



Maundy Thursday

Exodus 112:1-4; 11-14

John 13

Luke 22:7-38

What an evening; a perfect Occasion. The band of friends from the regions are in the great city, making it their own. A few have found the Air BnB Jesus had sorted, and carefully prepared the feast. It is so intimate, the relationships forged over three years' ministry together, and yet it is also part of the bigger Passover story. The individual and intimate is always best and warmest when there is also a sense of wider valuing and connection. The long Passover story mingles intensely with the brief individual story of Jesus of Nazareth who audaciously speaks of a new covenant. Then, Luke puts it briefly, "I come among you as one who serves," which John displays magnificently with the washing of feet. Jesus has received this beautiful ministry from Mary of Bethany and now gives it back to the fellowship. In this intense fellowship service flows in every direction. Giving and receiving are both graces. And the wine is flowing. He insists they all share the wine around before supper, only later charging another cup with the particular, vivid meaning of his blood. Indeed, unsettling as it is, on the best occasions aren't about jollity. You are able to touch on the hard and difficult things, like death and loss, with those you trust.

I wonder what the most perfect moments of fellowship you have experienced; I wonder when the love in the room, the collaboration, the sense of bigger purpose and immediate pleasure have melded together. I wonder in what kinds of gathering you've felt the atmosphere rich and lavish with meaning.

It's perfect. And in this perfection, two devastating things happen. First, betrayal is identified. The vulnerability of such intimacy *is* vulnerability. It can be abused. You don't get the intensity without the risk of hurt. And here it is. How hurtful, mean and bleak the sale of a friend looks in the intense glow of that room. When Jesus mentions betrayal, they all start to question who on earth it might be. The next moment we encounter the second disaster, and it's arguably worse. In the trusting fellowship, where service is given and received and given again, and the meal is infused with thankfulness, uttered in prayers at every course, the disciples end up bickering about who is the greatest. Instead of meal as gift, God's self as gift, each other as gift, it's suddenly all about the seating plan.

How shabby they suddenly look in the glow of that room. St Luke very clearly intends us to understand what makes for good fellowship while uncompromisingly facing us with our flaws and competitive tendencies. There is intensity, but no romance about that last supper, which became a first supper for the Church. Luke is very deft, giving us pairs, contrasts, with which to read situations. "Who is the betrayer? Then "Who is the greatest? Questions are paired, revealing in different ways the same ugly curse of rivalry. Then, greatest/youngest, leader/servant are delightfully parodying that uglier pair, showing the playfulness the fellowship will require to keep itself humble. This gospel began with the

shepherds' worship and the Magnificat's reversals. Here, the foot washing and bread and wine are keeping those reversals tumbling. Again, the twin group/individual complementarity and contrast is held with poetic balance. Notice Jesus does bless the clumsy group lavishly "You have stood by me. You will eat and drink in the kingdom" and then turning to Peter alone he gives an individual both stark warning and then personal blessing.

This then is the very imperfect place where Jesus offers us symbols with which to measure our community life thereafter. The symbols of washing, of bread and wine shared, all surrounded and infused with thanksgiving to our creator, will always be enough to recalibrate and test the health of our interaction., from church to government to community activist group to workplace or family.

It is notable that Luke attaches this meal very deliberately to the Passover lamb, and hears from Jesus the emphatic word "covenant." For the Passover lamb was not a payment for sin. It was an agreement, a pact, a mutual promise. We will share this meat in the way God describes to emphasise year after year, in prosperity or penury, in freedom or in bondage, that we are ultimately dependent on God for our human freedom and sustenance; indeed for life itself. It is a promise from God that God wants to be with us; us to be with him, and will do anything and everything to make that possible. We will see more tomorrow how that works out.

By leaving the church with this gift of symbols, he does not leave us with a manual for exclusion. It is, or should be, a permanently humbling practice which requires that, when we leave the fellowship, we can't help judging the fellowship by the fellowships we meet and participate in elsewhere. By holding betrayal and shabby competitiveness in the heart of the founding story, Luke forbids sectarianism and superiority. Rather, he opens our eyes to look for the leader/servant, greatest/youngest reversals out there in the world.

