



Sunday, 25 September 2022
The Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity
1 Timothy 6.6-19; Luke 16.19-end
The Rev'd Dr Mariama Ifode-Blease
'Eeny, meeny, miny, moe'

May I speak in the name of the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

What a month September has turned out to be. The Queen has died. The state funeral, which had two Church of England services at its heart, was watched by half of the world. After two years of having our eyes firmly fixed on survival, the past ten days have given us permission to grieve, to unwrap some of what we could not express during the years of pandemic and curtailed ritual.

As if that wasn't enough, we also have a new prime minister. The budget that wasn't-really-a-budget-but-was-actually-a-budget, was released this week, shows the priorities of the new government. As one reader wrote in the Financial Times a few days ago:

"I'm in the City and this means another £5k a year in my bank account but I'm not happy. Public services are crumbling due to years of underinvestment and the UK deficit is out of control. There is no point being privately wealthy but publicly impoverished".

Eeny, meeny, miny, moe
Look how far we have to go.
Eeny, meeny, miny, moe
It's the little things, you know.

Distance. That is the key. The distance between policy and lived experience, between having enough and having too much, between our acts and our words, between the eternal and all we know to be life on earth.

During the period of official mourning, I spent a few days as a chaplain to the queue for the lying-in-state. It was a huge privilege to stand with people as they queued for hours, to hear their stories of the distance travelled, their tales of pilgrimage to pay their respects to Her late Majesty. Distances faded through dogged determination and careful planning. I saw the tears of frustration as those in the accessible queue were not accorded the same level of respect and dignity as the people in the queue along the riverbanks.

During one of my shifts, I listened to a gentleman in a wheelchair who told me about the challenges he had faced travelling to, and getting across, London. He mentioned a kind policeman who had found a ramp to help him mount a pavement in the city. He explained

that he only became disabled later in life and that it had been a shock to him. As he lamented the lack of basic provisions, he said to me: “it’s the little things, you know”. I found myself crying.

For we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these (1 Timothy 6: 7-9).

The basics *are essential*, but are often not enough. In a society where it is now becoming even clearer that the rich are getting more comfortable and the poor are getting poorer, how can we settle for the basics alone?

The first letter to Timothy reminds us that the life we experience on earth is only made possible through distance. The distance from birth to our final days. And no matter the distanced travelled, or how we travel it, we leave as we have arrived.

Eeny, meeny, miny, moe,
Look how far we have to go.
Eeny, meeny, miny, moe,
It’s the little things, you know.

Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses (1 Timothy 6:12).

We have preached here many times that life is eternal and love is immortal, and these truths are a challenge to lived experience. In all of what we feel and live, we are not able to fully capture what lies beyond this human life. “When asked earlier this month whether she believed in an afterlife, Hilary Mantel [who died last week] said she did, but that she could not imagine how it might work. “However, the universe is not limited by what I can imagine,” she said.¹

The eternal life to which we are called means that we shall have to recognise that this life is only a part of our existence. But my goodness does it matter. We are a part of creation, the divine maker of which somehow sits outside of it, but is so intimately present within it at the same time. Psalm 91 tells us that:

For God will deliver you from the snare of the fowler
and from the deadly pestilence;
God will cover you with his pinions,
and under God’s wings you will find refuge;
God’s faithfulness is a shield and buckler. (Psalm 91: 3-4).

The image of God covering us with the outer part of a bird's wing locates us within creation. We are sheltered in a cosmic shield of love and the distance between us and God totally melts away. That sense of safe harbour, also evident in the stunning reredos behind me,

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/sep/23/hilary-mantel-author-wolf-hall-dies>

gives us a full image of the intimacy of God with us, and we realise that God is not really far from us at all. The safety, love, tenderness we may or may not have felt in his life are firmly present, present with God.

Eeny, meeny, miny, moe,
Look how far we have to go.
Eeny, meeny, miny, moe,
It's the little things, you know.

There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table (Luke 16: 19 – 21).

How far do you think the rich man's table was from his gate? 100 metres, 50 metres, less? Whatever the distance, it could not be breached. And it is distance that is highlighted again after death:

But Abraham said, "Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony.

Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us." (Luke 16: 25-27).

