

Sermon for Knox Presbyterian - Dunedin 4th Sep 2016, given by Rev Dr Doug Gay

Jeremiah 18:1

The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD:

Come go down to the potter's house and there I will let you hear my words..

let us pray: Lord – let us hear your words this morning, this is our prayer,
in Jesus name, AMEN.

His name was Tommy – and if he was tired of hearing this story from Jeremiah chapter 18 he never let on.

Tommy Lohead – to give him his full name, I never ever heard him called Thomas or Tom.

As long as I knew him he had white hair - thinning a bit on top and a white moustache
white hair which he wore longer than people in our church should have – right down to his collar –
he got away with it, because he was an artist - in fact he was a potter to be precise –

Tommy Lochhead – the Kirkcudbright potter – based in the fishing town in South West Scotland which had
become something of an artists colony –

He worked in the Old Mill – where the artist Jankel Adler had worked before him.

I loved Tommy – he was proof that someone from my church could be an artist, which had never occurred
to me until I met him.

Apparently when he was an art student – he went late to a church service mid week, still wearing his
painting clothes -

A woman turned round – looked at him disapprovingly and said –
are you saved son?

Now he's dead, his work sells for increasing amounts of money – back then he was always hand to mouth.

He had a lot of church folk drop in over the years – and being a church where folk knew their bibles –
almost every time someone would say – as the Lord said to Jeremiah – come go down to the potter's
house – so here we are. And he would grin kindly at them, as if he had never heard anyone come out with
that line before.

He had a portable wheel, which he could fit into the back of his battered old blue ford –

He used to take it round to church meetings – usually for the kids -

He would set it up - slap some clay on - dip his hand in water
and he would say

One day the Lord told Jeremiah... come go down to the potter's house..

As he told the story, he would build a beautiful pot – but he had secretly put a stone in the lump of clay –
when he began to thin it out and pull the top up – it would wobble, then buckle then collapse in a
crumpled mess on the wheel.

The kids looking on in wonder – would all sigh in disappointment.

Tommy would find the stone and pull it out – that's what the Lord Jesus does for us he would say – and he
would build the pot again – this time straight and true.

I have one at home – one that he took back and glazed and fired for me – on the bottom, where the other
ones say Lochhead – he's scratched on the clay – Made New.

For years I saw Tommy every week in church – he and his wife would drive me to Dumfries for youth
meetings because there was nothing for young folk in our church A shy, kind, humble, godly man – a warm
hearted and sincere believer, an artist in a church which didn't approve of artists

I hope you'll understand why I can't read Jeremiah 18 without Tommy in my mind –

It's a great story and he was a great man – although I'm not sure that his old testament interpretation was as good as his pottery – it's a big leap to go straight from Jeremiah in the potter's house to Jesus dying on the cross to take the stone out of your clay.

And actually – Jeremiah 18 is maybe not much of a story for children after all. When you read it – it's not an easy picture of God we are given.

If you read through the words of this prophet – you will find that Israel as a society was unable to face its disturbing reflection in his work.

If that last sentence sounds at all familiar, I walked around Dunedin for the first time on Friday – I stopped in to check out this church and then just after, I stopped to read a billboard on the street a few yards from here. It carries a poem by James K Baxter called *The Fear of Change* – and at the bottom are those words '*Baxter was often at odds with a society unable to face its disturbing reflection in his work*'.

I walked on to discover the University book shop and bought a volume of his poems, alongwith the Michael King history of New Zealand.

Because we read Jeremiah within the covers of our bibles – within the canon of scripture – it is tempting to assume that his words have been folded neatly into our religious traditions – but when we actually read the words of the prophets aloud – we realise that they remain deeply disturbing words – if you'll forgive the anachronism - we might even wonder if Jeremiah is not a kind of James Baxter of the Old Testament – holding up a mirror we do not want to look into, confronting us with a reflection we are not ready to face.

There is an insight which I return to again and again – which I share with all my students – its from the writer and theologian Sam Wells, now Vicar of St Martin in the Fields in Trafalgar Square in London – Sam says that as Christians or as people exploring Christian faith, when we come to worship we are being trained in the skill of naming the presence of God. I love that idea. As we range through the scriptures – as we read prophecy and poetry and psalms, as we engage with history, as we encounter Abraham and Miriam, Rahab and Ruth, Jonah and Jeremiah – time after time we are being given new glimpses of God at work in the world, of God's presence and God's absence, of God's blessing and judgment – in times of celebration and festival and in times of oppression and exile. We are being trained in the skill of naming the presence of God.

Sometimes the word will be shaping and forming us for where we are here and now, for what is right in front of our faces – sometimes it will seem like an alien word – one we struggle to imagine being relevant to us – but if it becomes part of our spiritual repertoire, part of our skill set, part of our spiritual imagination – then we trust that the Holy Spirit will bring it back to us at a time when we need it. Which means on a day like today – we may have to gird our loins and dare to look in the mirror Jeremiah holds up to us and to our world.

