

“Like artefacts being fashioned”, a sermon based on Jeremiah 18:1-12 and Luke 14:25-33, preached at Knox Church, Dunedin, New Zealand by Kerry Enright on 8 September 2019.

At the end of a day, when we reflect on what has happened during the day just gone, we can imagine God is not working in our lives, that we are essentially unchanging and that the people around us are unchanging. We can think of ourselves as essentially the same people we were ten years ago, and we can respond to others as if they are essentially the same people they were ten years ago, with the same views and perspectives.

Jeremiah presents an arresting image to challenge the idea people do not have the capacity to change or do not change: “Just like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.”

When we look back over our lives, can we see the impact of the potter, centring, shaping and perhaps at times breaking us? When we tell the story of a person at a funeral, we often name those times: the raw material given at birth, the experiences in which our spirits were tested and stretched, the times our lives were broken and reconfigured. The potter and the clay.

Sam Wells says, “We are God’s artefacts – beautiful, incomplete and mysterious.” God creates us as with shape yet tensile, with form yet flexible. Like trees whose capacity to bend enables them to survive the wind, from whichever direction it comes. The water of God’s spirit turns dust to clay, to be shaped and reshaped in the potter’s hands. We are not the same as we were ten years ago, physically, emotionally and spiritually. In the hands of God, our lives have been reshaped.

Where does malleability come from, our capacity to be reshaped? Malleability is an inner quality, an openness to the Spirit of God. The muscles of our inner being learn humble openness through practice, through listening in prayer and worship and scripture.

In contrast, a hard human spirit is impervious, set, closed in on itself. “We will follow our own plans, and each of us will act according to the stubbornness of our evil will.” Chapter 18 in Jeremiah begins a section where God addresses Judah’s resistance, where the pot must be broken because it did not allow itself to be shaped.

Malleability and teachability are taken up by the word disciple that Jesus uses. The followers of Jesus are disciples, students, learners, apprentices.

We know that as we grow, there are things from our past and from the present that we need to leave behind. “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.” It doesn’t sound like the Jesus who called us to love even our enemies.

He is speaking about being detached enough to be able to live the way of Jesus. Our commitment to those we respect and revere and love is not to bind us to ways that are not God’s ways for us here and now. We can respect and revere people from our past – parents, ministers, teachers, elders. We can learn from their wisdom, but we cannot escape the risky process of discerning God’s will for us now, here.

“None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.” “Give up” is like a gesture of offering. We give up what we have so God can use them, so our possessions do not possess us.

Our faith is that we are clay God is reworking.

In the world-wide Christian movement, the Presbyterian tradition is part of the Reformed family of churches that grew out of Calvin’s Geneva in the early 1500s.

Its catch-cry, echoing Jeremiah was this - “The church reformed and always being reformed.” For as artists know and as Jeremiah proclaims, the first attempt at pottery isn’t always a huge success. It often needs reforming.

In fact, Jeremiah’s image summarises the story of Christianity.

As Sam Wells says – “That’s how art works. Art doesn’t fundamentally lie in the creation of the material. The material is a given—to be understood, practiced upon, cherished, for sure, but not created. Art lies in the re-creation of that material in a new form ...”

“Christianity is not about imagining something perfect called creation and straining to get ourselves back to that ideal state; it’s about taking the material of humankind and the surrounding world and universe, exploring the form of a relationship between God and us, and contemplating the governing idea that God the artist will go to any lengths to restore that relationship.”

Athanasius, the fourth century Christian theologian and leader - “When a portrait . . . becomes obliterated through external stains . . . the subject of the portrait has to come and sit for it again, and then the likeness is re-drawn on the same material.”

The story of Christianity is that God does not throw us away as flawed but reworks us into something more beautiful.

The agent of this forming is Jesus.

Vincent van Gogh wrote: “Christ lived serenely, as a greater artist, despising marble and clay as well as colour, working in living flesh . . . this matchless artist made neither statues nor pictures . . . [but] loudly proclaimed that he made . . . *living* people, immortals.”

Jesus takes our brokenness and works healing. Jesus takes our distress and works comfort. Jesus takes our anxiety and works peace. He makes us into icons, images of the beauty of God. Jesus is the hands of God’s who turns us from formless material into works of glorious and eternal art.

Our tradition names the freedom to be reformed as forgiveness and our tradition names the work of being reformed as sanctification.

Augustine was a Christian theologian and leader in the late 300s and early 400s. He says that an artist who makes an unsatisfactory statue need not throw it away but simply moisten the material and remix it. He calls God the almighty artist who removes our shortcomings and makes us beautiful like never before.

What is true of us as people is also true of congregations like ours.

The gospel is about trusting that God will bring us into renewed relationship with God's own self, with one another, and with ourselves. The gospel is about allowing Christ and the Holy Spirit to transform the poverty of our nature through the riches of God's grace.

We are God's artefacts— beautiful, challenging, incomplete, delicate, mysterious. And our deepest unnamed longing is to be remoulded by the potter into something even more beautiful.

A church is a community where an artist is at work refining, caressing, transforming, remoulding, and restoring.

In what ways is God's Spirit making you into something good and beautiful and true?

KNOX CHURCH, DUNEDIN
called to be a community following Jesus



Knox Church
449 George Street
Dunedin
New Zealand
Ph. (03) 477 0229
www.knoxchurch.net

Kerry Enright: 027 467 5542, minister@knoxchurch.net