

From this week's Epistle, from the Letter of St. James.

*So let every [one] be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath...* St. James 1:19b

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Those who were part of our study last year on the festivals of the Jewish calendar may remember something about the Festival of Shavuot; or the Festival of Weeks, as it's also called.

It will fall this year just two weeks from now; on the first weekend in June.

We also know it as Pentecost.

It has a two-fold significance.

First, it commemorates the giving of the Torah; the giving of the law on Mount Sinai; one of those defining moments in the life of God's people

But, just as importantly, it comes at the traditional beginning of the wheat harvest; and on that day the people were commanded to bring the *Bikkurim*; a small offering of the seven different species of plant life for which the land of Israel was praised in Holy Scripture: wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives, and dates.

Farmers would tie a reed around the first ripening fruits from each of these seven species in their fields.

And at the time of harvest, the fruits identified by the reed would be cut and gathered and placed in baskets.

The basket would then be loaded onto oxen and then sent in procession to Jerusalem.

And, once in the capital city, each farmer would present his offering to a kohen; to a priest, signifying both his gratitude for the first fruits of the field and for God's grace and protection throughout Israel's history.

It was, as I said, the offering of the first fruits; the very first of the new crop; given at the beginning of the harvest in gratitude, but also in hope that there was a larger harvest yet to come.

It doesn't take very long, if we take the time to look, to recognise that the world can be a very angry place.

So often we seek to blame someone else, even when we have no reason to blame others: and so often we seek to hurt those we blame in whatever way we can.

So, it doesn't have to be the person who makes headlines by violently taking the lives of others.

It can be anyone who chooses to ignore the facts to settle old scores; who willfully chooses to overlook the truth in the heat of battle.

Maybe it's just human nature.

Maybe it's something wired into our genes from a violent past; where hardship taught us to take whatever we needed by whatever means was at hand.

And much of the violence that we see every day is never physical.

So much of it can be emotional and psychological: using every tool in the toolbox to control and manipulate and get our way.

That's why James speaks in this week's Epistle about the Church as a kind of

'first-fruit.'

We're called to be a kind of tangible evidence that something more, that something better is on the way.

We're called to be living, breathing, walking, talking evidence to our very broken world that the way of violence and aggression and bitterness and revenge is never our best choice; that the instinctive desire to grab and take before someone else gets ahead of us is no way to live; even though the world assumes that there is no other choice.

James tells us that we are to be like that sheath of wheat and barley, those first-fruits; a sign to a world caught in the trap of constant violence and anger and abuse that there is a better way.

And that why James speaks of how we are to be 'swift to hear but slow to speak.'

Because the world will only know that there is more to life than the constant cycles of abuse and violence and anger if they see the way of patience and mercy in us.

First-fruits not of those seven species but of the seven fruits of the spirit: such as love and joy and peace; and patience and kindness and generosity and faithfulness.

And we do that not because we're better but because we are called to be witnesses of the Resurrection; as Job speaks so prophetically in this week's Lesson.

Because we know as surely as we know anything that Jesus has risen from the dead; that he has defeated once and for all time every power that threatens us.

And because he has already won that battle for us, we no longer have to fight that battle for ourselves; that we don't need to scramble and grab; or control and manipulate; because we have no real enemies at all.

Because Christ has defeated each and every last one.

That's the great truth that the world can never teach us.

So when we choose to live hopefully rather than fearfully; when we choose to live generously rather than selfishly; when we choose to live patiently and compassionately rather than bitterly and resentfully, we stand as the first-fruits of a better, more hopeful, world.

First-fruits of a resurrected world.

And when we choose to set aside our anger in favour of reconciliation; when we choose to slow down long enough to actually listen to each other, with patience and understanding, rather than just dismissing others without actually hearing what they're saying, then we show our very broken world that bitterness and anger are not our only response.

When we recognise each other not as enemies to be defeated but sisters and brothers to be loved and cared for; when we choose to set aside the weapons of hurtful words; when we choose not to respond out of fear, then we stand as witnesses to that better, more hopeful, more compassionate world.

Witnesses of a resurrected world.

By offering patience in a world where patience is all too hard to find.

As first-fruits of a whole new resurrected world.