

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Jeremiah 18.1-11/Psalm 139/Philemon 1.1-25/Luke 14.25-33
St. Paul's Church, Halifax
9 September 2007

The House of the Potter

~Paul H. Friesen~

One of the wardens told me early this past week, maybe on Sunday, that he was looking forward to my thoughts on this Sunday's Gospel. Not yet having read it I said I was looking forward to this too. And then this past Wednesday, while I waited for a daughter at an after-school lesson, I sat in Perks on Quinpool with a cup of tea and pile of papers and a pen when I walked the son of a fellow priest. He looked at me and said: 'What are you doing?' 'Working on my sermon for Sunday,' I said. With bewilderment on his face he blurted out: 'But its [only] Wednesday!'

The truth is no matter how early we start or how long we put it off today's Scriptures can't be easily or politely explained. I'm thinking now of Jesus' line about *hating* 'father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself' if we hope to be his disciple. And I'm thinking too of Jeremiah's 'word from the Lord' in which God says to the citizens of Jerusalem: 'Look I am a potter shaping evil against you...' And then there is the problem of the runaway slave Onesimus whom St. Paul sends back to his master, Philemon.

But if we can't neatly explain away the jagged edges of Scripture, the heart of our tradition, then we can maybe at least hear the echo of God's voice as we lean forward, so to speak, and listen.

We begin with Jeremiah. The prophet comprehends that God wants him to listen. We don't know how Jeremiah heard—was it in a dream, or a prophetic trance, or a poetic moment, or a voice inside his head? We don't know. It simply doesn't matter to Jeremiah to tell us. But he feels it terribly important to visit the local potter's house and to watch the potter work in order to understand God's point of view on the sad condition of Israel. Jeremiah's prophecies spanned 40 years and the reign of the five last kings of Judah until the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. Most of the clans of the Judah's fellow tribes had been exiled, and now the end of Israel (as it had been known) was around the corner.

What was Jeremiah expecting to understand, as he watched the potter? What did the potter think as the great prophet studied the potter's hands? The first thought came to Jeremiah quickly. The people of Jerusalem, the descendants of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, were like clay in the hands of God their maker. This later made a deep impact on Jews in medieval Europe who developed a liturgical poem recited on important holidays—they took Jeremiah's metaphor and ran with it. God and God's

people were likened to stonecutter and stone, blacksmith and ax, sailor and tiller—and more.¹

The point is clear, but hard to believe. Do people of faith really want to blame God for the evil that happens to them? Is it right for them to assign responsibility to the God whose love we confess? In fact, the prophets often do, as do the great heroes of our faith, as does the *psalmist* often, and does Jesus on the cross, when he says: ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’²

It is a hard truth, but the church has always confessed God’s sovereignty, that is God’s authority over all that we call good and evil. It is not a matter of ‘why bad things happen to good people’, but rather why ‘good and bad things happen to every human being, and every human society, contradictory mixes of good and evil.

These truths should never encourage us to look at the victims of war criminals or violent crimes, or to look at cancer patients or those treated with cruelty by bosses or parents or politicians and say: ‘Well, God did it or God allowed it, and here’s why God did!’ We human beings are so finite, so limited in our point of view, that we can’t really fully explain why something evil has happened, nor should we ever say there is nothing we can do about it. But if we blame only the devil or the criminal over there or a country that is a part of the ‘axis of evil’ we are blaming lesser gods, not the God whom we confess in the Scriptures, and in our worship.

In our faith we grant ultimate authority to the God who made heaven and earth, who redeemed the world through Jesus Christ, and who is bringing that redemption to bear fruit, some of which we see when evil is turned to good. This is the God we confess: the Sovereign who takes the evil done in the world he made and turns it into divine good.

This doesn’t mean we are helpless. As Jesus in the garden, as the disciples repeating the Lord’s Prayer we lift our voice to God and say ‘lead us not into temptation’ or ‘save us from the time of trial’. We have governments, we have a legal system, we have hospitals, we have research labs and philosophers and theologians—and we should, to confront evil and avoid what we have learned encourages evil in any of its forms, from holocaust to economic system. But if we look up to a lesser god than the one we confess, we are looking in the wrong direction. There is great honesty and truth in shouting out to God in our distress over evil. God is responsible for the universe.

Now Jeremiah can repeat the word of the Lord in a way that you or I cannot, about God shaping a particular evil against his children who had turned to evil. He was, after all, a prophet whose words we confess a divine message of God, not a preacher or

¹ This description of the *piyyut* is in the marginalia of *The Jewish Study Bible*, ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford: O.U.P., 2004), p.963.

² *Mark* 15.34. All biblical quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version* unless noted otherwise.

politician. But Jeremiah also says words that can help us as much as they helped ancient Israel.

