

## THE POTTER AND THE CLAY

In the early years of television, whenever there was a gap between programmes, they used to fill in with a short silent film. I can still remember one of them, which was of a potter at his wheel. I loved to watch his fingers forming the clay, and the vessel gradually rising up under his hands. If you've every tried to turn a pot, you'll know how difficult it is. More often than not, you don't centre the clay on the wheel, or it's too wet, and the whole thing just collapses.

Which is exactly what seems to have happened when Jeremiah visited the potter. In our first reading he tells how he witnessed the pot going wrong and how often the potter had to start again. He saw how this patience and willingness to make new beginnings mirrors the way God works with his people. Israel is the clay and God the potter. "Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as the potter has done? Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel." God is giving Jeremiah a word both of judgement and of promise. Of judgement, because Israel has so often failed to live up to her calling. And promise, because when they have failed, God is always ready to prepared to start again with his People to fulfil his purposes for the world.

This was something that it was vitally important for them to understand. Jeremiah was living at a time of national catastrophe. In 587 BC, Jerusalem had fallen to the invader and most of the people were exiled to Babylon. Imagine what they must have gone through as their land was overrun and so many became migrants. They felt that their very identity as a people was called into question by what had happened. After all, they had been brought up to believe that God had specially chosen them to be his People, had given them their land, and had promised to be with them for ever. It must have seemed that either he had forgotten them, or was punishing them for their faithlessness, or, even worse, was simply powerless to prevent their destruction and defeat. Jeremiah finds himself having to address their fears and speak God's Word to them in this moment of catastrophe. What he does is to reassure the people that no disaster is terrible enough for God to forget them or let them go. He continues to hold them in his hand, and will remould his clay.

The message of God's providential purpose for his people and his world is, of course, one of the great biblical themes. It was reaffirmed when the Word of God spoken through prophets like Jeremiah eventually became embodied when the Word became flesh in the person of Jesus. When we sing "He's got the whole world in his hands", we sing what, in fact, has always been true. Like the potter moulding the clay, he continues working to fulfil his purposes of love. A purpose that today encompasses the election in America, those caught up in the disastrous conflict in Syria, the apparently never-ending misery of Israel, the murderous ideology of Isis and the terrorism that feeds off it. In our own country He holds us in his hands as we grapple with Brexit and our continuing political confusion. Every age has to confront its' own particular challenges, and ours is no different. But with the perspective that comes from faith in God, we can recognize that throughout the ups and downs of the historical process, he is working out his purposes of love. So we pray for the coming of his Kingdom on earth as it already is in heaven and we try to work with him to nudge his Kingdom forward. He is the potter; we are the clay.

And what is true for the world at large is also true for each of us individually, as our epistle reading today reminds us. Paul, you recall, was pleading on behalf of the runaway slave, Onesimus. We don't know the back-story, but it sounds pretty messy. In his letter, Paul is inviting Onesimus' former owner Philemon to take him back. Just as God is ready to remodel the clay, so Onesimus needs to be given a second chance. The Gospel is about new beginnings, restored relationships. That's how God always is with us. He never gives up on us, always waiting to create new possibilities for us at every stage in our lives. So God the potter does not just work on the stage of grand historical events, but also on the intimate level of our own personal lives.

Of course there is a cost to all this. Real trust, real forgiveness, are always costly. In today's Gospel reading, Jesus teaches us about the cost of discipleship, because if we are going to be changed, we need to commit ourselves to the journey. He tells us that we must be prepared to detach ourselves psychologically and emotionally from all those things that we may be tempted to use as God-substitutes. There are lots of potential candidates for us to choose from, many of them perfectly good in themselves, but dangerous when they become the reasons for our existence. Family relationships can be one of these, but also money and possessions, success and status,

sex and pleasure-seeking. Different people are tempted in different ways. If we are going to be a disciple, Jesus says, we need to get first things first, and learn to surrender ourselves into the hands of the potter, to be made and re-made.

And what is true for us personally is true for the Church at large. We find our place as disciples within the Church community, where together we are called to be signs of God's Kingdom, to celebrate it and witness to it. One of our particular temptations at the moment, it seems to me, is to be over-anxious about numbers. We are aware that congregations are diminishing, and naturally we are keen to encourage more people to come to church. But if today's Gospel reading is anything to go by, Jesus himself does not seem to be particularly concerned about the number of his followers. What he seems to be looking for is faithfulness. He wants faithful disciples. And a faithful disciple has to learn to carry a cross. Not something that is ever going to be particularly popular, particularly in a culture like this one. So let's get on with the business of discipleship, of being clay in God's hands, and let God do the rest. Like John the Baptist, our job is to prepare the Lord's way. We don't make Christians; he does. Our task is to become good, pliable clay. And that will begin to happen when we put loving service, prayerful concern and mature discipleship at the heart of our lives. When we place these things at the centre of our common life we will be allowing ourselves to be fashioned into a beautiful and sustainable vessel for God.

I'm always reassured by the knowledge that disciples don't always have to be right. Look at the gospels. The followers of Jesus often got things wrong. But he didn't give up on them. He went on patiently preaching and teaching, opening them up to the experience of being with him, helping them to learn from their mistakes, encouraging them to know themselves forgiven so that they could begin again. The fact is that the treasure of the Gospel is conveyed in earthen vessels like you and me. What counts is that the Gospel is not about us; it's about God and his love for us and for his world. And this is a love that nothing will ever overcome. The potter always has the clay in his hands. Our task is to allow him to make us into the kind of vessel that he intends us to be, and the kind of vessel that he can use for his purposes.