

The Potter and the Clay Jeremiah 18

Reading: Jeremiah 18:1-12, 15-23

The Potter and The Clay.

Imagine an elderly lady who spends hours watching the news. And she hears about the latest terror attack, or rising crime figures, or corrupt politician, or war of words between heads of states and she becomes increasingly anxious. And imagine the impact of that on her husband.

Now, if that woman was your friend, what help would you give her to ease her anxiety? You could tell her to stop watching TV couldn't you. And her life would probably be much happier if she did. But it might also magnify her fears, because now she knows the world is really bad, but now it's also hidden and who knows when it might jump out on her. Or maybe you could tell her, 'don't worry, be happy' or sing her Doris Day's, Que Sera Sera, whatever will be will be. And that might bring her a kind of peace, but fatalism is hardly the answer, is it?

What she needs to know is what the Lord teaches Jeremiah here - that he is in absolute sovereign control of history. That her life, and all the world with her, is in the hands of the one who loves her.

Look at verse 2: "Arise, and go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words." So Jeremiah watches as the potter takes some clay and works it on his wheel. And as he begins to work it into a vessel - maybe into a milk jug or something, it doesn't go the way he wants, maybe the spout's going wrong, so he reworks it into something else, maybe into a vase, v4, 'as it seemed good to the potter to do.'

And as he's watching, God speaks to him: v6, "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done?... Like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand."

Now when God tells you that he's the Good Shepherd, he's telling you that he cares for you. And when he tells you he's the Rock, you know that he's the ground you can stand on. And when he tells you he's your fortress, you know that you're safe in him. Each time he gives you an image of what he's like it's so you can trust him. It's exactly the same when he tells you, I'm the potter.

In Genesis chapter 2, God takes the dust of the earth, the clay, and the Master craftsman makes Man from it, because he's the creator, and we're the created. When objections are raised to God using Cyrus, a pagan ruler, to achieve his ends, Isaiah the prophet says, "Does the clay say to him who forms it, 'What are you making?' (Is 45:9) - because it's the potter who determines what gets made and used for what. And when Jesus meets a man born blind, he spits on the ground and makes clay from the mud and puts it on the man's eyes and restores his sight - because he's the potter with the power to make new. And in Romans 9, Paul says that just like a potter moulds his pots, so God is moulding every life for his glory.

And here, God says that "I'm the potter and the nations are like clay in my hands." And when you know that, you know he's in total control." And when you trust that, you won't be upended by whatever's going on in the world.

But what's true of the nations generally was true for Israel specifically. I mean, think: what had God made Israel for? For his glory, to be a shining example to the world of what it is to have God as

your centre. But she'd failed, that pot was spoilt, but still the potter reworks it, through judgement and exile if necessary, so that the light of his grace and love should still go to the nations.

And that tells you that not only is God in control, nothing can thwart his purposes - for his glory and our good. Not even our failings.

Because what was true for Israel as a nation, is true for us as individuals.

You see, when God first called Jeremiah he said to him, 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you' (Jer 1:5). And that word *formed* comes from the word for *potter* - it's what potters do. So even before Jeremiah was born, before you were born, you were on his potter's wheel. And he was moulding you and shaping you for his glory.

And that should teach us two things. Firstly, it should teach us humility. God, you're the potter, I'm the clay, and that means you can do with me whatever you want to. And these prods, and these squeezes, as your fingers shape my character and mould my life, it maybe painful at times, but thank you that I'm in your hands, you can do with me as you will.

But secondly, it teaches us hope. You see, when I was at primary school our headteacher was a fan of pottery, and he made sure we had regular pottery lessons. But you can imagine the kind of stuff we created, can't you. You're told to make a mug, and you do, but the bottom's wonky and the mug wobbles. The sides are wonky and the moment you pick it up, the handle falls off, and no parent would be foolish enough to risk drinking a cup of tea from it. Plus, it's covered in thumb prints.

But God is a much better potter. And you're clay in his hands. And he's forming you into something that's not just useful, but beautiful. So this pressure you're experiencing in life, these moments when you feel on the wheel and waters being poured on you and you're spinning and the thumbs are going in, aren't the sign that he's abandoned his work in your life, it *is* his work in your life. And nothing, no failure on your part, no ill intentions on others', can stop him achieving his purpose in your life - to make you more like Christ.

And that means Jeremiah's pottery lesson teaches him something else as well.

Change is Possible

And in v7 God gives an example of a nation threatened with destruction because of its sin. But then look at v8: But, "If that nation... turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it." So a nation, like Judah, could be on the verge of judgment, but if they turn back to God will turn away the judgment. But the same is true the other way. And in v9 God gives the example of nation moulded for blessing, but then, in v10, he says, but, "if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it."

