

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Year C - 8/9/2019

Jeremiah 18:1-11
Psalm 139:1-5,12-18
Philemon 1-25
Luke 14:25-35

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

It is fair to say that, of all the gifts and talents that the good Lord has given to me, an artistic talent (in terms of painting, ceramics, or drawing) is most assuredly *not* one of them!!

Indeed, there was nothing worse, when at school we were sent off to the art class, and the teacher would invariably shudder, I think, as to what was going to be presented by young Goodes at the end of the lesson - not anything that was going to be displayed for Open Day, or sent home in one's portfolio, that is for sure!!

And yet, there is just something about the art of pottery that just amazes me, in a way that few other forms of art really do. I tried it - once - a disaster of course, but the way in which a skilled artisan can take a formless lump of clay, and transform it into whatever shape and design he or she wishes, is just astonishing.

And a truly skilled potter can see, even before she begins work, what is going to be formed, as the wheel turns, and her hands begin the delicate, yet strong process of shaping the clay - pressing harder to make it narrower, or softer where the pot is to be wider, or using one's fingers to make the bowl turn out at the top - it is something I could watch for hours...

I suspect you know where I am going with today's sermon by now! I love the book of the Prophet Jeremiah. And this particular passage speaks strongly to me precisely because of the very earthy image of God as the potter.

The dominant theme of Jeremiah is that of national sinfulness and looming judgment.

Jeremiah's 40-year ministry spanned the final days of Judah's existence as an independent nation. Obeying his call from God, he urged his country's people to surrender to Babylon, whom God showed him to be the instrument sent to discipline God's people. Such a demand could be viewed only as treason.

As a result he was hated as a traitor to his people, and his life was often threatened. Yet Jeremiah lived to see his words come true. So Jeremiah was imprisoned, his life threatened, and his ministry constantly rejected by God's people.

We don't read much from Jeremiah through the year of Sundays - just a few chosen passages here and there, mostly in 3 or 4 week blocks. It was only a couple of weeks ago that we heard the story of the call of Jeremiah to ministry - when he tried to reason with God - "Ah Lord God truly I do not know how to speak for I am only a child!" And we have skipped through much of the intervening chapters, where it becomes increasingly more apparent that the people have turned away from God.

In great slabs of poetic prophesy, Jeremiah has brought word to the people and to the King of Israel of God's despair and anger at the nation's actions and its faithlessness. Images of faithless marriage partners; of sheep without shepherds, of a city under siege from an army all paint the clearest of pictures - God is distressed by the failure of God's people to follow the commands and laws they have been given. And despite all of this, all of these warning, they continue to wander.

So God now introduces another image - that of clay and potter. How much more explicit does God need to be. Will the people respond to *this* plea - will they realise the significance of the image of clay. After all, was not Adam formed from the dust of the earth? Will they not understand and recognise themselves in the same way - as clay, formed from the very ground?

And surely they would have seen how a skilled potter is able to take a shapeless and lifeless lump of clay and craft it into something of beauty, or something of practical

worth, or even something of value - something that can bring worth and identity to this clay?

This is God's desire for God's people - that they should be crafted into what has been God's plan for them from the very start; a faithful people, who would care for one another, who would seek justice for the oppressed, and who would ensure the vulnerable among the community are fed, and clothed, and housed, and given the dignity that is their inherent right.

This has been the call of the Prophet throughout the ages, it is the call of the Prophet Jeremiah to God's people almost 600 years before the birth of Christ, and it is as relevant today as it was then.

The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams has written a marvelous little book - perhaps the most accessible thing he has even written, actually - simply entitled "Being a Christian". In this book he looks at what he calls the four marks of being Christian - Baptism, the Bible, Eucharist, and prayer. It is the section he writes on Baptism that seems most relevant for us today, because in it he outlines what happens in baptism but more importantly what are the gifts given to us in baptism - what is bestowed upon us in this rite.

Rowan claims that as we are baptized into the life and death of Christ, so we take on the earthly ministry of Christ, most especially in the realm of Prophet, Priest, and King. Yes, this may be a surprise to you to think in those terms, but he's right. If we truly claim that our baptism joins us to Christ, then it naturally follows that we share in his ministry. So we are, each of us prophetic. We are priestly. We are "Kingly" - understood, as Rowan explains, as the freedom within our own lives to make our own choices - to shape our own lives.

So then, like Jeremiah, I am a prophet. Like Jeremiah, you are a prophet. So what is our prophetic ministry, today, here, now?

Because that is the invitation of today's message, I think. To ponder what sort of vessel God might make from me, this lump of clay - what sort of things God has in mind for you.

So, we have a calling to be prophets to each other, in this community of faith. To dream about what this place and this community might do together, and with others, as we seek to worship God and love and serve our neighbours.

Our Mission Action Planning process is just one way in which we hope the Spirit of God might speak to us, as we seek to discern new and different ways of being Church, fresh ways to talk about our faith with others, and confidence to dream that God might equip us to show signs of the Kingdom. I do encourage you to become involved in this process - either by attending our MAP planning sessions, or by engaging in conversations with others who have, remaining open and hopeful for the future.

And, as prophets, we are called to encourage one another in ministry, building one another up in love and fellowship. A strong fellowship and community together will be one which is naturally attractive to others who come, and will naturally seek the best for everyone.

And perhaps most daunting is our call to be prophets to the world -, "to ask as Rowan Williams says 'what's that for', and 'why do we take that for granted', and 'where's that leading us', and to do that for the whole of our human environment which needs that sort of questioning for its health and survival." It is a task which can at times seem overwhelming - it certainly seemed that way for Jeremiah. But God, in God's wisdom and power, called him, as we ourselves are called - to become vessels by which God's love and mercy are shown - to each other; to the community; and to the world...

Amen