

Trinity 14

Jeremiah 18.1-11, Philemon vv 1.21, Luke 14.25-33

'The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: "Come go down to the potter's house and there I will let you hear my words".'

I stumbled down to breakfast on Wednesday morning to discover that God did not create the universe. I then said Morning Prayer.

I think it is as true now as it was in the days of Jeremiah that believers in God encounter him not so much in the mysteries of space and time, but in the fabric of our lives. Jeremiah did indeed hear the word of the Lord in the potter's house. He watched a lump of clay being shaped on the wheel by the potter's hands. Something went wrong. It collapsed. The potter took it off the wheel, reshaped it into a lump, threw it once more on the turning wheel and worked it into something else.

And God said, This is what I do. I am the potter who shapes Israel. When it goes wrong I throw it on the wheel and make it again. That could sound very 'controlling' and yet what we must remember is that the potter is intimately 'in touch' with the clay. It has no function of itself, but only in the intimate relationship of shaping and moulding. The clay bears the imprint of the potter's desire, and so there is vulnerability on both sides. Jeremiah was not the only prophet to use the potter and the clay as a metaphor for Israel's relationship with the Almighty. It was taken up later by the author of the third strand of the Book of Isaiah, who pleads with God to reveal himself as he did in days of old, 'You are our Father, we are the clay and you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand'. Not only Israel but each person.

One of the things that really makes me cross about the casual scorn sometimes poured on religious believers these days is the assumption that faith is only for those who are not brave enough to tough it out in a purposeless and chaotic universe. It is as if they imagine that faith is only ever a comfort blanket.

Yet the truth is that the deeper the faith, the stranger the journey of faith becomes and the more demanding the call of God. Once we hear that call, even tentatively, even through our unbelief, God goes to work on us, completely without our permission, moulding us through our experience, our desires, our frustrations. 'It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God', says the author of the letter to the Hebrews. And our psalm today takes up the theme, 'O Lord, you have searched me out and known me...you hem me in behind and before and lay your hand upon me'. I find it very moving that we say that psalm here at St Bene't's during Holy Week when we gather for Night Prayer: that week when we remember our Lord Jesus Christ and the conflict and betrayal of that week, which somehow mirrors and magnifies the vulnerabilities of our own lives. For Jesus, like us, had to feel for the touch of God and to find him. He is not spared from this aspect of our human condition. 'Behold the great creator makes himself a house of clay', as Thomas Pestel's hymn puts it.

But vulnerability is not the whole story. Christ comes again, bringing us with him, his treasure reborn in our earthen vessels. Don't let's flatter ourselves: we are no morally better after Good Friday and Easter than we were before. We remain, clay, earth from earth. If you have ever worked in clay you will sometimes have had to cast and recast the same lump, and you do it because you can't really throw away unfired clay, it sort of waits around to become something. On the wheel, moulded by God's fingers, pressed by God's hands it becomes something potentially beautiful, unrepeatable, precious and strong. And it gets really strong, beautiful and complete in the fire, in the kiln. 'Fire and spirit in our baptism', says Ephrem the Syrian, and, 'in the Bread and the Cup, fire and Holy Spirit.'

For some of you the moulding of God's work has been a process throughout your life which has paralleled the natural unfolding of your gifts and opportunities, and has brought happiness and fulfilment. For others the pain has been considerable. You shrink from the thought of the slap of the wet clay on the wheel, the burn of the fire in the kiln. Perhaps your instinct is jump off the wheel and

run out the door. Rather like a poor frog who got trapped in my basement last week, strong, wet and very slimy he was too, and I don't think he liked being tricked into a box and taken to the nearest pond. But when he got there and jumped out of the box straight onto a water lily, he might have seen the point.

Our atheist friends think we cling to God because we are weak; the reality is that our weakness more often makes us want to run away from him. But of course it is also impossible to do just that because God is not anywhere that we can run from or to. We live and move and have our being *in him*. He is our place our context, which is why even our best science cannot see him. He is simply not available to microscopes, lenses. We can't read his nature from equations. Israel tried to run from God, to run from God's presence, God's demands. Israel tried to escape to easier and more agreeable gods. And so God lets them go into exile. Where they spend their whole time moaning to be back in Israel. We learn from this that being without God is not being free, but being trapped in a humanity that is not quite human because it is without, its soul, without God.

Running away is a repeating theme in scripture. Perhaps that is what Onesimus did, the subject of our second reading from Paul's brief letter to Onesimus's master, the Christian leader Philemon. Traditionally Onesimus has been portrayed as a runaway slave. But seems to have been some rift between Onesimus and Philemon his master, and the slave has ended up looking after Paul. For those of you who find Paul difficult I commend this gentle, tactful letter. He writes from a place of vulnerability. He is getting old, and he knows it. He is also in prison. Onesimus has been a comfort to him – his name means 'useful' – and Onesimus has benefited from serving Paul. In fact he has become a Christian through Paul, and Paul is now sending him back to Philemon. Paul describes Onesimus as his child and even as his heart, and he pleads for Philemon to refresh his heart by welcoming him not as a mere slave, but as a 'beloved brother'. Paul sees in this apparently strained relationship between master and slave the opportunity for something new to take shape, something that will reveal the love of Christ, 'Refresh my heart in Christ'.

'You are the potter, we are the clay'. What happens to Paul and Onesimus and Philemon is part of God's moulding and shaping. Onesimus, a slave. Paul in prison. There are constraints and limits in all lives. Some can be reversed, some alleviated, some just have to be born. The wheel of life goes on. But we have a choice as to how we see that wheel.

We can choose to see it as the wheel of fortune. What goes round comes round. Nothing really changes but you can hope for good luck, and perhaps spin the wheel a bit in your favour now and then. That is the way of compliance with the world, it is the world's wisdom and we are invited to live by it every minute of every day.

Or we can go into the potter's house and watch the potter at work at the wheel, and hear the words of the Lord addressed to us. Those words are the words of life. They are the words that led to the Gospel. God is good, God is love and Jesus Christ has overturned the wheel of fate, so that there is no fate, but grace and freedom. And that is not only comforting and terrifying. It is also, I believe, true.