

# **Rolheiser: We kill first with a thought, then a word, then a gun**

In the early pages of the Bible, we are given a series of stories that describe the human condition and give reasons why things are as they are. We are most familiar with the story of Adam and Eve, eating the forbidden fruit, the one we call the "original sin" story.

But that story is followed by a series of other stories, less famous, but not less enlightening. One of these is the story of Cain and Abel, supposedly the first children of Adam and Eve. That story might be recast this way:

Once upon a time, twin children were born: The first child was named Abel. He was a smiling baby, beautiful in body and in disposition. Naturally talented and gifted, everything he did pleased his parents and his teachers. He was good in school, in athletics, in music and in making friends.

Everything came easily for him. Popular and a natural leader, chosen as class president, Abel won a scholarship to a prestigious university, graduated at the top of his class, married a wonderful woman who matched his good looks and good disposition, landed a high-paying job, received a series of career promotions and won Man-of-the-Year award for his work in charity and philanthropy. He became the most respected and loved man in the community, deservedly so. The smoke from his sacrifice always rose up to heaven.

The second child was named Cain and you are that child. You were born crying, less beautiful in body and needier in disposition. Suffering from colic and skin rashes as a baby, you were not your mother's favourite.

## **CLOUD OVER YOUR HEAD**

Nothing came easy for you, neither school, nor athletics, nor music, nor making friends. Picked on and bullied on the playground, school became, at times, a nightmare but eventually you did graduate, near the bottom of the class.

Nothing you ever did pleased anyone, least of all your parents and teachers. The marriage partner of your dreams never appeared and you drifted into a marriage more numbing than life-giving.

There were no promotions or man-of-the-year awards for you. The smoke of your sacrifice somehow never seemed to go upward. Bitterness and anger began slowly to grow inside you, especially as you watched your twin brother, Abel, seemingly move so effortlessly and gracefully through life.

No one is ever shot by a gun before he is first shot by a word, and no one is ever shot by a word before he is first shot by a thought. You began to kill

Abel: "Who does he think he is? He thinks he's so talented and smart. He was born with a golden spoon in his mouth. None of what he has is deserved. He's a hypocrite, a show-off, a charlatan living inside his privileged little bubble. He understands nothing about life. It's unfair. I hate him."

With such thoughts, we kill each other just as surely as Cain killed Abel. Like Abel, that stigmatizes us. Just as Cain's contemporaries saw the blood of his murdered brother on his hands, our contemporaries see the jealousy of Cain in our eyes and hear it in our conversations.

#### **STENCH OF JEALOUSY**

There's a jealousy that murders others and people steer away from us when they smell that jealousy on us, leaving us even more lonely, more on the outside, more bitter, more jealous, more stigmatized, more alone with our anger.

But that is the human condition. All of us, unless we have been extraordinarily blessed and gifted, suffer from a "Cain-complex." We have some of the jealousy and bitterness of Cain in our hearts and we have some blood on our hands. We too, like Cain, have already killed out of jealousy and bitterness.

But recognizing this in ourselves should invite us to conversion, not discouragement. The first words out of Jesus' mouth in the Gospels are: "Repent and believe in the good news." The English translation doesn't much capture the substance of that invitation. The word that Jesus uses for "repent" is the Greek word, *metanoia*: literally, *meta* (above) and *nous* (mind).

Jesus invites us to put on a bigger mind and heart, one above our present one with all its jealousies and bitterness. The word *metanoia* also plays linguistically off the word "paranoia." To undergo *metanoia* is to become non-paranoid. In essence, Jesus' salient invitation to us might be rendered: Become non-paranoid and believe that it is good news.

But that isn't easy to do. To surrender our distrust, our bitterness, our anger and our sense that life hasn't been fair to us, is singularly the most difficult moral and psychological demand in our lives. In the end, it isn't sexuality, greed, lack of justice, or lack of prayer and religion in our lives that block us from God and community. The real obstacle is paranoia, bitterness, distrust, our "Cain-complex."

So in the darkness of our alienation and distrust there is an invitation, perhaps the most important one in our lives: Call out for help.