? I'm not sure how you would answer that: maybe financial security is important to us and, along with that, job security. For some it may be about our social media image, and for many of us it is having family and friends around us. Facing uncertain times, as we are during Covid, having good support systems around us can be really important. But, I want to tell you the story of someone I heard about recently. They were an in-demand speaker at Christian gatherings and had recently written a potentially best-selling book. Then Covid hit. All revenue from meetings dried up; the potential book sales didn't materialise and they were left with mounting bills and little income. It's the sort of situation many

business owners are now facing. For this particular person it drove them back to a fresh realisation of their total dependence on God. You know, often it's only when the bottom drops out of our world that we find ourselves going deeper into dependence on God, our Creator, protector and provider.

David Atkinson says this: "When, as with Cain, we are separated from God, our world is one of constantly searching anxiety." As St Augustine said, "*You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.*"

I find this is a lesson I have to learn many times over as I have to choose to rest in the deep peace that only Christ can give.

Genesis 4:18-22 God's Partnership

As we move on to the next part of our story, I want us to think about where is God in all of this? What has happened to his plan to create humankind in his image and his commission to them to fill the Earth and subdue it – to bring it under God's sway?

One of the most amazing things about this story in Genesis is the way God acts in grace towards Cain and his descendants.

God has not abandoned Cain. Not only is he under God's protection, he is active and he is creative as are his descendants. Their lives have value and purpose. In fact, in the seventh generation from Cain, Lamech's children, are singled out as the ancestors who bring a new level of sophistication to human society.

Jabel is the father of those who live in tents and raise livestock, probably nomadic herdsman rather than looking after the family flocks of sheep and goats as Abel did.

Jubal is the father of those who play stringed instruments and pipes. We don't have a corresponding ancestor for artistic expression but the name of Lamech's daughter, Naamah, means lovely or graceful so beauty is recognised as being an important aspect of our lives.

Lastly Tubal-cain is described as engaged in metal working with bronze and iron, the beginnings of technology.

Interestingly, unlike Babel, nowhere does God state his opposition or displeasure at Cain's city and its development so I think we can assume that these are good things and part of the fulfilment of God's creation purposes. God partners with us so that even through Cain, and in a society that seems to be out of touch with God, art, culture and technology flourish. God's commission to humankind – the creation mandate - continues to operate.

Theologians call this common grace by which they mean the undeserved blessings which God extends to all humankind. Louis Berkhof writes: "[Common grace] curbs the destructive power of sin, maintains in a measure the moral order of the universe, thus making an orderly life possible, distributes in varying degrees gifts and talents among men, promotes the development of science and art, and showers untold blessings upon the children of men."

Our God is a God of mercy and grace.

But we would be foolish if we painted too rosy a picture. All is not well outside of the garden. Music can refresh our spirits, as it did with King Saul; it can inspire us to worship God; or it can become an idol, an end in itself; a divisive force even in church settings! We are all too aware of the benefits of technology like zoom but also aware of the damage social media can do. Metal working can produce useful tools or lethal weapons.

Indeed, cities themselves, certainly in our modern context, can be places of opportunity, excitement and excellence but also places of exploitation, greed, superficiality and unhealthy competition where sin can flourish. It is the latter that typifies 'Babylon' in Revelation 18, a doomed city with no future. We are told to "Come out," which doesn't mean a mass exodus to the countryside but an inner separation which resists the values of 'Babylon' and lives by the values of the city of God. Remember in OT times Jerusalem contained the palace of God's anointed king and the temple where God met with his people. This is the earthly blueprint for the New Jerusalem.

Lamech.

In Genesis 4 despite the veneer of civilisation, sin is still at work, and we find that exemplified in Lamech. Lamech has been described as Cain on steroids. Not content with God's intent for a man to have one wife, he takes two: the first recorded instance of polygamy. Lamech is deliberately flouting God's way. David Atkinson says that whereas Cain had succumbed to sin, Lamech exults in it." Listen to the poem or song he sings to his wives:

²³ Lamech said to his wives, "Adah and Zillah, listen to me; wives of Lamech, hear my words. I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me.

²⁴ If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times."