Here the eternal is presented in a binary form of heaven and hell with the rich man in hell and the poor man in heaven next to Abraham. What the Gospel writer seems to be saying is that distance still matters. The distance we live here on earth between justice and equity, between dignity and suffering, between compassion and wilful ignorance. We are not able to see the future, but we know that we have some agency, more than millions have in our world. What do we do with it? What do we do with our resources?

Eeny, meeny, miny, moe,
Catch a tiger by the toe.
Eeny, meeny, miny, moe,
If he hollers, let him go.

The first three verses of 1 Timothy 6, not part of today's reading, are dedicated to telling slaves to obey and honour their masters, as they [the masters] are "members of the church", namely good people. In some of the North American versions of the nursery rhyme 'tiger' was replaced by another word.² So the distance between the epistle and the nursery rhyme suddenly becomes very small.

What, we must ask, do we use in our modern times to justify poverty, a lack of rights and opportunity, and access to the basic provisions that give people dignity? Because we know

² <https://aninjusticemag.com/the-racist-origin-of-eeny-meeny-miny-moe-411e2d4815ac>

that the Bible for centuries was used to justify slavery, to create and affirm a hierarchy that stated and then systemically created societies that said one ethnicity was better than the other. While race is a social construct, racism is a lived reality.

Eeny, meeny, miny, moe,
Look how far we have to go.
Eeny, meeny, miny, moe,
It's the little things, you know.

How far are we from the table that has been richly set for us? That was the question I had to ask myself this Thursday, when it emerged that “Mpho Tutu van Furth, the daughter of the late Anglican archbishop Desmond Tutu [was] barred by the Church of England from officiating at her godfather’s funeral in a Shropshire church because she is married to a woman. Mpho Tutu van Furth, an ordained priest in the Anglican church, was invited to preside over her godfather’s funeral...The C of E said its actions were “in line with the House of Bishops current guidance on same-sex marriage”.³ I wonder whether that line will wash when we all get to heaven.

Because we know that it is not Mpho and her wife Marceline that need to change or bridge any distance between them and the love of God. It is the church that needs to question, *once again*, how far it is from being a true presentation of God’s love here on earth. Because eternity is not a bunch of white and black male bishops sitting feasting at a table when the rest of us are waiters and servants to that ungodly feast. The fact of the matter is that the current guidance on same-sex marriage simply has to change. It’s not rocket science. It’s simply love.

Distance. Distance is the key to understanding the Gospel reading this morning. The distance between where we are and where God is calling us to be. The distance between the heavenly banquet set before us and our human made restrictions. The distance between true social equity and consistent narratives of hate and bigotry. The distance between systems that work for all and the handouts that benefit the few.

The Gospel reading speaks of the rich man and the poor man. It is a simple image for our times. If we are rich, then what is the distance between our wealth and the gates that separate us from seeing and recognising that there is still more to be done? It is not for one rich person to make the difference. Our planet is a shared responsibility, our society is a shared responsibility, our communities are *our* shared responsibility.

As Sherry Rehman, Pakistan’s Climate Change Minister wrote last week:

... When temperatures crossed 53C in Pakistan, the summer of 2022 turned our southern towns into the hottest places on the planet, melting our glaciers, burning our forests, scorching our crops. But nothing prepared the country for the biblical flooding that saw a third of Pakistan inundated by an ocean of water... Scientific modelling now attributes the extreme flooding in our country to the climate crisis, and the

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/22/church-of-england-bars-desmond-tutus-daughter-from-officiating-at-funeral>

catastrophe presents a clear warning to all those who have set their climate clocks to another few decades...Why should we in Pakistan pay for catastrophic floods we had no part in causing?⁴

Eeny, meeny, miny, moe,
Look how far we have to go.
Eeny, meeny, miny, moe,
It's the little things, you know.

In this season of creation, let us hold fast to that which is good, to the call to the eternal rooted in the here and now, to seeing our part in the change we wish to occur, to bridging the distance between a creation struggling to meet our insatiable greed to one that is fully alive and flourishing, of which *we are a part*, and to which we owe our very breath.

Amen.

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/sep/21/pakistan-floods-big-oil-gas-bill>