

**God's pottery**

*Jeremiah 18:1-11; Philemon 1-21*

The 'Potter's Wheel' interlude film was introduced on 16 February 1953. It was probably the best known of the many interlude films made for the post-war television service. The films were made to cover for the many intervals in programming, to allow for changes between studios, or for the frequent studio breakdowns.

They tended to show a nostalgic view of British life. Other interludes included ploughing a field with a team of horses, a windmill turning, kitten playing with a ball of wool, a spinning wheel, and railway journey and some angel fish. Youtube and rediscover your lost youth.

The potter's wheel film showed the hands of Georges Aubertin as he threw a pot, accompanied by Charles Williams' 'The Young Ballerina'. Viewers who stayed alert noted that Aubertin never finished the pot, but just kept remodelling it.

Pottery is the dominant image that people of faith have taken from the Jeremiah reading. People love this image of 'the potter'. As one Bible commentator notes, "Potters are gentle people, are they not? Are they not artists who are sensitive souls constitutionally averse to violence?"<sup>i</sup>

But that's not what the passage says. The pot was spoiled, and the potter reworked it, maybe even breaking it down so that it could be reshaped into something better and more useful. Even more unsettling, if the children of God did not sort themselves out, God might change God's mind about the good things God intended, and shape something more punitive.

It is such a powerful and unsettling image at one and the same time. Will the clay allow itself to be shaped, or will it continue to go astray and need breaking down, and working on again?

Anyone who has observed a potter at work knows that working the clay is demanding and time-

consuming. The vessel the potter intends frequently grows misshapen in his hands as too much or too little pressure is exerted, or a wall of the vessel becomes too thin, or an intended shape does not develop as planned. When this happens, the potter collapses the vessel, compresses the clay, and begins again.<sup>ii</sup>

What lies at the heart of this Bible story is a powerful impetus to look at your life and behaviour, change your ways if things are not right, or God, or circumstance, may change them for you. Not only is this something in personal life; what Jeremiah is also driving at here is the life of the community. The community, the society in which we live must also change, adapt, evolve, and grow.

God may well plan to play a part in the lives of every individual, but with God, here, it is the bigger picture. God means to shape the community of faith, in its collective, social, and political life to serve God's best interests in the world.<sup>iii</sup>

God's love is infinite and tender, yet also firm handed and severe by turns Like a parent with a child, or a teacher with a pupil, or as here, like a potter with clay, God will nurture, protect and encourage to flourish. But when things do not go the way intended or hoped, God will remodel, recast, reshape, and sometimes drastically.

In Paul's letter to Philemon, a slave has run away from a master. Setting aside C1st issues around the morality of slavery, Paul, Christian, writes to Philemon, the Christian slave-owner, about the run-away Christian slave, Onesimus. We might want Paul to go on to denounce slavery as immoral in C21st terms, but in fact what Paul does goes even beyond that. He calls the slave-owner to recognise the slave as a brother in Christ, with all that that implies. Is this not the kind of radical, transformational, drastic remodelling, recasting, reshaping the Jeremiah evokes in his image of

the potter working at the clay, changing attitudes and behaviour in such a way that society is transformed?

In truth, the Philemon story is a lived-out parable of Jesus' command: "love your neighbour as yourself." We treat others with respect, kindness, fairness, decency. In the eyes of God, in the eyes of the world. We all know the, "love your neighbour as yourself" saying, but the constant question is, do we?

To what extent does the brokenness of our society today, with all its inequalities, unfair practices, economic injustice, racial prejudice, cultural marginalisation, ecological myopia, point to the fact that the good God intended in those Creator hands for God's people and God's world has become misshapen and distorted, and the world, and the individuals within it, need to start again?

When we see a third of Pakistan underwater, a direct cause of global warming. When we see fuel poverty caused by the evil of war caused by Russian territorial greed. When we see some politicians refusing to commit to provide economic support for some of the poorest in our nation, and soon that might be many of us, through imposing windfall taxes on obscene profits made by energy companies. When we see sewage pouring into the seas because it is alleged that the post-Brexit Government has abandoned its international obligations to protect human health and marine life. When we see an unstoppable rise in the use of Foodbanks, creeping up through those who have no jobs and into the ranks of those who are on low and middle pay. Is this not evidence of the kind of society breakdown Jeremiah saw in his day, provoking in his imagination the image of God at the potter's wheel, making and remaking a broken world, and the communities within it, so that they might look at what is broken, and play their part, with God, to change things, transform things?

God does not cause the brokenness, God wants to heal it, and fix it. And I believe God wants us to work with God in that process. God the potter is not indifferent to the way our society is shaping up. God wants to shape society for good, even if, and when, we might resist God's intention, even if we are not aware that that is what we are doing. Do we want to work with God, or against God? And what do you think that looks like?

We might not be able to fix everything, but can we fix something? That's why we support our charities, even in small ways, because they seek to make a difference. That's why we have social events, because they seek to address the need for friendship and welcome, even in small ways. Even the broken clay can be reshaped, reformed, and transformed into something of use, of beauty, of hope. Even if the breaking down is hard and difficult.

In a few days the draft Presbytery Plan for the future shape of the Church in Edinburgh and West Lothian will be released. It will not be easy reading as churches in our communities, like those all over the country, wrestle with, and lament over, and possibly square their shoulders and work hopefully towards, what the future shape of God's church will be. It will be a significant turning point. There will be some breaking down before there will be some building up. How hard will it be to hear the words of Jeremiah's potter then: "...he was working at his wheel. The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him."

In our church, are we brave and honest enough to see the things that are not quite, or not at all, working, maybe even broken? That we, with God, might have to reshape and refashion and repurpose. With all the guilt and fear and resentment and sadness that might bring. But maybe also with the courage and determination and wisdom and hope that we will need to face God's future for us, that God is already beginning to shape on that potter's wheel.

We've done it before in Morningside. Where there were five churches, there is now one. Where there were too many buildings, we have sold, and reshaped and remodelled, in order to build back better. Not without pain and loss, but with vision, so that we could provide a place of welcome and light, of wonder and inclusion, of hospitality and hope. Driven by necessity but illuminated by faith and vision and intention.

Pottery work is messy. One commentator notes: "We clay-footed bearers of the divine image can expect to get our hands dirty, run some risks, and – on occasion – face failure as we respond to the Potter's hand...participating in the creative work of God is always messy and risky..."<sup>iv</sup> But God's hands are dirty with ours in this business of recreating and reforming. And in the new and hopeful thing that is made, God's fingerprints will be found. Right there alongside ours. Therein lies our hope.

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**

**Amen**

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<sup>i</sup> John T Debevoise, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol 4 p26

<sup>ii</sup> Bruce C Birch, *ibid*, p29

<sup>iii</sup> Sally A Brown, *ibid*, p27

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid* p31