

Gen 4:1-16

We are beginning again. We have had the whirl of High HolyDays, Sukkot, Simchat Torah when we completed one cycle of Torah readings and began another, but after the celebration, after the party, after the big launch, there is always a moment when life just has to begin again. In some ways today is the first day of the rest of the year.

We are celebrating lots of new beginnings today. Kezia Kennedy has started primary school this term. The thing about starting school is that on the first day it can be a great adventure. But the important thing is that you go in the second day and the day after that. And then pretty much every day for the next fourteen years. It's a huge threshold. We all have these big transitions in life, starting school, having a baby... Joseph Wareham has had his very first birthday this week – and luckily for him, this special event is going to happen every year from now on. I lost my mother a couple of weeks ago and after the funeral and the shiva week, that moment comes when ordinary life begins again. Different. Transformed. Life's never the same again once you have a child, start school or lose your mum, but life does nevertheless continue, in a new routine. That's the kind of new beginning that Shabbat Bereishit, the Shabbat of Beginning, marks – it's not quite back to normal, because we have hopefully

been transformed by our experiences over the past month. It's the beginning of life renewed, as we start afresh.

And our very first reading is a huge sweep of pre-history – five and a half chapters beginning with the Creation of the World, through to the creation of humans, Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, through to the birth of Noah many generations later.

But this year our reading today is concerned with the story of Cain and Abel, Adam and Eve's children, the first human beings to be born in the bible.

It's a very well-known story: Cain, the older, is a farmer; Abel, whose name means breath, is a shepherd. They both make offerings to God, God prefers Abel's, and Cain, in a fit of jealousy, commits the first murder in the Torah and kills his brother. It's a dark story. But the family is not always a place of sweetness and light.

Something I realised when I had my second child is that when you have your second, something else gets born too – a sibling. The second child also turns it's older sibling into a brother or sister and so a new relationship is forged – a relationship that the parents cannot always control. The moment the second child is born, so is the potential for sibling rivalry. We are programmed to love our parents but the relationship with our siblings is always more complicated. We have to work at it. We have choices about whether to work with them or fight them. And in a way, particularly for children, their

relationship with their sibling is their first prototype for friendship – a relationship with someone who isn't their parent, not an extension of oneself, but in a sense, other.

Of course Cain and Abel are not well parented – who is, in Torah? It's a manual of how not to do it! Adam and Eve are pretty absent. God, acting in a pseudo-parental role, favours Abel's work and is then surprised that Cain is upset.

A very anthropomorphic God says to Cain: You still did well to make the offering. If you stay this angry, Sin is crouching at the door, lapetach chatat rovetz. I love that image of sin crouching at the door – it's sometimes translated as a demon, squatting at the entrance to your house waiting to see if you make bad choices. It's a source text for the rabbinic idea of the Yetzer HaRa, the evil inclination, which we all have, this ability or tendency, to make the wrong choices, to be mean, to do things which are bad for us or other people, to get angry because someone has done better than us, to be jealous of our siblings. The Rabbis thought the yetzer hara was always with us and our task, always, as agents of free will, was to combat it by doing the right thing. Something of course Cain, fails to do. We don't know why God favours Abel's offering, but it is true that some of us do just get ahead in life quicker, are more talented, find life easier than the rest of us. And that can be hard to deal with, particularly if it's your

sibling that does better than you. The issue of course, is always, how one deals with the hand that life gives you.

So Cain kills his brother and when God asks where Abel is, Cain asks, in a question that has echoed down the centuries: How should I know? Am I my brother's keeper? It's a rhetorical question and God answers with another rhetorical question – what have you done? It's so resonant because it's a reminder of our human responsibility to preserve life. We are all each other's keepers, in that we are each of us responsible for each other and if somebody is suffering then we need to know about it. The Hebrew word for keeper is Shomer, but it's from a verb that can also mean to guard, to love, to take care of, to protect. It's what you hope an older sibling would do for a younger one.

Stories in the Torah are often a lot more nuanced than we remember. Most people remember that Cain was given a mark to single him out and as a punishment cursed to wander the world for the rest of his life. But the mark of Cain is a Christian reading and one that was often used against the Jews. The word for the way in which Cain was marked is ot, which can also mean a wonder. The mark is actually a sign of mercy – it assures Cain that he will not be murdered by anyone else. Vengeance is not the outcome of this story. And wandering the earth is also a double-sided outcome. To become a nomad is certainly a punishment but wandering is also

connected to spiritual enlightenment - the Israelites in the desert, for example, are wanderers. Cain ends up building the first city and naming it after his son - perhaps he has served his time, perhaps he is sorry enough for remission.

The month of Tishrei with all its festivals ends in a couple of days and we begin to face the challenges of daily life. May we all have the strength to make the right decisions, to treat each other with love, and to begin this new cycle of life as we mean to go on.