

[Galatians 3:22-29, Luke 11:27-28]

In Nagorno Karabakh this morning, Armenian soldiers are firing shells and rockets into the homes of Azerbaijani people, killing old and young, men and women. And the Azerbaijanis are firing rockets and shells into the homes of Armenians, killing them too. More accurately, it is their political leaders who buy and use the rockets, drones and big guns. But both sides want the same bit of land. They are rivals.

Paul is trying to teach the people of Galatia that people who have been baptised into the risen Christ, have no need for rivalry; it makes no sense any more to have enemies. It is a bit hard for us to understand what Paul was saying about putting on Christ, for we have minimised baptism, as we have also minimised the eucharist. Now, we no longer break a loaf, but use little bits of pre-cut plastic bread for eucharist; and in baptism we pour a cup of water on the person's head; in Paul's time candidates took off their clothes, were fully immersed in the water, then came up and put on a white garment before being anointed. Paul was telling the Galatians: you have actually put on *Christ*. Like him, you were dead but have now risen into a *new existence*.

Paul said much more: he had glimpsed, on the road to Damascus, a vision of what lies beyond death: the risen Christ. If we are 'in Christ'; he also said we are actually 'the body of Christ', we are not rivals or enemies of anyone. It is absurd to fight over land, much less kill other people to try to get it. We *all* share Christ's life and friendship. We begin to understand what it means to be loved absolutely, unconditionally.

Do we think that being a Christian means having joined a special club, with Catholic rules? Are we rivals to the Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus; like rival rugby teams in the Bledisoe cup? Not at all! We are fortunate to know Christ, to be re-born into a new stage of our existence. It is up to us to *let go* of being rivals, hoping that other people may reach God too, because we can show them Christ by our friendship.

That is why for about 300 years Christians would not fight in any war; would suffer martyrdom rather than join the armies of the Roman empire. Around 315 AD we **joined** the Roman Empire.

Becoming a Christian is radical, life-changing, challenging. Paul tells us that for Christians all the social divisions have come down. If we come from different races or religious backgrounds, it doesn't matter. Neither does it matter if we come from a rich or poor background. In Paul's time no

groups could be further apart than slaves and free people, yet he said the people who owned slaves had to treat them as sisters and brothers, and those who *were* slaves, likewise. The difference between the sexes too, was replaced by radical equality. Mind you, even Paul could not live up to this radical challenge: he could not break free of many customs of the patriarchal society around him: slaves and women remained in lower positions, even in church. And we have done the same, adding the sin of letting clerics be more powerful, and of greater dignity, than lay people. But at least we know what we *should* be doing, if we followed Christ fully.

Then we have this lovely short gospel, words from Jesus himself. A woman who was impressed by his eloquence shouted out how blessed his mum must have been, to have born and fed such a child. In those days, blessings or beatitudes were a common way of paying someone a compliment. But Jesus expanded on her words: You are right, but take it further: there are people even more blessed than my mother.

Anyone who hears my words about the Reign of God, and ***lives*** by them, loving everyone as I, Son of God, love you all; having absolutely no rivals, that person is really blessed. Elsewhere, Jesus would expand on that and say that people who have died to themselves like that, have already entered into eternal life.