

The Murder Of Abel

A Sermon by the Rev. Patrick A. Rose

"Then the LORD said to Cain, 'Where is Abel your brother?' He said, 'I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?' And He said, 'What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood cries out to Me from the ground.'" (Gen. 4:9-10)

There are some people who go out of their way to avoid organized religion. Their feeling is that the history of organized religion has been dominated by hypocrisy -- dominated by people who profess to act in the name of the Lord, and in the name of love, but in reality are mean, spiteful, hateful and cruel. It may be that those who reject organized religion are being overly sensitive, and completely unrealistic. People are people, after all, and one cannot expect people, even people in the church, to be perfect. All too often, though, the history of religion is a sad and sordid story, filled with examples of people who went out of their way to be spiteful, hateful, cruel, and even sadistic. Atrocious wars, the torture of heretics, and even genocide: the sorry history of organized religion cannot be explained away simply in terms of human imperfection.

Now this does not mean that there have not also been, throughout the centuries, countless examples of good, kind and caring people. Religion at times indeed brings out the best in people. This, after all, is its purpose. Sometimes, though, it seems to fail in this purpose. Sometimes it can seem as if religion brings out, not the best, but the worst in people. This is nothing new. It has been this way for a very long time. Right near the beginning of the Old Testament, in the fourth chapter of Genesis, there is a story of how the sphere of worship, the sphere of thanksgiving, is shattered by cruelty, by hatred, and by murder. Both Cain and Abel brought offerings to the Lord. Abel's offering is accepted by the Lord. Cain, though, had not done well, and his offering is not acceptable to the Lord.

In response, Cain murders his brother Abel. While they are talking in the field, Cain rises up and kills him. Cain pretends not to know what happened to his brother. "Then the Lord said to Cain, 'Where is Abel your brother?' And he said, 'I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?' (Gen.4:9). But the Lord, of course, knew what had happened. "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood cries out to Me from

the ground" (Gen. 4:10). It is a horrifying story -- of a man who not only murders his brother, but does so because the Lord accepts his brother's offering and not his own. In essence it is a story about the Lord's church, and about what can go so tragically wrong amongst people who have gathered to worship the Lord. The story of Cain and Abel can be explained on a number of different levels. In general, though, it is a story about the relationship between faith and charity in the Lord's church.

Abel, we are told, stands for charity (AC 366) or heavenly love (AE 317:3). More specifically, he stands for good conjoined with truth (ibid.). When people are in good conjoined with truth, when they live a life of good according to the truth, then all is well in the church. Abel's offering is pleasing to the Lord (Gen. 4:4). Cain, on the other hand, stands for the things of faith separated from charity and love (AC 366). Truth is meant to be the "keeper" of charity (AC 372). It is meant to serve by leading a man into charity. When, though, a person believes that he doesn't need to live his religion, when he separates the truth he believes from the way he actually lives, there is then something tragically wrong. He does not allow the truth to lead him towards love and charity. And, without these, without love and charity, there is nothing to stop the hells from dominating a person's mind. As the Lord told Cain in refusing his offering, "If you do not do well, sin lies at the door" (Gen. 4:7). Or, as we read in the Arcana, "when there is no charity there are unmercifulness and hatred, consequently all evil. Sin in general is called the 'devil,' who, that is, his crew of infernals, is ever at hand when man is destitute of charity" (AC 364). This is why religion so often seems to fail.

This is why the history of organized religion is filled with so many examples of mankind at its very worst. When people do not live their religion, when they think the truth, but do not obey it, then there is nothing to keep them from evil. There is nothing to keep the hells from entering. When people do not live their religion, they in effect open the doors for the hells. And then good, and good affections, are destroyed or murdered within the church (AE 817:3). Cain rises up and murders his brother Abel. It is not that religion itself has failed. It is people who have failed. They have failed to live what they know, and so have opened themselves up to the terribly destructive power of the hells. And the hells are indeed destructive, destructive beyond belief, for they are filled with hatred, hatred which breathes destruction towards all that is good and true. Now none of us likes to think about hell. We don't like to think about evil spirits, and the misery they can bring. Part of us would

like to pretend that hell simply didn't exist. Hell, though is real. One of the reasons that Swedenborg was allowed to look into the hells, and to describe what he saw, was so that we might know that the hells are indeed very real, and very destructive (TCR 312e). We are told that "all who are in hell are in hatred against the Lord, and thus in hatred against heaven." (AE 1013:2). When those in hell merely hear the Lord mentioned, they are inflamed with anger, both against the Lord, and against all who love Him.

They hate the Lord, and they hate those who love the Lord, and they are perpetually trying to destroy all who are in heaven (AE 693:4). Those in hell are, in essence, murderers. Hell is said to be the source of murder itself (AE 1013:2). Because hell is, in essence, hatred against the Lord, it seeks the destruction of all that is truly human, all that comes forth from the Lord. Hell seeks the destruction of human life, and it burns with the lust of destroying human souls. And the reason that the devils of hell seek to murder and destroy human life is not primarily because they hate their victims, but because they hate the Lord (AE 1013:4). This is why Cain murdered his brother Abel. It was because Cain was angry with the Lord for not accepting his offering. And so Cain attacked his brother Abel, simply because the Lord had accepted Abel's offering. It was spiteful; it was completely callous and vicious. It was hateful. And it portrays perfectly the way in which the hells, out of a hatred for the Lord, seek to murder and destroy all that is good and true. This is what was involved in Cain shedding the blood of Abel. The blood of a person stands for his life, life that is not his but is of the Lord with him. And it stands for charity, because charity does not originate in person, but is in him from the Lord (AC 1010:1). The hells seek to destroy charity. They seek to destroy love. From hatred they seek in myriads of ways to destroy all that comes from the Lord. And the many ways in which the hells seek to do this is represented in the blood of Abel. In the Hebrew the word for blood is plural: "What have you done?" the Lord said.

