

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 5 SEPTEMBER 2010

Rev. Anneke Oppewal

Jeremiah 18: 1-11; Psalm 139; Luke 14: 25-33

"The Potter and the Clay"

I don't know if you noticed but there is a difficult word in the Psalm and in the reading from the gospel: "hate".

Aren't we supposed to love? And eradicate that word, "hate", from our dictionaries and our lives altogether?

There is not only a difficult word in our readings. There is also a difficult image. The image of the potter destroying his work when he is not satisfied with it. An image applied to God in the words that Jeremiah speaks to his people, picturing God as someone who not only builds and plants, but also breaks down, plucks up, and destroys.

Another thing that doesn't sit easily with us.

Isn't God supposed to be this nice, loving and positive entity? Forever creating and recreating all that is good in the world? So where does hate come into that? The breaking down, plucking up and destroying?

Isn't God meant to love us, warts and all? And doesn't scripture tell us that God seeks to encourage that same loving in us?

Yes, that's right. The God that scripture talks about loves us with a passion that is able to overcome anything, even death. The God of scripture never gives up on love, on creation, on peace, on justice. And it is for that reason that the word "hate" and the image of the potter destroying his work only to start again emerges in the text.

That God loves us doesn't make what is wrong, right, you see. What these texts acknowledge, using these very strong words, is that there is evil, that there is wrong, that there is wickedness. That sometimes the things that God is creating, is building, is working towards gets spoiled, and damaged, making some radical action necessary.

What scripture shows is a God at work. Shaping and transforming all the time, guided by the principles of love, peace, wholeness and justice. And whatever might clash with that, has to go. Even when it hurts. We read of God taking that radical action at times, when forced into it by evil, reaching a level where nothing but desperate action will help. We read of God's pain, God's sadness, even God's remorse, every time this happens. Noah and the flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, the Pharaoh and his horses, they are all examples of such desperate action. Until Christ comes and God is seen to try something totally different. Trying to overcome hatred with love, death with life, evil with goodness. Until God shows us through this man Jesus how change might be brought about, without violence and destruction. Transforming our lives and the life of the world through practicing his ways and letting our agenda be set by his.

However, Jesus still uses that word "hate", doesn't he? And in connection to something that is most

sacred to us: Family. How can Jesus put those two together? Sure we all know family trouble is often the most painful and difficult of all to cope with, that family systems can lay claim on our lives in a way nothing else can, that family damage often is able to scar our soul at its deepest level, that abuse in a family context does deeper damage than anywhere else. But hate?

I believe that what Jesus is on about here, and what Jeremiah and the Psalm is also trying to convey, is that what gets in the way of love, gets in the way of justice, peace and wholeness, needs radical treatment. Treatment that will remove it from our lives and from our world. No compromises. And that that's why strong words and images may sometimes be necessary when we talk about it. Words and images that talk about strong emotions like hate and conjure up strong imagery like that of the potter destroying his work when he is not pleased with how it has turned out. So there can be no misunderstanding.

Hate is a strong emotion. It involves our heart, soul and mind. And it is that strong involvement God seeks when it comes to eradicating what does not concur with wholeness, peace and justice growing and shaping our lives. Even if it concerns what is held most sacred by us and those around us, family.

If family is destroying you, damaging you, standing in the way of your growth as a disciple and follower of Christ there is nothing but to let go of the chains it binds you with.

And perhaps that is a better translation, as some scholars suggest, of the greek word used here (if we don't let go of the strength of feeling expressed in the word): to let go. To let go of whatever gets in the way of God transforming our lives as individuals and as a community.

Perhaps the potter letting go of a shape that won't work and starting all over again with the same piece of clay can then become a liberating image instead of a scary one. When God is at work in our lives, in our world, God is not bound to one way, one thing, one plan. But God keeps working, shaping, forming, creating and recreating with endless patience, stubbornness and love for his material until it reaches its potential, its most beautiful shape. The clay growing more and more moldable over time as the hands of the potter work it and rework it. Our world growing more and more into the shape God had in mind from the beginning, a world where justice and peace run like a river and love informs every action. Us growing more and more into what and who we can be over time, letting go of the old, letting go of what hampers and gets in the way of us becoming whole.

Hate can then become a word that helps us realise just how passionate and committed we are meant to be about accepting the invitation to work alongside God, in Jesus' footsteps, untethered by anything that might keep us from making God's vision for the world come true.

At the table we learn what this vision looks like. At the table our soul is fed and nurtured, encouraging us to let go of whatever may be between us to live a life where sharing and caring come first. Encouraging us to believe that with God are new beginnings, over and over again, growing in us, making our world grow, closer and closer to this image of the household of God coming together at the table and sharing with the world, what they receive. Amen.