So when God says, I am the potter and you, the nations, or you as an individual, are the clay, he's not saying, 'you're just a puppet on a string'. He's saying, 'I'm sovereign, and you have moral responsibility. And whatever your moral choices are, as a nation, or as an individual, I will work all things for my glory.' So this is divine sovereignty and human responsibility in a pottery class.

And in v11, God says to the people, "Behold, I am shaping disaster against you." But it doesn't have to end that way. Change is possible: v11 again, "Return, every one from his evil way, and

amend your ways and your deeds.” Because of their sin, they’re being shaped to be a toilet pot, but if they would only repent, they could yet be something much more beautiful.

Now, maybe you can see how the bad choices and decisions you’ve made in life, or your personality, or the way you treat people, are yielding bitter fruit in your life; and you don’t like the direction of travel, because you can see how this is going to look in 10, 20 or 30 years time. Or maybe you’re not yet a Christian and you realise that one day you will have to give an accounting of yourself to God - and things are not looking great. Well, this lesson at the potter’s workshop tells you that this trajectory your life is on doesn’t have to be it. Things can change. A very different future is open to you if you will listen to the Lord and yield to his hands and turn back to him in repentance and faith.

There’s a well known story that you’ve probably heard before, but I like it. One night the commanding officer of a battleship was on the bridge and he saw a faint light in the distance, so he ordered his radio operator to send the signal, “Alter your course 10 degrees south.” And the reply came in, “No, alter *your* course 10 degrees north.” So, the now angry captain sent the message again: “Alter your course 10 degrees south—I am the captain!” And the message came back, “No, alter *your* course 10 degrees north—I’m a seaman third class.” So the captain shot back, “Alter your course 10 degrees south—I am a battleship.” And the reply came back, “Alter your course 10 degrees north—I am a lighthouse.” And when you’re heading for the rocks it’s best to change course. And the great promise of the Christian faith is that you can.

But sadly, the message of Jeremiah is that the people of Judah refused.

The Danger of Spiritual Amnesia

Today, we tend to value stuff like independence and assertiveness, don’t we. But you also know that those can become destructive. And assertiveness can become stubbornness, and independence can become self-centredness and self-importance. I’m reading a book at the moment about 4 US presidents, called *Leadership: lessons from the presidents for turbulent times*. And it tells the story of how Theodore Roosevelt, after his initial election successes said, ‘I rose like a rocket’. To which his friend Jacob Riis replied, ‘those who rise like a rocket tend to come down like a stick.’ And sure, independence and assertiveness and knowing your own mind, and charting your own course can lead you to soar like a rocket, and bring you a measure of success... until you fall like a stick.

Look at v12, ‘But they say, ‘That is in vain! We will follow our own plans, and will every one act according to the stubbornness of his evil heart.’ God offers them the chance to avert coming judgment and they say, nope, we’ve got other plans. They’re happy with how things are now - so they don’t need, they don’t want to change. They thought they could carry on as they were and there would be no negative impact on their lives.

But think about your own life. We can become comfortable with wrong attitudes or wrong behaviours in our lives. And we excuse them - this is just the way I am. Sure others think this is wrong, but I’m easy with it - and we see no pressing need to change. Or maybe our sin does bother us, and we’ve tried to change, but change is slow or non-existent, so we become discouraged and think real change is impossible; or we can become complacent with our sin - this *used* to bother me, but I’ve learnt I can get away with it.

And in v15 the Lord explains what lies behind this kind of thinking: ‘My people have forgotten me; they make offerings to false gods.’ So it’s possible, God says, to forget him. Now, if you forget mother’s day, or if you’re married and you forget your wedding anniversary, you’re in trouble, aren’t you - because to the person you’ve forgotten it says, ‘I don’t mean anything to you.’ And to the people of Judah God had ceased to mean much. And maybe you recognise that spiritual amnesia in your own life. Maybe in the past you thought about God or praying or reading your Bible more than you do now, but now God is slipping out of your field of vision. He occupies your thoughts less. And the problem is that when God ceases to mean much to you, sin also bothers you less.

But it went further than that. It wasn’t that when they had stopped worshipping God they had stopped worshipping. It was that like a football fan who changes the club he supports, they’d switched allegiance to other gods. And, of course, the *other* gods of money, or success, or personal freedom are much more comfortable with sin, aren’t they. In fact, they make vice a virtue. And pride isn’t pride, it’s self-confidence; and covetousness isn’t covetousness, it’s ambition; and self-centredness isn’t self-centredness, it’s personal freedom.