One friend, deeply hurt by the rhetorical violence done to precious partnerships by the invitation to the Lambeth Conference not being extended to same sex partners of bishops attending, felt the last straw breaking the back of her belonging to the Anglican communion. She found her way into a Birmingham opera company where all are welcome, the non-judgmental inclusion extended in every direction, ethnicity, gender, disability, and she found the mutuality she cannot find for now in an Anglican eucharist. For me, it's often our Youth Project that adjusts and judges my perspective on inclusion here around this table. The fluidity with which we need to read our practice and that of others. Indeed, the eucharist can and should sometimes clear our sight and judge the hierarchies and economic habits of weekday news and encounter.

Since that night, no meal is just a meal. Ethically ignited by the eucharist, every meal judges the political environment. Every meal is a gift from God. Every meal, even eaten alone, is a chance to celebrate interdependence and mutual service. Every meal interplays the story of each precious, flawed individual with the precious, flawed groups to which we belong. Every meal is a eucharist, strengthening us for service beyond and an occasion to which we

can bring all our thanks and needs. Every meal challenges our rivalry, by reasserting that everything is gift for which we say “thanks be to God.”

II

Good Friday

Luke Narrative

Luke 22:66-71 Religious Rivalry

One Religious rivalry is set aside, at least, as the leaders of Sadducees, whom Jesus had challenged over the reality of new life after death, and Pharisees who do believe in life after death, and enjoyed that put down, but whom he had criticised so often over oppressive religiosity and lack of compassion. They are united in their desire to be rid of Jesus. They rose “a s a body” to deal with this matter.

As the robed figures acquiesced in before the guards’ bullying, and asked their theological questions, we may wonder at two people’s discomfort. First the High Priest’s slave. Was he let off work that day after the assault last night. What was going through his mind; his heart? One of Jesus’ followers had pathetically struck out, with very bad swordsmanship, glancing off the side of his head cutting off his ear. Nasty, but not surprising. The real surprise was that the one they’d come to arrest spoke authoritatively and confidently, saying “enough” and touched him tenderly, healing his ear. Rumours of his powers were now an unquestionable reality in his life. What goes through his mind this morning? Is he more startled by the healing or the calm, authoritative pacifism? Does this linger in his life as a tale to tell at the pub, or does it glow like an ember in his heart and spark into flame again when rumours of resurrection circulate?

Then there’s the High Priest himself who witnessed the scuffle in the garden and now has to live with the knowledge that this disruptive preacher has reached into the life of one of his slaves to work somewhere in his heart he, the priest, could never touch. Did he try to rationalise it away, or did it fester and was the night time bullying and this next day’s gradually rising voice an attempt to drown out the dissonance in his heart? Was he more offended by the healing or by the calm, authoritative pacifism?

When he’s healed before, they have only focussed on the legal technicalities of breaking the sabbath. Religion was demonstrably more about status and control than about the condition of the human heart before God. “You say I am” is his response to the Messiah question. In other words, “Take responsibility for your own opinion.” Their response is to admit to each other he may indeed be the Messiah. “We have heard it from his own lips.” He is the ultimate rival. He is taking away their control and he is disappointingly, worryingly pacifist. The dissonance screeches in the head, so the volume of their self-justifications will have to be turned up.

If we feel our religious rivalry raise its ugly head, looking down on those authorities, we recall Luke's attention to Peter's interrogation by the fire last night, ending in bitter tears, letting Jesus down, was much longer than this description of the High Priest's interrogation. The murky shadow of anti-Semitism, disturbing in a political party, is yet more dreadful in the life of a church.

Religious superiority is exposed and dismantled.

PRAYER

God can you forgive your church for the horrible ironies of superiority, self righteousness or power play throughout our history? Luke knew it may happen. Unblock our ears to hear our contradictions. Alert us, when angry, that it may reveal more about us than anyone else. When ready to accuse, remind us gently of our flaws, not that we may shrink away from saying anything, but that we may listen and speak with Petrine humility that learns from its mistakes and seeks the common good.

