

The Fifth Sunday of Easter

James 1:16-21

Once again, at first sight, it might seem that our Easter Epistle is not all that Easterly, not all that festive; which might seem somewhat odd, since we are in the midst of the great festival that supposedly celebrates the resurrection of our Lord Jesus, and thus, to celebrate our salvation.

Instead, again, it seems, we hear instructions on how to behave, rather than encouragements to rejoice in our salvation. We hear the admonition: *Let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath*; and this admonition becomes rather severe, does it not, as it is followed by the motivation: *for the wrath of Man does not produce the righteousness of God*. The implication seems to be that if we are too quick to anger, it is actually an *obstacle* to the righteousness of God, does it not, that is: an obstacle to us being righteous and right with God, and as such, an obstacle to our salvation.

And then it gets even more unpleasant, and almost insulting, in fact: *lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness*. The implication seems to be not only that we are actually engaged in filthiness as it is, and lots of it, but also overflowing in wickedness. Not much to rejoice about here, is there?

Once again, though, as we listen into what is being said, we will hear that there is more to it than what immediately meets the eye; or rather, perhaps, the ear, as it were.

Clearly, however, the admonitions we hear to be *swift to hear* and *slow to speak* and *slow to wrath*, and to *lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness*, they are found in Holy Scripture, and so they do represent the command of God, His will for us, and how we owe it to Him to behave. So let us, by all means, hear them.

Let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath. for the wrath of Man does not produce the righteousness of God.

Now, what does it mean, to be *swift to hear*? Well, we certainly know what the opposite is; and if we do not, we learn from what we hear today, that being *swift to hear* goes with being *slow to speak*.

There are those who are so swift to speak that you can never tell them anything, let alone *teach* them; nor can you ever get an answer out of them, that is: you can, but not to your question, for before you are done asking anything, they are way into volunteering a multitude of answers.

Obviously that kind of conversation is usually not all that fruitful; for that reason alone, there is much to be said for being *swift to hear*.

There is more to it, though. For as we hear it, being *swift to hear* also goes with being *slow to anger*.

Some of us know the kind of people, also, who do not bother to hear what you say, not so much because they do not *care* what you might have to say, but rather because they assume that they already know, and also already know that what you have to say is something offensive and wrong. Before you are done saying what you wanted to say, you are exposed to a barrage of accusations and explanations as to exactly why you are wrong, and a bad person. And to explain yourself is an exercise in futility, chasing your own tail, for they have already made their judgement as to what evil you are up to, and that judgement is final. Otherwise they would have to admit to having been wrong about something, and we cannot have that, can we? Well, they cannot. Now, a conversation with a such person is not all that fruitful, either. As James, servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ writes it: *the wrath of Man does not produce the righteousness of God*. Such behaviour really is an *overflow of wickedness*, as is also mentioned in what we hear today. It is either the overflow of an evil attitude of hatred and resentment, or of insecurity, the fear of not being perfect, which is born out of an ungodly desire to be like God in one's own mind. Nothing good comes from that kind of behaviour, either, or from the attitude that breeds it. It does much harm in congregations. But the real tragedy is that the person to whom such behaviour is what comes naturally is a person who really needs help, but refuses to accept help from anybody, from other Christians, and from his or her Pastor, and from God, for to accept help would be to admit to not being God myself!

There is so much more to being *swift to hear*, though. For how can one even be *swift to hear* to begin with? Hearing depends on there being something to hear, does it not? Well, it does. So when it comes to hearing, the ball is not really in your court; is it? Before you can hear, somebody must speak. And that is exactly the point.

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, James writes, servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning. Of His own will He brought us forth by the Word of Truth, that we might be as a first fruits of His creatures.

God has spoken; and God speaks.

And with His Word, every good gift and every perfect gift comes down from the Father of lights. By His Word of Truth we are born anew as good and perfect, as the beginning of His new creation and His heavenly Kingdom.

For His Word of Truth is the Word of His salvation, by which we, poor and miserable sinners as we are, receive full and complete forgiveness for all our sins and shortcomings, all *filthiness* and *wickedness*, as James writes about it, so that we shall not perish and die for ever in His judgement but rather live and be with Him for ever in the fullness of His goodness and His glory; and this out of His goodness and mercy alone, and for no other reason whatsoever, and at the most terrible cost to Himself, the bitter sufferings and death of His Beloved, the Son of God, who is Himself God from eternity.

He came to us from His heavenly home in glory, to suffer with us and for us a lifetime in this world of suffering and sorrow and sin, to live for us sinners the life that we owe it to Him to live, free from all filthiness and wickedness, in full and complete love and obedience to the Father. Much more, and so much more, He had Himself baptised with the Baptism of sinners to take upon Himself the sin of all sinners and bear it for us, and His own judgement against it. And having taken upon Himself the sin of all sinners He had Himself crucified, cursed and condemned by God for all sin, all ungodliness and impurity.

And He is risen from death and is again in His glory as God. For so far did His righteousness outweigh our sin, His goodness our evil, that with His sufferings and death the price and penalty has been paid for all sin, in full and in abundance. And so there was no need for Him to remain in death who died for the sin of the world, nor for any who belongs to Him, any whom He will claim as His own.

And this is what He does with His Word of Truth. With the Word He has entrusted to His Church to proclaim to sinners, of the price He has paid to ransom and redeem us as His own, He claims us as His own and declares us to be free from all guilt before His judgement. And since He is the one who shall judge both the living and the dead, and since He has Himself paid the price and earned the right to declare whomever He will free from judgement and damnation, what He declares is what *goes*. Unlike the wrath of Man, the Word of His love and what His love has done for us does indeed *produce the righteousness of God*; it makes us to be righteous before His judgement, and heirs with Him to His heavenly Kingdom and His eternal life.

His Word of Truth is the Word of His salvation; not only the Word *about* His salvation, rather, it is the Word in which His salvation *is*, and by which it is given to us. His Word *has the power to save your souls*, as we also hear it today that James writes it, servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, he writes. *Of His own will He brought us forth by the Word of Truth, that we might be as a first fruits of His creatures.*

By His Word of salvation we are born anew into His salvation, as the beginning of His new creation. We are cleansed in His sight from all impurity, set free from all guilt and debt. And we have begun to be *cured*, also, of the disease of sin in our nature. Unlike the wrath of Man, the love of God, which shines upon us in His Word of His love, what His love has done for us and what His love gives to us, that does *produce the righteousness of God* in us. For in His Word of His love and what His love has done for us, His love shines upon us, and shines into us, and drives out the darkness of disobedience and defiance, so that we begin to believe in Him, and find confidence in the assurance of His love. And by His living Word of love, His love lives in us, and His life, and He Himself, and works in us.

Therefore is it that James, as a servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ, admonishes us: *Therefore, lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted Word, which has the power to save your souls.*

His Word of salvation is one that *implants* itself in us; it sets root in us, and it will grow. For in His Word of salvation is His *power* of salvation, and *His own life*, who has conquered death and is risen from the dead.

His Word does come, of course, with the insulting implication that you are not God; in fact, you are not even *almost* alike to God in His goodness: you are not even *almost* perfect. Still, to submit to His Word in meekness is well worth the insult; for it also comes with the good news that you do not have to be perfect, or even almost perfect. For *every good gift and every perfect gift comes down from the Father of lights*. With His Word of Truth, all things good and glorious are given to you, freely and for nothing. So hear it, and take it to heart, that you do not have to worry about not being perfect. And rejoice. All things good and glorious are yours. What more could you ever need?

Worthy is Christ, the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing. Amen.