15 July 2018: Said Matins
The Seventh Sunday after Trinity

Genesis 4: 2b-16; 1 John 3: 9-18

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‘Wandering’

In our first lesson this morning, we heard that, having murdered his brother, Cain was condemned to be a wanderer and a fugitive. I don’t know about you, but my immediate reaction is: well, that’s not much of a punishment, I rather like wandering! Wandering, walking aimlessly, unconstrained by time and the demands of the routines that normally bind us, sounds like a really attractive option to me. The French have a good word for it: someone who happily wanders, carefree and with all the time to watch the world go by, is called a ‘flaneur’. My French teacher used to explain it by giving the example of window shopping. There’s even a verb: ‘flaner’ – which means to stroll or saunter. So, a wanderer wanders with time to stand and stare.

Actually, my own mental picture of a wanderer is a rather more romantic one: Caspar David Friedrich’s portrait of the rugged wanderer, standing atop a mountain, wooden staff in hand, hair blowing in the wind, surveying a rolling landscape that opens out before him, limitless, beckoning, asking to be wandered. It was the picture on the front of my LP of Schubert’s Wanderer-fantasie.

Wandering, then, suggests freedom – freedom to follow one’s nose, to leave everything behind – freedom, even, to get lost. There’s a poem by Shelley which I sometimes leave as an ‘out of office’ message, when, at that blissful moment when I can close my computer and go on holiday, knowing that I don’t have to answer emails for at least a week, I can tell everyone that I am no longer here to answer; that I’m not answerable: it reads,

Away, away, from men and towns,
To the wild wood and the downs—
To the silent wilderness
Where the soul need not repress
Its music lest it should not find
An echo in another’s mind.
...
I leave this notice on my door
For each accustomed visitor:—
“I am gone into the fields
To take what this sweet hour yields;—
Reflection, you may come tomorrow,
Sit by the fireside with Sorrow.—
You with the unpaid bill, Despair,—
You, tiresome verse-reciter, Care,—
I will pay you in the grave,—
Death will listen to your stave.
Expectation too, be off!
Today is for itself enough!
Just reading it makes me long to go out into the fields and wander!

So what it is about Cain’s wandering that is a punishment? I think the answer lies in the fact that he is described not only as a wanderer but as a fugitive. He is not condemned to idle over fields without a care, but is on the run; he is not a flaneur, he is fleeing; he is not free, but enslaved. His wandering is an exile, a banishment, from friends, family and homeland. His actions have placed him outside of any community; he has cut the ties that bind and is permanently on the run, never able to rest, but with no-where to go and nowhere to seek refuge. The more you think of it, the more nightmarish it becomes. Cain’s fate is to be alienated from God.

And so, when, in our NT lesson, John tells the recipients of his letter “do not be like Cain” – what he means is not so much: ‘ do not be like Cain who murdered his brother’, but rather: ‘Do not be like Cain who hated his family and his brother’. His opposition is not so much between committing murder and not committing murder – that is beyond
our experience and is really just an extreme example of a much more basic opposition which we all do know, and which is all too familiar to us: the opposition between love and hate. The picture of Christian life which John sets before his readers is therefore one based on the defining feature of what it means to be a Christian: it’s based on the double commandment of love of God and love of neighbour. And the reason why this is absolutely fundamental he also makes clear: because God is love. To love is to belong to God; to hate is be separated from Him; to love is to act in accordance with God’s will; to hate is to oppose and frustrate that will; to love is to act towards others in compassion, to hate is to act in selfish disregard of others. The model for Christian life - a life of loving, compassionate self-giving - John tells us, is set before us by Christ, who died for us, so that we might be saved.

The contrast could not be more stark, then: Christ’s loving self-giving, even to the point of death, for those who deserve nothing other than punishment; and Cain’s hateful self-interest, even to the point of murder, the murder of someone who had done nothing to deserve punishment.

Where does this leave the wanderer? The idea of Christian life as a journey, or a pilgrimage, in which the creature is turned towards their Creator, in longing and desire to return to the union which they enjoyed before they fell away from Him in sin; before they got lost in the barren desert of self-interest; before they were cast out of Eden into the wilderness of life in the world, is a common one in Scripture. Adam and Eve are cast out of Paradise to suffer hard labour; the Israelites are cast out of the promised land into exile in the desert; the Psalms are full of songs of longing and desire to return to Jerusalem, the promised land. Early Christians, especially those who were subject to persecution, understood themselves as resident aliens, pilgrims in a foreign land, wanderers, with no lasting home in the world. The difference is that, unlike Cain, these wanderers are not fugitives; they are not fleeing from God in hatred, but journeying through the world towards him, drawn by longing love. Their wandering, if it is good wandering, is motivated and inspired by God, who is love, a love demonstrated in His death on the cross, and breathed into them by His Holy Spirit.

And so it is for us. We may be wanderers, but because of God’s continuing faithfulness, we are not fugitives, lost and condemned to permanent exile; rather we are freed by his saving death and the inspiration of his Holy Spirit, to wander towards Him; to be drawn by his love and guided by his grace. Far from being alienated from God, we find in him a safe refuge and shelter in our wanderings. As the Psalmist puts it in the Psalm we heard
this morning: ‘Deliverance for the righteous comes from the Lord, their refuge in time of trouble. The Lord will help keep them safe from the wicked; he will save them because they seek shelter in Him’. The righteous person is therefore not one who has reached their goal, or who is immune from suffering, but one who, in the midst of suffering, and in the midst of wandering, seeks shelter in God, their refuge.

There is also a sense in which our wandering isn’t always a matter of following a direct path to a set goal; it includes allowing ourselves to go off track, to follow our nose, to get lost and find ourselves again. All of this is possible because of our faith that we will not remain lost but will be found by the one who loves us and keeps us safe. This is the freedom which God’s love affords; let us embrace it and become true and faithful wanderers, heading towards the heavenly Jerusalem.