

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
SUNDAY 8 SEPTEMBER 2013
Rev. Anneke Oppewal
Jeremiah 18: 1-11; Psalm 139

“The Potter”

The parable of the potter as we read it from Jeremiah today is, to me, one of the most beautiful Bible passages around. Perhaps that is because I am a visual thinker: The picture of two sensitive hands forming and reforming a lump of clay into something beautiful really appeals to me. Or maybe it is because I myself like working with clay, the feeling of moulding, working and creating something out of nothing a pleasure that I remember all too well from kindergarten and other occasions where I had the opportunity to let my creativity out in that sort of way. To me there is a sensuousness about it and a sensitivity that is quite moving and is somehow able to touch something very deep inside me.

I know this is not the same for everybody. Some of us hate working with clay, the stickiness, the unruliness of the material, the difficulty of making something really beautiful.

Whatever your feelings are, Jeremiah uses the image of a potter moulding clay when he wants to say something about God. God, he says, is like a potter. Forever moulding and forming the clay of the world into something good and beautiful. Forever trying to make the material he has into something that will show his love and convey his mercy.

The material he is working with, however, proves really difficult. Often it doesn't want to go the way he wants it to go, and although he tries and tries and tries it never quite shapes into the thing he has in mind. That material is God's people. People he is desperately trying to shape into something wonderful and useful but that refuse to comply. Leaving God with a lot of frustration and the temptation to give up altogether and throw out the clay. But somehow he can't. And that is a very profound insight Jeremiah conveys to us here. Somehow God can't. God may be tempted to but he'll keep reworking the same lump of clay until finally he feels that it has become what he has been looking for. Creation and recreation going on to this day.

Where I grew up the imagery of the potter was understood differently than I understand it now. One example of this different approach to the story I still remember, is how, when a boy, a teenager my age, contracted cancer and had to have his leg amputated, that this was taken to be the potter at work, moulding and shaping his and his family's faith. Giving them an opportunity to grow in more perfect pots to God's glory! With the marks and scars that were obtained in the process became decorations that would only make the pot more valuable at the end.

Hardly loving and sensitive hands at work there! And for a very long time, whenever difficult things happened to me and to others this theology, supposedly supported by this text (and others like it), led to belief in a God who was harsh, violent, angry and difficult to placate. Trying to convince me that pain and suffering were just God's way of showing me love and helping me to grow.

“A good father doesn't spare the rod”, was one of the favourite sayings used in that context. Not only giving parents an excuse to physically whip their children into shape, but using it to portray God as a highly violent and abusive parent, who would, after he was done with some forceful prodding and pushing, then put the pots in a searing fire. Suggesting that after the moulding on the wheel of life has whipped you into shape, there is, if God really loves you, even more suffering to be expected in the refining fire of God's kiln. Living in an area of the Netherlands, where the clay was good for the production of bricks, and my father a builder who liked to visit the factories the bricks he worked with came from, I was familiar with the

moulding of clay into brick and the heat and the precarious process involved in the firing of clay. And so were most people in our village. We all knew that the clay needed to be worked, pressed into moulds, banged violently to get the air bubbles out and dried exposed to the elements. If the clay had not been worked enough, it would buckle in the oven and end up on the slag heap. Being turned into useful bricks was certainly not a pleasurable experience for the clay! And so, we were made to understand, it was with us. If God didn't work us enough, didn't press and bang us around before he put us in the fire, we would buckle and end up on the slag heap of misfits, of no use to God, or God's Kingdom. We also had some living examples of what happens when you get too close to that fire, or fail to handle it with respect in our Church. Labourers who were wearing the scars of "the Oven" on their bodies.

Needless to say the Christianity of my youth, the Christianity I grew up with and is still virulent in the Dutch Bible belt, produces a sombre, heavy, plodding kind of Christianity many of you would find difficult to recognise as akin to your own.

Why am I telling you this? Isn't our faith, our way of looking at God, our way of reading the text worlds away from that?

Well, yes and no.

It took me a long time to grow out of this sadistic imagery of God and master the fear it inspired. It was a long journey with many small and larger shifts along the way. One of the larger shifts, in relation to this text in particular was caused by getting to know and watch an actual potter at work and being invited to work with clay myself. There is no way you can mould clay into a pot when you are angry! Especially on a wheel. You may throw the first bit of clay on, but after that it needs patience, careful guidance, concentration, getting a feel for the material. The pressure needs to be gentle, measured, carefully applied, and otherwise whatever is on your wheel will go pear shaped pretty soon.