But the problem is that that kind of spiritual amnesia, and redirecting your worship, leads you into dead ends. Verse 15 again: ‘They [these other gods] made them stumble in their ways, in the ancient roads, and to walk into side roads, not the highway.’ Several years back, one Saturday we arranged to meet Dan and Mia and John and Kim Bottimore, with all the kids, at La Berra, which is a ski station in the Prealps. And we’d never been before, so I went on Google maps and found La Berra, and printed off the map and set off. The problem was that the nearer we got the narrower the roads got, until we were driving on these single track forest roads, but it was ok, because we were still going up. But then the roads didn’t just get narrower, they got more and more snowy, but still, the map was clear, this road leads to la Berra and we’re still heading up. But by the time we were wheel deep in snow it dawned on us something must be wrong. So we stopped and rang Dan and Mia. And it turns out that we were heading for La Berra, the peak of the mountain, up a dirt track, now covered in snow. But la Berra the ski station was round the other side of the mountain. You’ll be glad to know that after that Dan and Mia bought us a GPS.

But that’s where forgetting God and turning to false gods leads you. Up dead ends and down side roads. However much they tell you you’re on the right track in life, they’ll never lead you where you really want to go.

In fact it’s the opposite. Look what God says in v17, “Like the east wind I will scatter them before the enemy. I will show them my back, not my face.” You see, Judah has turned its back on God, so now God will turn his back on Judah. Which is never a good outcome.

And yet, the cultural elite still refused to hear that message. Verse 18, ‘Then they said, “Come, let us make plots against Jeremiah, for the law shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet. Come, let us strike him with the tongue, and let us not pay attention to any of his words.” It’s interesting, isn’t it, how opposition to the message of repentance and faith can sound very religious, and spiritual and wise. And it comes from the voices of authority in the culture. The priests were the ones with power. They were like the government. The wise were the public intellectuals, the academics. And the prophets were the ones telling everyone, what you’re doing isn’t wrong, it’s right, it’s to be celebrated - so they were like the chat show hosts. And

these voices of authority in the culture wanted to shut Jeremiah down, to silence him. Just like today, they wanted to de-platform him.

And that rejection, and those threats by people whose lives Jeremiah was trying to save hurt him deeply, and in v19-23, the emotional dam breaks. Verse 20, “Should good be repaid with evil? Yet they have dug a pit for my life. Remember how I stood before you [Lord] to speak good for them, to turn away your wrath from them.” But now, in the face of all their plotting Jeremiah prays that they might feel the full extent of God’s wrath. Verse 21, ‘Deliver up their children to famine; give them over to the power of the sword.’ I’ve tried to warn them, but they refuse to listen, instead they want to kill me, so God let them experience all the horror of the war that’s coming. Verse 23, ‘Forgive not their iniquity, nor blot out their sin from your sight. Let them be overthrown before you.’

And the tragedy is that because of their refusal to change direction this is exactly what did happen.

But you and I need a better prayer than Jeremiah’s, don’t we? You see if we recognise our need to change, and that there are times when we can forget God or get tempted by other gods, then we need someone who prays a better prayer than ‘God, let them experience your wrath.’

A Much Better Prayer

And here, in his hurt, Jeremiah prays that God’s wrath would fall on them, but Jesus comes and experiences the same opposition - from the very same cultural elite who opposed Jeremiah. But unlike Jeremiah he doesn’t pray for their destruction. In the Garden of Gethsemane he prays, ‘Father, take this cup from me, but not my will, but yours be done.’ If it’s your will, Father, I will drink the cup of your wrath that they deserve. And he does drink it.

And at the cross, as he bears our sin, God the Father turns his back on his Son, so that he might turn his face to you. And Jesus is overthrown instead of you. But what does he pray as they crucify him? Does he pray Jeremiah’s ‘Forgive not their iniquity’? No. ‘Father forgive them, they don’t know what they do.’ And rather than pray that our sins might not be blotted out, Jesus carried those sins, and he was blotted out. As John writes, ‘The blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.’ And the wrath of God that Jeremiah wants to fall on the people, fell on the Son of God - so it never has to fall on us.

And God is the potter, and we’re the clay, and he has every right to treat us as Jeremiah prays. But he doesn’t. Instead Christ takes it all.

But he doesn’t only die for us. God raised him and now he lives to pray for us. Listen to Hebrews 7:25, ‘He is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.’

Those times you forget him, he’s praying for you. Those times when you’re tempted by idols and dead ends, he’s praying for you. Those times when you fall, and feel discouraged and empty - he’s praying for you. And those times when life is good and pride is rising, he’s praying for you.

And knowing Christ like this means you can yield to his hands. He loves you, he died for you, he prays for you, so as he moulds your life, as he tells you - ‘things need to change’ - you know he means good for you, and will give you the power to change. And when you’re tempted to drive down those dead ends you know his ways are better. Including the way you think of those who

oppose you. As Jesus says, 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you' (Matt 5:44). As Paul says in Romans 12, rather than taking revenge you can 'leave it to the wrath of God', you can leave it in his hands, because he's the potter, you're the clay. And instead of repaying evil with evil, you can 'overcome evil with good.' (Rom 12:21).