"The voice of your brother's bloods cries out [or shrieks out] to Me from the ground. "Bloods" stand for the many terrible things which flow forth from hatred (AC 374:3). Indeed hatred is, we are told, "the fountain of all iniquities." (AC 374:2). Now once we realize that the hells are in hatred against all those things which come from the Lord, it becomes obvious why the hells are always trying to infest the Lord's church. They hate the church. They would like to destroy or murder the life of the church,

because the church is from the Lord. And this is why, as a protection against the hells, the Lord has commanded those in His church that they shall not kill. "Thou shalt not kill." It is a commandment which we might assume is addressed primarily to those outside of the church, perhaps as a law for the civil state. After all, it is almost unimaginable that somebody in the church would commit murder. And yet the Ten Commandments have been given by the Lord specifically for His church. They have been given specifically for those who seek to follow the Lord. And so it is that those in the church are commanded by the Lord not to kill. When the Lord was in the world, He explained clearly what He meant by this commandment: "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder,' and whoever murders shall be in danger of the judgment. But I say to you, That whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, 'Raca!' shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, 'You fool!' Shall be in danger of the hell of fire" (Matt. 5:21-22). The Lord was teaching that unjustified anger, hatred and revenge were also forms of murder. He was teaching that there are far more ways of feeling hate, and there are far more ways of expressing hate, than by actually taking the physical life of another human being. Probably one of the most common ways of killing others is by slandering and defaming them. If we hate or despise someone, and so try to destroy his reputation, try to destroy his image in the eyes of others, then this is a form of murder (AE 1012:3). And if we do this, if we allow ourselves to act from spite, from hatred, then we are opening the door to the hells.

"Hatred," we are told, "constitutes hell with man" (AE 1015:3). It need not be this way. Certainly it need not be this way within the church. We do not need to allow ourselves to act hatefully and vengefully. We do not need to talk spitefully and contemptuously about others behind their backs. If we do, then in a sense we shed blood, for we are acting destructively towards charity -- charity which is, in many ways, the very lifeblood of the church. We do not need to spill blood and so open this doorway to hell. And it is most certainly a doorway to hell. Each of us, at some point in our lives, has experienced hatred -- the desire to really hurt some other human being. It is a dangerous desire, for it burns within the heart. It has a tendency to burn with a consuming fire -- eating away inside us -- destroying all happiness and peace. This is hell. It is hell-fire itself. And to the degree to which we allow ourselves to be consumed by anger, or hatred, or revenge, to that degree we bring

misery upon ourselves and upon those we associate with. It is a way in which the misery of hell enters the church of the Lord on earth. The Lord's church on earth has been provided so that we might be led to heaven. The truths of His church have been given so that we might live them, and so come into the life of charity and love.

The church is to be the gateway to the spiritual love of heaven itself. And this is something wonderful, something precious, something holy. It is something to protect, something to cherish. And this is why it is so very important that we remember the commandment of the Lord not to kill, not to hate, not to be hurtful. It is important, not only for our own sakes, but for the sake of the Lord's church itself. When the people of the church do not live their religion, then, in the words of the Lord to Cain, "sin lies at the door" (Gen. 4:7), and the hells can be very close indeed. But the opposite is also true. When the people of the church do live their religion, then the gates of hell cannot prevail (Matt. 16:18). When people live their religion, then heaven itself draws close to the church, and the Lord can bless His church with love. How can the people of the Lord's church come into heavenly love? They come into it by receiving it from the Lord. Spiritual love is not something we produce within ourselves. It is not something we attain simply by willing it to be so. Love, and charity, come from the Lord. Charity is likened to the life-blood of the body (AC 1010:1). And the Lord will give us this life of charity provided only that we obey His commandments, and do not allow hatred to destroy this life. If we shun what is hateful, then the Lord will bless us with love. As we read in *Apocalypse Explained*: "So far as one shuns murders, and thus shuns deadly hatreds and revenges that breathe slaughter, so far the Lord enters with mercy and love" (AE 949:3). Or, as it is said in *Doctrine of Life*, "In proportion as any one shuns murders of every kind as sins, in the same proportion he has love towards the neighbor" (Life 67). And so it is that we need to shun murder as a sin. Murder includes all forms of enmity, hatred and revenge. And these must be recognized and shunned as sins -- as evils against the Lord Himself. When we act with enmity, when we act from hatred, we might imagine that we are acting only against our fellow human beings. It involves more than this, though. To act in this way is not only an evil against other people. It is also an evil against the Lord. That is what a sin is. Sin is an evil directed against the Lord. And to act hatefully, to act from revenge, is to attack the very love and charity that come from the Lord Himself. This is why we must shun what is hateful and hurtful. We must live our religion. We must act charitably in all our

dealings with one another. Only if we take care to act fairly and justly towards one another can the Lord dwell amongst us. Only then can His church truly be with us. Only then can He bless us, and bless His church, with mercy, with kindness and with love. Amen.