Luke 23:1-12 Regional Rivalry

They are agile in their move from religious to secular political territory, speaking of nation, tax, and adding the trigger word "king" to the religious "Messiah" for Pilate's benefit. But the dissonance really rings out now as they speak of both "our Nation" and emperor in the same breath. So that would be the emperor claiming on all the coins to be "son of God" would it? That would be the emperor whose armies those taxes pay for would it? They then trace Jesus' journey and name the regions they feel beyond their control: Judea, Galilee, and their deepest indignance that he has reached "*even* to this place" – the city which proclaims in stone their elite status.

The legal answer is curt. No basis for accusation. The phrase "this man" objectifies him and belittles their indignance. This secular territory is uncomfortable. But there is something useful here for Pilate who can send the ragged little man to Herod as a diplomatic nod to his rival, a gesture of acknowledgement to his territorial responsibilities. If in Pilate we see a pure pragmatist, in Herod we see a narcissist. He has wanted to kill Jesus before now, but here he displays that most ugly characteristic in the powerful: a childish sense that the world is there for his entertainment. Here cares not one bit for the God Jesus' signs all point to, only for the glamour of a magic trick. It's a shallow life, moving from one novelty to the next, each giving a brief semi erotic stimulation with no meaning. This one won't play, so we'll make our own entertainment, cracking a sarcastic joke with an expensive robe. Like the unexpected unity of the rival religious groups, Jesus is the agent for accidental reconciliation between two regional rivals.

We may feel our political rivalry raise its ugly head. The careless pursuit of entertainment by narcissistic politicians is called out and always to be named and challenged. Jesus does not dignify Herod with a single word. Pragmatism is thin and dull, but at least has some kind

of purpose. Who'd be governor, having to make all those decisions, exposed to criticism from above and below? We might pray:

PRAYER

We hold before your cross political leaders and would be leaders. Show them the priceless humanity of all whom they serve. Hold before us the humanity of political leaders. Give us wisdom and honesty when faith and politics collide; heal the delusion that they are separate; make faith an agent not of rivalry, but of reconciliation.

Luke 23:13-25 Rival Solutions

It's a clever move by pragmatist Pilate to draw the crowd into the conversation, as hopefully they'll expose the disingenuous claims of the leading parties. Like a referendum, what could possibly go wrong? Was it an impulse or was it a deeper disappointment about Jesus from Nazareth who'd entered the city like a king, but now looks rather bedraggled? Barabbas at least had raised his fists. Mind you, we hear the dissonance again as the authorities have told Pilate Jesus has been stirring up the people, but now advocate the release of a rebel in his stead. But like the authorities accepting the Emperor, the crowd cry out with the very Roman suggestion of crucifixion. Rome has won hearts and minds.

Our offence at kindness, our recoil at generosity, our fear of the accusation of naivety and our annoyance at talk of peace is exposed by their cries. Maybe it's fear more than anything: fear of something in ourselves. Surges of anger and cries of accusation, the impulse to add shame to any conviction and keep working it up so often goes beyond the case in question, becoming a place to put our own disappointments and self loathing. Projection onto another, pouring blame onto someone we're jealous of, finding someone to point and screech is nearly always a feeble attempt to take attention off oneself and one's own culpability or shame. Its tabloid venom and its fleeting satisfaction are akin to Herod's search for novelty. It rarely ends well.

When there's a really clever scam reported in the news, we may often wonder what good might be done if all that ingenuity was applied to something positive. Likewise, what if the technological expertise that makes weapons were applied to environmental innovations? As we hear the crowds and tabloids cry, we can feel the energy we put into our rivalries, stoking them, feeding them. What if that energy went elsewhere? Even our most meagre sibling rivalries or work-place competitions take eye-watering amounts of emotional energy. What if the energy of our petty indignance was channelled into community building?

Two would-be saviours stand before the crowd, one offering violent revolution, the other a pacifist revolution of the heart. The volume of the cries suggest they know they are wrong, but they choose Barabbas. We think we wouldn't, we're angry about shootings in Derry. We think we'd shout for Jesus... but we have nuclear weapons.

PRAYER

We bring our resentment to your cross. We bring our disappointments. We ask you to direct their energies into something good. We pray anxiously for Derry as some there choose Barabbas once again. We admit our share in the Herodian shallowness of short term gratification, and blindness of the cost to others of our cheap pleasures. By your cross cleanse our self-deception, expose us to daring honesty and deepen our mutual recognition.