Jeremiah realized in the house of the potter that God could take a misshapen lump of clay and turn it till it becomes a beautiful vessel—a vase or a pitcher. The ears these words fell on were the ears of a nation in distress, and so this great story of the prophet and the potter was a message of hope, if they would hear it.³

‘God will change his mind’—how we wish we could say this at a hospital bedside or on a battlefield. But if we grant God the authority God really has, we must also grant God the time and the means that belong to God too. Sometimes human intelligence and diligence, gifts of God, are rewarded with divine medical results. Sometimes it takes centuries. Sometimes the turning to God of a nation might result in divine good over generations—think, for a moment, of the abolition of slavery in England.

We confess God that Jeremiah’s potter is a picture of God, and we confess that the *psalmist* is right. God ‘formed [our] inward parts; [God] knit us together in [our] mother’s womb. [We] praise [God] for [we are] fearfully and wonderfully made.’ So what do we do?

The early Christians confessed Jesus’ words about the creation of a new world through a new community that is the ‘body’ of the risen Christ. God has been shaping this community for good for two-thousand years, if we would hear God’s voice, and respond.

We are asked to believe that in the Scriptures and in the Creeds that God is shaping the church, that community, to change the world. So when Jesus spoke the words about ‘hating’ spouse and blood relatives, Jesus was speaking about our response to God’s actions at the potter’s wheel.

Of course hating relatives comes easily to some!

But Jesus did not have human selfishness or family feuds in mind. After all, Jesus had called some religious leaders on a legal dodge that allowed them to say that financial support to parents could be taken away and theoretically dedicated to divine purposes. Jesus reminded them of the first of the social laws in the *Ten Commandments*: honour your father and mother.⁴

Jesus often used hyperbole or exaggeration to make a point. Remember his response to religious hypocrites, about straining out a fly from their cup, but not noticing they were swallowing a camel.⁵

In fact when it comes to ‘hating’ family, Jesus spoke differently on a different occasion, in the *Gospel According to Matthew*: ‘Whoever loves father or mother more

³ See Robert Carroll, *Jeremiah: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), p.372 and William McKane, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1996), vol. I, p.422.

⁴ *Mark* 7.9-13.

⁵ *Matthew* 23.24.

than me is not worthy of me...[nor is one who] does not take up the cross and follow me.’⁶

The point Jesus made, was illustrated by St. Paul several times and in several ways: ‘As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female.’⁷ When we enter the Christian church all ‘natural’ ties—family, gender, race, economic class, and so on, ought to become far more flexible than our unity in the faith. This was the story of the early church, as a cruel Roman government, the so-called great civilization, attempted to use the appeal of family on the one hand and the threat of execution on the other, to drag Christians out of their commitment to Christ and the Christian community.

The bonds of Christian community ought to be stronger than any other human ties. Is this perhaps the ‘shaping of the clay’ that the divine potter is working in the church today, and in our parish? According to the confession of Jesus and the apostles it has been so from the start.

I grew up in a religious world in which the church needlessly created too many church activities to protect its members from too much time ‘out there’ in the world. It created a ‘sub-culture’, a whole world of alternative art and music and novels and baseball leagues. Is that what Jesus was talking about when he said ‘take up your cross and follow me’ in today’s Gospel? That is hard to believe.

But look at the story of Philemon (the baptized slave owner) and Onesimus (the now baptized runaway slave) and Paul (the apostle).⁸ The Roman attitude to slaves was that they were property. The Roman penalty for runaway slaves was branding with a red-hot iron (at best) with the letter ‘f’—for *fugitivas* (fugitive), a mark carried forever. At worst, the penalty was crucifixion. And yet here the apostle was telling the legal slave-holder, in the hearing of both, and the members of that church, to remember that Onesimus was Paul’s *child*, more truly a child than anyone’s slave, as if Paul had conceived him with a spouse.

There truly was no ‘slave and free’ in the family of Christ. But had the church of that day publicly called for the liberation of slaves it would have been crushed. It suffered enough for its outrageous claims that they all drank from the same cup and ate the same bread at the one table. How the Apostle would have rejoiced to see the day when slavery was finally abolished, at least in part of the world, for a while!

How is God shaping our parish, our church, our world? We don’t need Christian bowling leagues. But do we need to take up our cross, and to boldly proclaim that within the church there is neither slave nor free, male nor female, Jew nor Greek? And do we need to count the cost, and pay the cost (repentance and change)—the cost

⁶ *Matthew* 10.37.

⁷ *Galatians* 3.27-28. See also *I Corinthians* 12.13 for a similar (baptismal) formula.

⁸ The story is well told, in readable words, in William Barclay’s *The Letters to Timothy, Titus and Philemon* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1965), p.309-324.

of living out that truth in Christ's church? And do we need to work and pray for that truth to invade the world around us? This is a great and divine thing to think about as we gather around the Lord's Table.