

16<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Year C - 4/9/2016

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, of throwing a pot, 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 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 - entitled simply "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.

Firstly, and more obviously, perhaps, 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. And, as prophets, we are called to encourage one another in ministry, and also to call one another to account, or to question a direction that is being taken.

Might I say at this point, that the prophetic voice, therefore, must be sensitive - I am not advocating a constant stream of negativity flowing from one to another, all because Sam told me I had to call you to account!!

But as well as this calling to be a prophet locally, our sphere is much bigger than that. Because, just as the voice of the Prophets reminded whole communities that they were failing in their mission to care for the vulnerable, to love the unwanted, and to live lives of justice and mercy, so our voice must be heard in a wider sense, whenever and wherever we witness this injustice in the world around us.

As Rowan Williams says, it is "to ask '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."

And like Jeremiah, you may well find that this prophetic voice is not welcome. So pray for strength and courage, as you place yourself in the hand of the potter, and ask to be made into the vessel that God would mold - that particular vessel for which God has a plan and a purpose...

In the name of God. Amen.