Luke 23:26-32 Rival sorrows

Jesus reflects back to the daughters of Jerusalem their compassion. Feeling with every step how the world is behaving when he is there, he wonders how much worse it might be when he is gone. He imagines a terrible cry of prayer: blessed are the barren” – a heart rending reversal of all the blessing down the ages: Sarah, Hannah, Rebecca, Elizabeth whose longing had been fulfilled. (As he writes, Luke knows the calamity that did befall Jerusalem as Rome displayed its disappointment and worked out the empire’s destructive self-loathing by destroying the city.)

That Simon of Cyrene’s name be known may suggest he became part of the fellowship. It must have been a burden, though, the memory of carrying the cross, feeling complicit in the execution, even though pressed into service. Compromised, as the whole crowd is, carrying his cross this passer by did at least give Jesus enough breath to speak those words of compassion. Compromised as we all are by any abuse or carelessness in our penal system, perhaps we can find ways of doing something to make room for compassion amidst the mess.

In a brilliant piece of radio recently, an American chef described what it was like cooking the last meals requested by death row prisoners. He had always done it carefully but, one day, the colleague whose bleak job it was to sweep out the execution chamber and the viewing room from where people watched the executions was very distressed. He asked him why and he said he was OK clearing up the needles and bloodied swabs and bodily fluids from the chamber, but in the viewing room, he’d found lipstick, tears and handprints smeared on the glass. That struck deep. The chef, thereafter resolved to cook each meal with the kind of care required if you know a person is loved. Implicated like every American citizen in the execution, at least he did something generous in the midst of it. That is, until the authorities withdrew the practice of offering a choice of last meal on death row.

Jesus having room in his heart for anyone else’s sorrow during his execution is breath taking. Simon helped make room for that. The women’s compassion does them credit, affirming all our impulsive compassion for strangers in need. Then, Jesus saying “don’t worry about me, I’m worried about you” pulls the rug from under us whenever we harbour the feeling that our sorrows are deeper or more important than anyone else’s. Every sorrow has God’s full attention.

Jesus embodies the truth that sorrow is not a matter for rivalry.

PRAYER

God, we bring to the cross the different patterned sorrows of our lives and those that seep into our life from others, the innocent and the culpable, the accidental and the cruel, the grief and the regret. Forgive us that sometimes we just don't have room for anyone else's needs, but at least free us from the tiresome indulgence of belittling their need with ours. Help us instead to trust in your compassion when ours runs low. Bless those we admire for their generosity in times of their own suffering. For they bring us your healing.

Luke 23:32-38 Rival humour

A young teenager wept at the headlines. None in particular. Just the overwhelming negativity of it all. By the time the News Quiz came on, they were still upset, saying what can we do? I pointed to the radio. "Listen to this." Political satire is crucial. It bursts bubbles of self-importance, and exposes self-justification and hypocrisy. It helps us occupy the "don't know whether to laugh or cry" space where we can face the most difficult issues. It shouts out "The emperor has no clothes on." A country with no political humour is a dangerous place.

But political satire brings its own risks: it can humiliate and belittle; it can be self-congratulatory and therefore itself hypocritical. It can nurse that most corrosive human ailment, cynicism. Rival wits are at work at the cross. The authorities and soldiers alike throw back in Jesus' face the claims of salvation. It's surely a mixture of relief and contempt. For surely he had seemed dangerously effective. Bold assertions of forgiveness had threatened to take from the religious authorities their power to manage behaviour and to exclude. It threatened the secular authorities' dependence on fear to coerce the populace. What a relief those healing hands are pinned to the cross and that mesmerising voice is wheezing for breath. Pilate works the regrettable political irritant to Roman advantage by tweeting "This is the King of the Jews" so the one man's humiliation becomes a humiliation for the whole occupied nation. Did Pilate sleep well that night, pleased with his satire, or buy a round of drinks for his PR team?

And who went home with the clothes, we may wonder. How odd the mixture of fairness, rolling dice, and callousness, doing so before the dying man. Dissonance again.

