

Luke 14:25-33

Philemon 1-21

Jeremiah 18:1-11

When I was at college I took part in an Arts Weekend where we were all given the chance to 'throw a pot'. We had to create something from a lump of clay, using a traditional potter's wheel. Despite all my best efforts, I achieved very little. Every time I managed to mould a design which seemed acceptable, I then pressed too hard on the clay, or tried too hard to smooth out a wrinkle - and the clay fell apart!

So I am full of admiration for successful potters and can empathise with the prophet Jeremiah while, as we heard in our Old Testament reading, he watched a potter at work.

Jeremiah saw that there was serious trouble on the way for Israel. The Babylonian Empire was rising and Judah was caught between Babylon and Egypt. The old securities were being broken down and even that stronghold, Jerusalem, could face a breakdown and fall into the hands of Babylon. But as he watched the potter, he realised that in the hands of God, such breaking down of the nation could also lead to its renewal.

Imagine we're in that potter's shop. In the corner is a pile of unused clay. It looks like useless lumps, dirty and not very attractive. To most people it would look ready to be written off. But we know that in the hands of the potter it can be transformed into something of worth and beauty.

Now let's look at the potter: he seems to be having some difficulty with a lump of clay. It's not going according to plan. For a while the clay seems alright but then it develops a wobble. The potter tries again but the wobble is still there. So he stops the wheel and wonders what to do next.

He could throw the clay away and start with another lump. Instead he takes the lump he's been working with in his hands and gently, patiently, re-shapes it. Unfortunately, the clay still does not produce the form he had in mind, so he breaks it down so that it can be rebuilt. He's very patient and as long as the clay remains malleable, he will make something of it!!

Now look in the other corner - at the lovely things the potter has made from the clay - beautiful and useful dishes, urns and vases. If **he** can do that with clay, think what God could do with you or me! - even if just now we might be feeling like one of those useless lumps!!

It's easy to see how we are like that clay. How many people have been regarded as useless or have felt themselves to be worthless until they have put themselves into God's hands. However, in our reading from Luke's Gospel, Jesus cautions us that if we commit ourselves to him we must be aware that there are consequences!

If we try to follow his way faithfully, we could be tested almost to destruction. We could find ourselves at odds with the rest of our family, or putting all our time and

energy into a project, for his sake, only to find it crashes. Similarly we might run around ‘making things happen’ in his Church, till the day he brings us up short with physical or psychological illness. Through Jesus we know that God is impartial, however important, or unimportant, we might think we are, only God knows how he can remake us so we become acceptable to him.

We need to understand that breakdowns are not always bad- they can be warnings that we are going in the wrong direction. Nervous breakdowns, business breakdowns, breakdowns in our health, can change dramatically once they are in the hands of God, where they can become **breakthroughs** to a better life, a stronger life.

However, as we are not God, we cannot at the outset see the outcome of placing ourselves in his hands. But, as with Jeremiah’s potter, all things are possible with God so long as we remain malleable, open to his influence, and not too set in our ways. We know God **wants** us to have a loving relationship, because he was even prepared to send his only Son to us, to enable us to be reconciled with him. So he’s always pleased when we return for him to work on again.

Talk of breakdowns raises the question of whether ‘suffering’, pain, is inevitable. As far as we know, life emerged on our planet when the first cells began to divide and multiply. Some creatures developed the ability to feel pain, which we now know helps us learn how to avoid danger. Then the faculty of memory developed, so lessons learned by one generation could be passed on to the next. Some animals became able to choose between alternative forms of action, developed self-awareness and the ability to love.

So, if there were no pain, we would not be able to learn from our mistakes; if there were no death, there would be no room for us to live, and no new babies would be born. We have become what we are because of pain and death.

Yet we also started to query **why** we should have to endure such things! So pain and death led to the concepts of suffering and grief.

Scientists can explain that this is **how** we developed but, as we are human, we want to know **why** we have to suffer and grieve. While science can answer the ‘how’ questions of life, it can’t tell us why, for what reason, things happen.

Yet it seems impossible that you and I should be what we are, unless there was some purpose for our existence. Suffering and grief really would be unbearable if they were accidental and meaningless. If we can see some reason for our torment, we can be enabled to deal with the situation.

Because God is the creator of space and time he is not limited by either, and Christians believe, as Jesus has explained, that he planned and controlled everything so that those who love him can live with him eternally. Because God is infinite, there’s room in heaven for all those who want to go there. As we’ve seen, as life on earth developed, pain was necessary so that we could learn to love, and death is inevitable so that we can enter the next phase of God’s loving plan for us.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus said, ‘Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me

cannot be my disciple'. In other words, suffering and death, when we are trying to be good Christians, have an essential part to play on our path to eternal life. In the light of Jesus's death on the cross, we can deal with them courageously, as Jesus did, as an inevitable part of our progress towards a glorious eternity.

Through Jeremiah, God told the Israelites that if they did evil in his sight or did not listen and respond positively to his voice, he would change his mind about the good things he had planned for them. Jesus told the crowd that if they wished to follow him and to enjoy eternal life, they had to be aware that they could not just cherry-pick from the commandments he gave them.

They had to give up all their possessions, realising they were simply stewards of what God had provided. They had to put themselves completely in his hands and allow him to reshape them. No more resistance and no more indecision.

When God created each one of us he made sure no two of us were the same, but as we know, because we **are** all different, the business of living in relationship with others and the worldly influences on our lives, can knock any of us out of shape. We can become obsessed with making our fortune, being a size 8, being popular with everyone we meet, or making ourselves indispensable. But where does it get us in the end?

God wants to restore the loving relationship with **him** for which we were created. Jesus has explained that to be reconciled we need to follow his way not ours, and that the road will not be easy.

The choice is ours, do we want to be useful and eternally-valued pots, or short-lived lumps of clay? Each of us can become a thing of beauty and a joy, to God, for ever. Let's put ourselves back into God's hands and begin to share eternity with him.