

**A Sermon Preached at the Eucharist
The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

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Jeremiah 18.1-11

The image of God as a potter that we encounter in the first reading is found throughout the Old Testament prophets as for example in Isaiah 64.8:

Yet, O Lord, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand..

In the eighteenth chapter of the prophet Jeremiah from which we heard this morning, God commands Jeremiah to go and observe a potter with a fresh set of eyes. This was so that Jeremiah could learn and could share with others something not just about the process of pottery but also about God.

The reading reminds us that the Word of God is communicated through images- through the common occupations of life. Jeremiah goes down to the potter to watch him at work. This will be the instrument through which the Word of God comes to him. Life provides illustrations of the divine Word. We've come together this morning for the same purpose: to observe God and work and to learn from that observation.

The potter is the master of the clay, but the clay resists his designing hand, and so he sets out to shape a new and different pot. The lesson that Jeremiah is telling the people of Israel is simple enough, Israel is resisting the Lord's sovereign will and therefore, like the potter, the Lord will shape a new people to himself.

It is the process of forming the clay, and not the final product that is the heart of this analogy. A potter is always at work fashioning clay. In the same way you and I are never, in a sense, put in the fire and "finished".

Think back to the creation story in Genesis 2, where God forms the first human from the dust of the ground, perhaps alluding to the way an expert potter forms the clay, and then breathes into the nostrils of this earthen vessel and makes us alive.

There is where we differ from a clay pot. Pots get fired and then they are set. A beautiful vase will sit there and look beautiful day after day. But we had free will breathed into our nostrils, so we always have to be moulded and changed. We sometimes talk of humans being set in our ways, but even our habits lead us down a path towards change. When humans are set and immovable, fired and finished it is not because we look beautiful day after day but because we are actually dead.

While Jeremiah may have been saying things that are hard to hear, he firmly believed in the possibility of repentance and change. His message in chapter 18 is that God is not done with us yet. Jeremiah makes it clear that the nation of Israel, and all of us who come afterward, that we are still like clay in God's hands.

The passage also reminds us that the potter is always working 'to make a useful vessel' (v. 4a). God has no intention of saving us without making us useful for his service. All of his work on us is for a purpose – to fashion us into something of use. And he is patient with us to make us a useful vessel. As St Paul reminds us in Philippians 1:6: 'He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.' We see in the action of the potter the complex dealing of God with the people. If a particular piece is not going well the potter remakes it into something else. The clay is not lost.

Pottery remains a metaphor for much of our life: the process of shaping lives, shaping a family, taking the formlessness of life and bringing to it imagination and skill and patience. The creation of pottery is a powerful image of the way in which our lives are carried out.

We read in Psalm 139:

O Lord, you have searched me and you know me....You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely....

Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?

If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me," even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.

For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

"I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made." This is where hope begins. If you know that, then you know that a light shines in the darkness and the

darkness cannot overcome it. If you know that you are wonderfully and fearfully made by God, if you trust that God created your inmost being and knit you together in your mother's womb, then you know you are made for abundant life. There is no place you can go, no situation you can encounter, where God is not present and at work.

Our lives take shape in response to a vision of something beautiful and useful emerging out of potentiality. Our lives take shape as a result of trial and error - a certain form is tried and then rejected and we are re-made. Sometimes designs fail because the potter changes his or her mind, or we, the clay are rebellious and uncooperative (for good or bad reasons).

So we give thanks today not only for the ways in which God may have shaped our lives, but for her vision that in each person there was the potential for something beautiful and useful