For Luke, the presence throughout this ugly process of both Jewish authorities and gentiles ensures the church cannot nurse any prejudice or superiority from either side. He will show the generous humour of Peter and Paul in preaching and Paul's writing will ring with a generous satirical tone but always drawing people towards life. Here, the satire is bitter, but Luke knows on the lips of Jesus' enemies is truth: indeed, he isn't out to save himself. He is here to save them. He is indeed a king like no other: one who serves. One who shares his people's pain. How strange the sound from this dying king's lips: not condemnation, but forgiveness.

PRAYER

We bring to your cross those who are wounded by others' wit; those in danger for cracking jokes; those manipulating public image and those desperate for influence. In the bleakest political times, keep our wit alive, yet keep it generous. Help us to see ironies, but protect us from cynicism. Let humour express and deepen our compassion.

Luke 23:39-45 Overwhelming Rivalry

What does a thief see when they look in the mirror in the mornings, I often wonder. For being a thief is to condemn oneself to deep loneliness. The furtive opportunism, the gradual wearing away of generosity in your soul, the constant looking over the shoulder. Denying yourself the satisfaction of dignified human exchange of labour for wages and wages for goods is to miss out on community, on life. What short term pleasure, you must have, everything sweet tinged with bitterness, and what gloomy haze must hover around the things you steal. Thieving is tragic. It is the most furtive kind of rivalry. Jesus is executed with two thieves. He converses with them. He attends to them, as he did to the women. The torture and humiliation is designed precisely to destroy community and engage everyone directly with Rome. Yet even hanging there, Jesus cannot help make community. It looks forlorn to passers by, but he is at once the one to whom a dying man can pour out his bitterness and another can speak of beauty and hope. Imagining paradise is defiant, to say the least. The thief who has seen his own tragic isolation reflected back whenever he went to drink water at the well at least does not blame anyone else for his predicament. No projection. No dissonance. In pain, he expresses pleasure in the very thought of paradise for someone else. He is one of the most impressive people in the New Testament. His own rivalry is overwhelmed with grace and the rivalries that put them there look mean and ridiculous as in that brief exchange he and Jesus are more alive than anyone else in the scene.

We may sing his prayer:

Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom.

Luke 23:44-49 Un-rivalled death

Having forgiven, and having shown that selflessness in pain, and having shown would be rivals are not rivals to him, he cries out in pure trust. We need not beat God any more. God is not out to beat us. Jesus un-rivals the tragedy and dies. It may be frustrating that they suddenly switch to regret, but the soldier's recognition that this was a ridiculous waste and the crowd beating their breasts is a kind of release. The self-justification has gone. It's as though they've learned something from the thief.

With the temple curtain, God's heart is torn open, our self-protections and competitiveness are torn apart, the heavens are torn open, reality is torn open as Jesus shows our rivalry with God is entirely unnecessary.

God wants to be with us, thieves, soldiers, priests, disciples, friends, would be rivals alike. He comes to meet us in our worst predicament because he wants us to be with him, and will do anything and everything to make that possible.

Friends are looking on, helpless but at least loving, especially women, Luke again notices, as if he's preparing us for something.

PRAYER

God, when tragedy leaves us helpless, the kind for which we blame each other, and the kind for which we blame you, help us at least to love. By your death, tear open our hardened hearts, tear apart our self-justifications; tear open the curtain of fear that have woven so carefully to separate us from you. Un-rival our religions, our nations, and our lives, that we may be free to live again.

Luke 23:50-56 Silence

III

Dawn on Easter Day

Matthew 28:1-10

Do not be afraid

What were the poor tomb guards so afraid of? A regimented life has its attraction. It can be a kind of shelter. There can be camaraderie. A uniform gives you a place in a bigger story. The emperor's face is known by everyone, imprinted on the coins. You are associated with the most famous man in the world; the man who controls currency. He might as well be god. It will have a cost, especially the derision of crowds, the muttered menace of rebels and the women looking away. In the other direction, put a foot wrong and you face the violence of the emperor's machine. It demands your obedience. It is a very calculable world, though, with actions and reactions, timetables and clear lines of authority.

