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Jeremiah 18: The Potter and The Clay

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One thing the pandemic has highlighted is that most of us dislike being told what to do. We don't really like authority and we don't like it when we don't have control over our own lives and choices. Stay inside? Forget it! Stop shaking hands? Forget it? Wear a mask? You've got to be joking! Get vaccinated? Perhaps it's best we don't go there...

We in the West dislike being told what to do. We like being in control, masters of our own destiny, able to make our own choices, determine our own paths in life, do what we want when we want, express ourselves the way we want without anyone contradicting us. We change laws to suit what we think is good. We vote out leaders who don't champion the message we think is right. And we attack anyone who dares to oppose our views.

In the West, we like to think we are in charge, masters of our own lives, free to do as we please. In many ways, Judah in Jeremiah's day was similar. Intent on living according to their own wisdom and good pleasure and very much opposed to anyone who challenged them – whether that be a true prophet, or even the one true God. But the notion that Judah was control of their own path was an illusion, just as it is with us. Their apparent mastery of their own lives was a falsehood, just as it is with us. And their pride and arrogance was about to be shattered in a very painful, very public way if they did not repent of it.

In our passage this morning, God takes Jeremiah on a field trip, if you like, and uses an everyday occurrence to powerfully illustrate to his people who they are in relation to him.

He is the potter, and they are clay; they must yield to him or perish.

18:1 This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: ²“Go down to the potter's house, and there I will give you my message.” ³So I went down to the potter's house, and I saw him working at the wheel. ⁴But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him.

In the days before plastic, pottery was the thing. What Jeremiah saw in the potter's workshop was not a novelty but a tradesman going about his business, fashioning clay into all manner of objects on his wheel, with great skill.

But as Jeremiah watches, there's a problem with the pot. It is marred – not because of the potter's hands but because of the quality of the clay itself – perhaps it's too wet or dry, perhaps it contains blemishes or impurities – whatever the issue with the clay, it is not appropriate for the vessel the potter originally intended to make. And demonstrating his deft skill and wisdom, the potter refashions the marred clay into a different pot, *shaping it as seemed best to him*.

⁵ Then the word of the LORD came to [Jeremiah]. ⁶ He said, “Can I not do with you, Israel, as this potter does?” ... “Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, Israel...”

What Jeremiah saw at the potter's workshop puts an end to all pride and every boast. It was a lesson in the absolute sovereignty of our Almighty God – the great potter who holds all people, all nations in his hands, who can and does shape them all *as it seems best to him*.

Can I not do with you as this potter does? It is one of the greatest rhetorical questions ever posed – who would dare answer no?! As Isaiah asks, *does the clay say to the potter, ‘what are you making’?* [Is 45:9] Of course not! Our God is the great potter; humans are but clay in his hands. God can do whatever he wants with us. As one commentator writes: *That is what it means for him to be God. Because God is God, he can do whatever he pleases – in his hands are all power, all rule, all authority, all dominion. This is the doctrine of the sovereignty of God. You may not like that doctrine, you may fear it, you may tremble at it, but you*

cannot escape it. You are not on equal terms with God – he is the creator, and you are the creature. He alone is the absolute sovereign.

We are made by God, for God, and he has the right to do whatever he chooses with us. It's incredibly humbling isn't it – particularly in a day and age where we believe we can be whoever we want to be, to love whoever we want to love, and do whatever we want to do. Yet Scripture tells us we are but clay in the hands of the great potter; he has complete authority over us. John Calvin once wrote, *until men are brought to know that they are so subject to God's power that in a single moment their condition can be changed, according to his will, they will never be humble, as they ought to be.*

God can change us, shape us, collapse us down and build us back up, according to his perfect will and wisdom, for our good and his glory. And he does. We are not the masters of our own destiny. We are subject to the great and wise God Almighty.

Now a few things to point out here.

Firstly, there are some who read this passage and believe that the potter is limited by the clay, that in some way, the clay can frustrate the potter's original design for it and cause him to change his mind. That the quality of people determines what God can do in and through them. It's a view that gives far too much credit to humans and far too little to God, forgetting that he made us in the first place. Isaiah has the perfect answer to those who believe this, in ch 29: *you turn things upside down, as if the potter were thought to be like the clay. Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it, 'you did not make me'? Can the pot say of the potter, 'you know nothing'?*

God is God. He can do as he wants with every one of us. He can humble the proudest person, he can redeem the hardest heart, he can make something beautiful, something God-glorifying, out of the deepest brokenness. He is in no way limited by what he has made.

Secondly, some read this passage and assume its purpose is purely to bring us comfort – that God will continue shaping us and moulding us and making us into something wonderful. And though this is true of God and part of what we can take from this passage, it's not the main point.

See, Judah had disobeyed the covenant, they had turned from God and worshiped idols, and had stirred up God's righteous wrath in the process. The reason why God took Jeremiah down to the potter's house was primarily to warn Israel about the judgement of God.

⁷ If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, ⁸ and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. ⁹ And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, ¹⁰ and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it.

¹¹ "Now therefore say to the people of Judah and those living in Jerusalem, 'This is what the LORD says: Look! I am preparing a disaster for you and devising a plan against you. So turn from your evil ways, each one of you, and reform your ways and your actions.'

Through his message to Jeremiah, God was pronouncing judgement upon Judah because of their evil and giving them the chance to repent before it is too late. Jeremiah's message was about clay in the hands of potter whose righteous anger had been stirred, and who had every right to destroy them because of their sin.