To produce something truly beautiful the potter not only needs skill, but needs to have the ability to completely lose him or herself in the material, become one with it, feel it, breathe it, smell it and stay with it without taking their eyes off it for even one minute. Because if they do lose their concentration for even a fraction of a second, it is highly likely they might have to start all over again.

That's very different from brick making, isn't it? And where that kiln is concerned? Finished pots need to be taken to the kiln with the utmost care because they are extremely fragile when they haven't been fired, and they'll only withstand the fire if the potter has prepared them for that fire properly and carefully. It's not the pot's fault that causes the buckling in the fire, if anyone, it is the potter's!

Jeremiah would have known that. In his world people would have passed the workshop of a potter at work every day. Would have been aware of the process, the skill and the care of the potter, and his motivation to build good strong pots before putting them in the fire. The work is a labour of love, and not of pain.

Why am I telling you this? I guess because it explains why I get irritable around people who put a positive spin on suffering and pain. People who say that an illness, or a crisis, or brokenness may, in the end, prove to be a blessing in disguise, sent from God to help us grow, or change or make changes. That it is one of God's ways of moulding us, the world, or the Church.

I've heard it around "Special Circumstances" (God has sent us the debt to help us to get on with "creatively re-imagining the Church"). I've heard it around the elections ("if Labor loses it will help it to get back on track again, the new asylum seeker policies may stop or slow down the baddies who make money out of other people's misery by providing the boats"). I've even heard it around Syria ("the nerve gas attack will force the UN to intervene and give them a chance to turn the situation around"). I've heard it around trauma ("wouldn't be the person I am if all these horrible things had not happened to me"), around illness ("it has made me appreciate life so much more") and around death ("losing a child has made me so much more empathetic"). And every time I hear things like that I get irritable.

Because my understanding of how these things work and how God works in them is different. Because, to me, thinking that way, believing that way, is dangerous, and unhealthy.

The image of the potter is one of love. Of endless patience, care and skill, and not of violence and intentional infliction of pain and suffering on God's part. God may be tempted to lose his patience, even lose it at times, or put a lump of clay that doesn't want to work with him aside for a while, but at work underneath that is always God's deepest desire to come back to his people to try and make it work again. Suffering happens, pain happens, illness happens, death happens, incompetence happens, they are part and parcel of our broken humanity. And God is in the middle of that, working with the material on hand, challenged in the process by irregularities and contamination that has gotten into that clay, despairing at times, needing to curb his impatience at times, but still skillfully, caringly, moulding and smoothing and holding and guiding the clay so it can find its way to its fullest potential. This will include marks and scars that have marred the clay, smoothing them out, or making them into features, badges of honour and strength, preparing the pot, pouring his strength, love and concentration into it so it can withstand even the worst heat of fire, should it come.

Watching his work, becoming part of it, knowing it, from the inside out, like any potter would. Helping it to change its shape to suit the material, or the destiny awaiting it.

An image that goes well with psalm 139 which portrays God as a creator so intimate with his creation that he knows every fibre, every breath, every movement of it with his heart. An image that portrays God as around his creation and in it, behind it and before it, beside it on every side, underneath and above it in every direction, even before conception. Holding, embracing this creation from every direction with love and care and gentle compassion.

For we who are the material he's chosen to work with the image then becomes one of comfort: We can trust God's loving hands around us, moulding and shaping us into people worthy of God's Name. Wherever cracks appear and difficulties arise in our smooth texture grows into something beautiful. God is there actively trying to get it right, to heal us and to mature us into something better than before. Sometimes we may feel everything has come to nothing, that God is not getting anywhere with his clay, that God has forsaken us. Our trust has to be that God will, in the end, not give up and keep shaping and forming, but trying again and again.

There are words of judgement in this image. Not about a God who would inflict pain to have his way with us, but about a God who is so gentle and loving that unwilling, broken and damaged pots not only challenge God, but actively hurt and pain God, sometimes to a degree where he has to put them aside. And that whoever or whatever gets in the way of bringing the clay to its purpose and destiny is getting in God's way.

In that sense the image calls us to actively shape our reactions and actions to what we know the hands of the potter are aiming for. Calls us to surrender to the hands that so lovingly surround us and keep us, and trust our maker. Trust the guidance of the one who knows every fibre of our body, our every thought, and our every action because it is the God who made us and loves us as can nobody else. Amen.