Whatever you make of the earthquake and the camp angel causally sitting on the stone they'd taken such trouble to seal (Matthew 27), they represent something breaking through into that calculating *tit for tat* world; something beyond the emperor's grasp. Their enervating fear freezing them to the spot is emblematic of how the emperor's world struggles to cope with something as disruptive as forgiveness; something as confusing as grace; something as vulnerable as self-giving love. The women have already disrupted their world by having the courage to come at all and doing something tender in the face of horror. I feel sorry for the soldiers, because the emperor's grip means they fear they'll lose everything, and become "like dead men," so they can't hear the angel's words: "do not be

afraid.” We will discover later this morning that those words *are* for the likes of them, but they cannot hear.

The women can. They already show energy, making their way there at dawn. The angel’s word, then, energises them more. They run, but it’s not a magic spell. They are still afraid, but that fear is now mingled with joy, a heady mixture, where the good aspect of fear is revealed. For fear can be an expression of love. It’s the feeling we get when we might lose something precious: reputation, a possession, someone we love, or the dizzy cliff top fear of losing life itself. It’s been said, a life without the possibility of fear is a life without love. Because it is love they fear being hurt by, because it is hope they fear losing, because it is the thought of seeing Jesus again that raises the fear of losing him again, their fear is about life. They run away from the frozen guards, no doubt each energised also by the other’s running.

Their reward is to see and touch Jesus. Falling at his feet they are able to express their ultimate human purpose: worship and closeness with God.

We know what the emperor looked like. Some of the coins still exist. And yet in his calculating power-grabbing world, no one could love him. Not properly. He could never know what it’s like to be told your worth, because he could never trust any positive thing anyone said; they might be speaking out of fear, or they’re trying to get something out of him. The most well known man in the world is also the loneliest.

The women have proved their love for Jesus is not calculating because they came to honour him when they thought he couldn’t hear or see them. In Jesus, God came to re-connect with everyone in a way we could trust, so he came vulnerable to nails, insults, grief and death. Unlike the protected emperor, no one to this day knows what Jesus’ face looked like, and yet he is worshipped and adored, and trusted, and welcomed into people’s hearts.

Every one of us has a part in a bigger story and need no uniform save that of a little bit of hope. Jesus’ death proves self-giving love will continue to be costly, but his resurrection frees us from calculating self-protection. His death names our greatest fear of loss, then his resurrection lets the light of the bigger story pour in and around our sorrows, promising we are right to hope. We need fixate on calculation no more. The women run with resurrection vigour to call us to a disruptive joy.

PRAYER God you have entered our life; you have known the “fury and the mire of human veins.” You have entered our world of friendship and betrayal; you have entered our realm of economy, taxation and exchange; you have entered the world of high politics and sleazy insult; you have entered our pain and grief. You have entered the stillness of our death. Now in the vigour of resurrection you step towards us, greeting us with gentle joy. Our grief, politics, economy, friendship and very being now shimmer with new meaning

and possibility. You have proven your love and our belonging with you. With gratitude and relief we sing:

1. I heard the voice of Jesus say
"Come unto me and rest..."

IV

Easter Day

Acts 10:14-43

Luke 24:1-12

Un-rivalled joy

If you want to know what an Easter person looks like, try Lyra McKee. To say that is not to hijack her for the church. One of the reasons she is an Easter person is because of the way she challenged the church. In a Ted Talk she described her tearful anguish as a teenager, convinced by the Church that as a gay young woman she was rejected by God. Having gradually found her confidence as a gay woman, and establishing herself as a superb writer and journalist, she described how hearts and minds are changed in conversation, drawn away from the small world of hate and prejudice to the much bigger, more colourful world of understanding. Conversations between people like her and religious conservatives need to happen, she said. She was ready to go towards them. She can be described as an Easter person because her desire was not to belittle or condemn conservative religious people, but to talk, to converse, to find uncompetitive space where understanding could grow. I don't say she's an Easter person because of the particular opinion she has on a particular matter. Rather because holding that inclusive belief, convinced the church's teaching on sexuality needed to change, she still sought the well being of those who disagree with her. She refused to jettison the whole church thing, even though we had given her good reason to do so. She was also an Easter woman because, while ambitious about what writing can do for the world, she seemed to know journalistic success was not a zero-sum game where others had to be kept down if she was to succeed. Though young herself, she was renowned for encouraging and guiding others just setting out on their journalistic career.