And God warns Judah clearly, *'I am preparing a disaster for you and devising a plan against you. So turn from your evil ways, each one of you, and reform your ways and your actions.'*

The message is clear. Destruction is coming if they continue in their wicked ways, serving the idols of other nations and bringing dishonour to the name of the one true God. And God urges them yet again to repent, to turn from their evil ways and turn back to him. If they do this, if Judah repent, if they obey God once more and walk faithfully with him, he will relent and spare them from the coming destruction. ¹² *But they will reply, 'It's no use. We will continue with our own plans; we will all follow the stubbornness of our evil hearts.'*"

Judah had turned from God. They had their own plans, their own agenda, their hearts were hardened in sin. They had exchanged the truth of God for a lie and refused to repent and submit to him once more. They had chosen their own path, the path that leads to destruction. And so, like marred clay on the potter's wheel, Judah would be collapsed down.

God says in v15, ¹⁵ *...my people have forgotten me; they burn incense to worthless idols, which made them stumble ... in the ancient paths.* ¹⁶ *Their land will be an object of horror and of lasting scorn; all who pass by will be appalled and will shake their heads.* ¹⁷ *Like a wind from the east, I will scatter them before their enemies; I will show them my back and not my face in the day of their disaster."*

The day of God's anger [v23] was coming. In the capture of Judah and the siege of Jerusalem, their children would die of starvation. Their wives would be made widows. Their men would be put to death, their young men would be slain by the sword, and a great cry would go up from their houses as the Babylonian army descended upon them, crushing the land and taking the survivors into exile [cf. 21-22].

Did God have the right to do this? Absolutely. He is the potter and we are the clay. He is under no obligation to forgive those who turn against him or reject him or deny him. God had dealt with Judah so patiently, so mercifully for so very long, giving her warning after warning, chance after chance to repent, but the time for God's righteous judgement had finally come.

And the day of God's righteous judgement is coming for each one of us also. 2 Corinthians 5:10 tells us that we must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ. We will each give an account for our lives to God [Rom 14:12]. Whoever believes in Jesus Christ shall not perish [John 3:16] – whoever has confessed with their mouth that Jesus is Lord and believed in their heart that God raised him from the dead will be saved [Rom 10:9]. But whoever does not believe stands condemned already [John 3:18]. The choice each of us face is as serious and as urgent as the choice Judah faced.

So today, where do you stand before God? If you were to meet your Maker today, would you stand forgiven and saved because of the blood of Jesus Christ which was shed for you, or would you stand condemned, because you have rejected God and persisted in your own ways?

Jeremiah 18 should strike reverent fear into the heart of every sinner, which includes each and every one of us here today. We are clay in the potter's hands. The God who made us can also take our lives without a moment's notice. If we turn our back on God, if we refuse to humble ourselves before him, if we choose to persist in sinfulness, denying God and rejecting the offer of salvation he extends to each one of us, then the day will come where he turns his back on us too.

Take the opportunity God is giving you to turn to him. Ask him to have mercy on you. Trust in Jesus Christ, who lived and died and rose again for the forgiveness of your sins and to reconcile you to God. And if you do, you can know for sure that just as *a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him, for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust* [Ps 103]. God formed us. He knows us. He is the potter and we are the clay. Yield to his hand today and know his great love and compassion and forgiveness.

Now, as we've said, the main reason God took Jeremiah down to the potter's house was to warn about judgement. But there was also comfort in this passage for the faithful remnant of Israel, and for every one of us who believes in Jesus.

If God is the potter, then he can make something out of the most un-promising blobs of clay. It takes a patient and skilful craftsman to make a pot that is both useful and beautiful. It takes a potter who refuses to give up on his work – even when there are flaws in the clay - not to give up and throw it away, but to continue moulding and shaping it, patiently re-forming it, making something new and wonderful out of failure and brokenness and disappointment.

This is what God did to Judah. They were crushed for a time and sent into exile. But after 70 years, he restored a faithful remnant to the land and continued moulding them as his people, rebuilding something beautiful out of their brokenness.

And this is what God has done to every Christian. We came into this world marred by sin. None of us were promising clay, none of us were useful or beautiful. We all needed to be created over again.

And in the words of one commentator, *that is what the Holy Spirit does in the life of a sinner who trusts in Jesus for salvation – he makes us into something useful and beautiful. If you know Christ, you are a memorial to God's patience and longsuffering, to his power of making something out of failure.*

Yet if we want God to make something useful and beautiful out of our lives, we have to yield to him. And as clay goes, we humans are not easy to work with!

I doubt many of us are happy with the way God is moulding our lives. He often makes something out of us that we wouldn't naturally wish for and shapes us in ways that we do not have in mind. We have difficulties, disappointments, frustrations and trials in every area of life: in our families, in our relationships, in work, in health, in our plans for the future. Very likely, if we were behind the potter's wheel, we would shape ourselves differently. But would we then unseat the great potter and take charge of our own shaping?

We are not the potter. We are only the clay, limited in every way, including in our wisdom. The proper thing for clay to do is to trust the great potter, who alone knows no limits. We must let go of the control we so desperately but foolishly crave and allow God to mould us, shape us, break us down and build us back up as he sees fit, according to his perfect wisdom.

Are we willing to trust the great potter? Are we willing to believe that his wisdom is best, his ways are best, and it is he who shapes and fashions us the best – so much better than we ever could?

If we have given our hearts to the Lord Jesus, we can trust him to make us into something useful and beautiful, should we yield to his hand. May our prayer this morning be, in the words of the wonderful hymn, *have your own way Lord, have your own way, you are the potter, I am the clay, mould me and make me after your will, while I am waiting, yielded and still.*