

The Potter

Jeremiah 18:1-11

I had every intention of talking to you tonight about the Psalms and Psalm 119 in particular, but knowing that the road to hell is paved with good intention, a glance at the readings set for tonight prompted me to change my mind.

Both are good passages, but I could not pass up the opportunity to reflect on the Jeremiah's words for a few moments for as a prophet, Jeremiah usually gets a bad press.

He is famous for being the harbinger of doom and gloom – so much so that his name has entered our everyday language - if we label someone a 'Jeremiah' we know exactly the sort of person he or she might be.

But hidden amongst the despair in Jeremiah's writings are some real gems and tonight's Old Testament lesson is one of them.

Looking at you, I suspect that you are of an age where it is probable that you, like me, can remember the days when there was only one television channel and it was in black and white.

I suspect also that if you can remember that far back, you can also recall that in those far off days the BBC had things called 'Interludes' and it was during these that they broadcast some wonderful films one of which was of a potter making a vase.

As I recall, it was the most magical thing to watch and if you have ever tried working a potter's wheel, you will know how much skill is involved in making a half respectable pot.

And there is the image that Jeremiah gives us.

The potter takes a lump of shapeless, useless dirty and not very attractive clay and in his hands, it is transformed to something of beauty and of worth.

Go to any pottery – they exist in holiday destinations up and down the country – and there you will see an extraordinary display of skill.

And apart from the potter working the wheel, most of these places abound with the most amazing things the potter has made from a lump of shapeless, useless dirty and not very attractive clay.

And if a potter can do that with clay, think what the Creator can do with us – even if we do feel as though we are a useless and unattractive lump.

But Jeremiah takes us further than that. He invites us to watch the potter who appears to be in a bit of difficulty with the lump of clay that is on the wheel. It is not going as it ought.

For a while it seemed all right but then a wobble sets in.

The potter grasps his hands around it and tries to form it, but the wobble persists. He stops the wheel.

What to do?

He could throw that piece away and get another.

But instead, he takes it from the wheel, gently kneads it, puts it back on the wheel and has another go.

And he can do that any number of times as long as the clay stays malleable. Eventually he will make something of it.

It is easy to see how we are like the potter's clay.

How many people have thought themselves to be worthless?

What they, and we, forget is that in the hands of God, we can be shaped into something of value, something of worth. It may not happen straightaway, but if we allow it, if we remain malleable like the clay, God will succeed.

But for that to happen, we need to understand that breakdowns are not always bad – we need to see them as signs that we are going in the wrong direction. We also need to recognise that in the hands of God, the breakdown can become a breakthrough into a better and stronger life, for all things are possible with God.

And of course, the ultimate breakdown is death. But Jeremiah's image allows us to see even death in a new light.

In death, the potter is taking us into his hands and is planning to give us a new and more glorious shape and purpose.

God said *'... can I not do with you as this potter does? Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand'*

Thank you BBC for giving us that image of the potter and thank you God for not giving up on us.

Amen.

Mike Rogers