Tragically caught in the crossfire of someone else's deluded rivalry, at the end of her life the local priest was called to anoint her. On her behalf, her partner extended gracious hospitality to the church that had caused such anguish in her teenage years, knowing there is a bigger story. Welcoming a priest to her bedside in hospital to administer last rights, God's grace could flow from via church that night because Lyra and her partner's Easter life extended a hospitable grace that could teach the church what its own teaching looks like in the light of the resurrection.

Meanwhile, those who shot Lyra have chosen to be Barabbas people. Without pre-judging the legal process, it is deeply depressing that the two men arrested are so young. It is not just a bursting back into flame of old rivalries. We should be very anxious about a new generation making it their own, in a perverse parody of making the Gospel known afresh in each generation, which a Bishop reminds

each church to do when installing a new priest. The killers' thuggish life is tiny, sad and pathetic, round and round in petty minded circles of violent rivalry. They may convince themselves of a big political cause but their idea of a solution is as ridiculous and deadly as the bitter circles of gang-induced knife crime. Their world never gets bigger. It only gets smaller, choked and constricted by resentment.

When Peter spoke the words we have just heard, he was standing in the home of a high-ranking Roman soldier, one from Rome itself. He was willing to travel out of his way and be guest of a senior representative of the establishment that killed Jesus. "God has shown me I should not call anyone profane or unclean, so I came without objection. [Now, how can I help?]" (Acts 10:24-29) Feel the enormity and weight of gravity in those words.

On he went to explain why he need not diminish others. For Christ risen from the dead, forgiving his own denials, charging him to embolden all the followers and to tell anyone and everyone who would listen about Christ, has radically changed his perspective on the world. Because he had met and eaten with the risen Christ, the spell of rivalry that led to the cross was broken. Peter could no longer see the likes of Cornelius as a rivals. He cannot help making the non-coercive offer of the story that could draw a thief, a Roman soldier and Joseph, a member of the Sanhedrin, into its alternative kingdom without rivalry.

I believe Peter and Paul would both have struggled with the idea of gay people being married, ordained, being famous journalists. But if Peter found he could learn and open his heart to Cornelius, we can be sure if he had the privilege of meeting Lyra it would take no time at all for him to recognise that something of God's Spirit has fallen on her and to open his heart and church and learn from someone as compassionate and wise and courageous as Lyra McKee.

It's too easy for me to say, but I've a hunch Pope Francis and Archbishop Justin Welby are getting there, too, but compromised institutionally by impossible demands for unity. To glimpse what Easter looks like in another context, last week they both hosted a summit seeking reconciliation between warring Christian factions in South Sudan. South Sudan is a terrible Barabbas story. Having felt oppressed by the Muslim majority in the North, founding a new young country with great celebration, in no time, the Christians were slaughtering each other. They were no longer of Christ, but living in the way of Barabbas. 400,000 have died.

Together they performed to miracles, the first, getting President Salva Kir and Vice President Mashar into the same room. Secondly, they began the summit with a meal in silence, where self-justification was not possible and rivalries welling up could not be spoken, so had go back down inside and be processed again and again in self reflection. Then at the end of the conference, when they had been allowed to speak the hard truths to each other as they saw them, the Pope said to them "I ask you as a brother; I ask you to remain in peace. I ask you from my heart." Then he knelt and kissed the feet of the president, then the vice president, who tried to stop him. "Allow me", he insisted. Diplomats wept. Archbishop Justin whispered to journalist Martin Bashir "There's a man who understands symbolism and the sheer power of weakness." It was Easter in that room. Now the two leaders, who had at least helped the miracle happen by being there at all, and then the people they represent must decide to leave Barabbas' tiny cyclical world and live as Easter people.

As we pray for them to do so, and pray for the people of Derry, whose leaders have also demonstrated a rare non-rival stance together to resist the surge of new Barabbas violence, we may bring to mind the rivalries we are embroiled in, from the petty to the grand. Perhaps without a Papal intervention, we can identify, as St Peter did, who we might need to put ourselves out for, to whom we may need to reach out and even risk receiving hospitality from in order to grow our world,

expand our vision. We can with confidence, like him, offer them what we have modestly discovered in Christ, and see how, when rivalry's spell is broken, fear of difference rolls back and community flourishes beyond our imagining.