

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost 4 September 2016

[Jeremiah 18: 1-11; Psalm 139: 1-6, 13-18 ; Philemon 1: 1-25 ; Luke 14:25-35](#) from Vanderbilt

[Proper 18C / Ordinary 23C / Pentecost +16 Sep 4, 2016](#) from Textweek

The first reading today presents a primitive and simplistic understanding of God; it illustrates an appreciation of God (from around 627BCE) as the creator, shaper, destroyer and re-worker of creation; a theology that undermines the responsibility and accountability of humanity in the whole scheme of things.

However, the writer's use of the analogy of the potter and the clay can still be very helpful for us in appreciating more fully the dynamic that we still seek to grasp when we contemplate God, ourselves, and the part we all play in creation's unfolding.

If we could watch the potter at work, as if for the first time, with the innocent eyes of a young child, we might wonder at the forces at play as hands and clay seem to blend together in creating and forming shapes on the wheel.

What would really captivate us are the process and the movement, the ever changing shape that is unfolding before our very eyes. We would be held spellbound by the constant motion of the wheel like a rhythm underneath all that is taking shape as hands and clay seem to wrestle together in forming an ever changing shape.

And our attention would only lapse once the process had finished; but even then we might wonder again at the delight on the face of the potter; an expression of sheer delight brought forth from the shape of the clay.

Once again we are captivated by this wonder; the potter's expression; and as we look from the potter's face back to the lifeless clay and then back again to the potter's face; we are left wondering at what is going on when seemingly lifeless clay can create such delight in the face of the potter.

Now, would that same child we have just imagined, be as captivated by the picture of a \$21.6 million Ming Dynasty vase in the Sotheby's Hong Kong catalogue?

Staying with the child a little longer, as that same child grows up and explores the world discerning more and more through a life of family, school, church or temple perhaps they will come across the Old Testament writings of Jeremiah; and like us they might read as we read today:

“5 Then the word of the LORD came to me: 6 Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says the LORD. Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand”.

And then recalling, not from memory but rather from an early knowing; the child again sees the wonder of the potter and the clay and so is able to respond to Jeremiah's writing.

“*Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand*” Jeremiah had been told; but the child's response is ‘just like clay, I respond to your touch and bring delight to your face’.

Now older, the child sees beyond the simplicity of earlier years and sees more fully the delightful interaction that unfolds creation.

Does a musician bring music to life or does music bring a musician to life?

Does an artist create a painting or does a painting create an artist?

The older child's questioning brings to life what Christ revealed when he led primitive humanity beyond the confining simplicity of the Old Testament.

In the clay-full hands of the potter; in the pressing of palm to clay and clay to palm we glimpse the "word became flesh"; the shaping of creation being formed by the process.

Together, potter and clay can represent the true dynamic of creation, fully human and fully divine touching together to give both shape and delight.

On the ever spinning wheel of life, clay and potter interact in the process of creation and it is in that creative unfolding and forming that creation's delight is given shape.

The insights of childlike wonder can be translated into whole of life icons; the growing child can return to the icon of the potter and the clay, each time being reminded to attend more fully to the process of which they are very much a part.

Earlier generations could leave it all to God to sort out, for they failed to see the process that somehow Jeremiah had disguised into an activity of judgement by the potter over good and bad clay results.

Perhaps later in life, as the child's hair greys and thins out the reflections will still be there and remembered; however quite likely they will also be accompanied by a growing sadness for so many of the child's friends will have lived into Ming vases.

And the culture itself seems to have lost that sense of wonder illuminated by the creative process; a western culture that no longer gets its hands dirty with clay, but rather a culture of pristine Ming vases, living in air-conditioned museums, looking good, very expensive, and going nowhere.

The image of the potter and the clay might well serve to remind us today that the process of creation and the very touch of God is an ever present reality, the earth spins just as the potter's wheel spins and all the time we are on that spinning wheel we are part of creation's forming and re-forming.

And, what we might learn from the icon is a counter-cultural insight; life's purpose is not to become a Ming vase, rather it is to bring into shape that which will bring delight to the face of the potter.

The second reading is a letter from Paul, a plea for freedom; perhaps freedom from the museum that holds Ming vases.

Although this might well have been a very real and practical letter written with the specific purpose of pleading with Philemon for the freedom of Onesimus; it does give us an insight into the very process of setting free.

Paul's plea, his letter, has a verse right in the middle; "*I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you.*"

Does this illustrate for us the process of freedom; the giving of that which we love to another? Paul underlines reality of giving in the next verse; "*13 I wanted to keep him with me*"; he gave that which he wanted to keep; and so Paul echoes the Divine process of creation "he gave his only Son".

It is a good letter to round off our contemplation of that which is being formed on the potter's wheel.

And the gospel reading has been deliberately avoided this week.

We did not read the last three verses in Church today; for in over 2000 years they have not really been heard 'in church'; and I doubt anyone will want to hear them today, for they herald the end of the Church that we know and love.

[Note: These words were omitted from the reading of the Gospel:

33 So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions. 34 "Salt is good; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? 35 It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; they throw it away. Let anyone with ear to hear listen!"

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Perhaps we're better off staying with the child's response to Jeremiah; '*just like clay, I respond to your touch and bring delight to your face*'; and as we grow into the full insight of that wonder-filled icon, we might then write the last three lines of the gospel for ourselves.