The image of the potter's wheel is not an easy one for us. For a start we like to be involved, we like to make choices, we like to shape our own destiny, we like to be in control – It feels disconcerting to be compared to a lump of clay – when Paul uses this same image in Romans 9 – its in the middle of a pretty tough debate about how can life be fair if God seems to be choosing some people and not others – and Paul uses the image to stop his own question going any further.

You're just the clay – you don't get a say.

Some of us might be tempted to stop reading right there – I come to Knox Church and this Scotsman gives me a proper dose of Calvinist fatalism – but I want to invoke Sam Wells again – the great thing about the bible is that there are many, many stories and pictures of God in it – in most of them Israel is no lump of clay – in other scriptures we will find Israel complaining and lamenting – raging at God – think of Psalm 44 – what’s going on God? are you asleep? can’t you see what’s happening to us? So we don’t have to be dumb clay every day.

Which is just as well, because it’s not so comfortable being clay – you need a lot of trust in God’s goodness – especially when that pot that was looking so good, when it starts to wobble and then buckle and then collapse...

are you sure your hand is on us? – God – your good hand?

if we are the church in Syria – if we are the Church in the Democratic Republic of Congo – if we are the Church in Scotland, if we are the Church in New Zealand, the church on George St – and if things are not looking good for us - can we trust you, God?

And you know this story gets worse – as if it wasn’t bad enough just being clay – Jeremiah tells the people of Judah and the people of Jerusalem – God says

Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you.

you have to read it twice – sorry Lord, did you just say what I thought you said – you’re planning *against* us – we don’t need you against us as well - we’ve already got the forces of secularism and the Synod of Otago and Southland to deal with...

But the God we meet in Jeremiah 18 says – you have to turn from evil and you have to change your ways and you have to amend your life – you have to shape up –

Which is hard to hear. Its hard to hear as an individual, its hard to hear as a church, its hard to hear as a nation.

What is compelling about it is that I can see how it rings true in my life and in the church I work in – and in our national Church – I can see we are out of shape – things are starting to wobble, even to buckle – some have already broken down.

what’s going on God? can we trust you? have you got your good hand on my life, on our life as a church? on our nation’s life?

is some of this pressure on us – the pressure of your hand?

do we need to find new ways, new shapes – what are you making us into?

and what will it cost – I say this with one eye on our gospel reading today – what will it cost us to follow you into the future?

In Luke 14 we met Jesus in uncompromising mood – again, not a good one to use with children – Jesus says you can’t be my disciple unless you hate your family – and even life itself –

At this point I’m getting worried about the conversations when you leave here - *someone asks – were you at Knox this morning? yes – it was that visiting Scottish preacher.. oh how nice – did he say anything interesting – he says God is a potter planning evil against us and Jesus says we all have to hate our families – awkward pause – oh I don’t know if I like the sound of him very much...*

Luke tells us there were large crowds with Jesus – I feel like saying we don’t really have that problem – we can’t afford to scare people off –

But you know maybe they were there because they believed that this was worth coming out for, worth leaving home for, it was worth leaving nets, leaving boats, of course it was harshly put – of course Jesus

doesn't mean hate your family in the ordinary course of things – but he does mean this is serious – he does mean the kingdom is our priority, he does mean we will have to carry a cross

Luke says it – St Francis said it - Dietrich Bonhoeffer said it - there is a cost to discipleship – T.S Eliot said it in the Four Quartets – costing not less than everything – costing not less than everything

So sit down – I'm struck that Luke says this twice here – to those about to build a tower – sit down – work out the cost - can you afford it? can you afford not to?

to those about to go to war – sit down – can you win it – can you afford not to?

Whether its something inside us or in our personal life or our love life or our family life – whether its something facing you here as a congregation or facing the Synod – whether it's the challenges facing us as a society and as a world in the face of global warming and climate change...

We have things to chew on this week – we have this to think over – is God reshaping us and can we trust the hand of God and what needs to be reshaped in our lives?

What was the Baxter poem called? *The Fear of Change*...

Just as it was Baxter's vocation to write some damning epitaphs about this town and its Calvinist heritage – epitaphs which resonate strongly with the situation of my own Church of Scotland today – so it may be our vocation to unwrite them, to rewrite what it means to Presbyterian and Reformed in new colours and new accents – when Jeremiah or Jesus speak uncompromising words to us, it is to call us beyond our fear of change, to call us beyond what Baxter terms '*arguments about whether the corpses were dressed in black or red*' - if our talents are for what he calls *anger and monotony* – then we need to pray God will give us new talents – will stir up new gifts in us.

You know better than I what those gifts might be for you, for this congregation, for this city, for this country. It may well cost us to receive those gifts which will reshape us and remake us.

So we are here this morning - as Jesus says - to sit down – sit down and think – what are we going to build – what are we going to fight for - and are we going to do this – are we going to do this with you and for you Jesus... even if, like a potter, in being for us you are sometimes against us?

This morning, Lord, we pray for grace to receive these difficult words from you – we pray for the grace of your hand upon us and we ask you to reshape us so that we may live as your disciples, and let God's people say, AMEN.

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