Is that over-reaction or what? Later in the OT we will read God's principal of commensurate justice – let the punishment fit the crime: an eye for an eye, and so on. Lamech goes way beyond this. His response is not about justice but vengeance for a personal slight. It is the absolute opposite of Jesus' command to forgive seventy times seven.

And I wonder what Lamech's wives thought as they listened to this poem? Were they impressed- or were they afraid? As I read these words I shivered. I thought of all those in oppressive or abusive relationships and I know I would be very wary of upsetting a man like Lamech. Moreover, I wonder how his neighbours felt about him and his tendency to take the law into his own hands.

From a wider perspective, it raises quite basic issues about how we order society. How is justice served if we allow the powerful and the violent to rule while others live in constant anxiety and fear. I challenge myself is God calling me to do more than pray "Your kingdom come?" What would it look like for me, for us, to "Seek first the kingdom of God and his ways of justice?" How can we partner with God in this?

Genesis 4:25-26: God's promise

Praise God this chapter does not end with Lamech!

In the last two verses two important events are recorded. The first is the birth of Seth to Adam and Eve. Seth means the appointed one, and Eve actually says "God has appointed me another seed." Maybe she is remembering Genesis 3:15 and the promise of a seed that will crush the serpent's head. Eventually Jesus, the seed, will triumph over all principalities and powers not through the violence of Lamech but through the self-giving love of the one who died on the cross for us.

Meanwhile in v26 we see the green shoots of that promise as we read that in the time of Enosh, Seth's son, people began to call on the name of the Lord. The writer actually identifies God as Yahweh – the God who will later reveal his name at the time of the exodus (Exodus 6:3). He is the God who has been active in his people's history from the very beginning.

We don't really know what 'calling on the name of the Lord,' looked like, but at its heart is the thought this is the one I am going to call on to help me. it's a choice to trust and follow this God and not another. As Joshua said: "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." (Joshua 24:15)

Lessons

So as we conclude what can we draw from this passage that will help us live godly lives in our own generation? What might God's presence; God's partnership and God's promise look like for us?

1). God's Presence.

Like the sun that is always there above the clouds shining down on us, God is always present with us. He was with Cain and his descendants in the land of restless wandering, as they sought to make sense of life by building cities and developing music, culture and technology. And he is ever-present with us.

At times I feel a bit like Cain adrift in the wilderness. With Covid the future has taken an unexpected turn and we are no longer sure of where we are or where we are going. But God our Creator is still present to provide a home and shelter for us wherever we roam. He longs to be the security we are looking for, our place of rest.

2). God's Partnership

We have the privilege of partnering with God, to use our gifts and talents to extend his kingdom rule in the world around us. It does have to be a big Ernest Rutherford type contribution to nuclear physics (!), we can use our gifts and talents to enrich the lives of those around us in many different ways. Like the unknown person who left a beautiful bunch of flowers on our letterbox during lockdown. Thank you!

And we are also called to be salt and light, to bring checks and balances to a world without God; to work for a society that is fair and just.

3). Lastly God's Promise or hope.

In Genesis 1 we read "God said: 'Let there be ... and there was.'

God's promises are as sure and certain as those words spoken at the very beginning. The promise of Genesis 3 was fulfilled in the coming of Jesus. He has restored our relationship with God. Jesus is our Immanuel, God with us, who has said he will never leave us or forsake us; he is with us always to the end of the age. And God the Holy Spirit who hovered over creation continues to hover over us and is at work in us and through us.

But there's more! Finally we shall see the Creator bringing in his new creation as the old creation passes away. In Revelation 21 we read:

Revelation 21:2-4 (NIV2011)

² I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.

³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.

⁴ 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

What a promise; what a hope - let's celebrate it not just at funerals but as the foundational truth of our daily lives. Amen.

Usually I like to end with a prayer but today I would like us to read together Psalm 107: 1-9

Psalm 107:1-9 (NIV2011)

¹ Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever.

² Let the redeemed of the LORD tell their story— those he redeemed from the hand of the foe,

³ those he gathered from the lands, from east and west, from north and south.

⁴ Some wandered in desert wastelands, finding no way to a city where they could settle.

⁵ They were hungry and thirsty, and their lives ebbed away.

⁶ Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress.

⁷ He led them by a straight way to a city where they could settle.

⁸ Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for mankind,

⁹ for he satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things.

May that be our testimony today and in the week ahead.