

Jeremiah 18:1-11/Philemon 1-21/Luke 14:25-33

I am glad to be back from vacation and to find all of all in good shape. Thanks to the Churchwardens for running the day-to-day administrative affairs of this parish, thanks to The Rev. Rod Sprange and the Rev. Cannon Mary Holmen for pastoring to you during my vacation and thanks to all of you for your continuous faith in God, a world in which being religious is seen as being illogical.

Now, let me draw your attention to the Old Testament reading, Jeremiah 18:1-11. Jeremiah was unique in two ways; he was one of the longest serving prophets in Israel, he was active for the four decades, he also ministered to Israel before the exile and some years into exile though some Old Testament scholars believe that editors continued to add to the book after Jeremiah's death and they are not sure whether chapter 18 was written prior to the Exile or during the Exile.

Jeremiah's message today constitutes a warning and a plea from Yahweh to Judah. The warning is that continued faithlessness will bring disaster, but the plea holds out the hope of prosperity to those who are faithful. Jeremiah started this kind of teaching in Chapter 17:1-4 when he reminded the people of Judah of their sins and promises that those who trust in human powers will be like dry shrubs in the desert, but those who trust in God will be "as a tree planted by the waters

Now, the last part of chapter 17 (verses 19-27) is a fitting prelude to today's reading. In those verses, God commands the people of Judah to keep the sabbath holy and promises prosperity to those who do and a devouring fire to those who don't. This same promise of prosperity to the faithful and punishment to the evil is reflected in our text. Of course, this kind of theology is difficult to comprehend in today's world in which the faithful seems to be suffering while the evil ones prospering. On my vacation I had an opportunity to read a little book by Francisco Danconia tittle, "money favours the evil". He was not necessarily encouraging people to be evil so that they become rich but he was emphasising the need for being principled when running a business and how that can be bring discomfort to the shrewd/corrupt world.

In the same way, the message of Jeremiah, though being straightforward, it brought a lot of discomfort to the Israelites, and he was considered a prophet of doom. The Israelites were a covenant people. Starting with the covenant of Abraham (the Israelites were “the people” the chosen ones, the covenant of Moses (Salvation was for the Jews, God’s mission was for the Jews and all of us we were not in God’s plan. This kind of theology is flawed just like believing that Men are the image of God and women were an afterthought) and Davidic covenant (among the Israelites, the house of David is the most special one and Matthew continued with this flawed theology to the extend of wanting us to believe that even Jesus was born from the house of David while in fact Jesus was there before David). The people of Israel/Judah had come to believe that these covenant promises granted them a privileged relationship with God that assured their prosperity and Jeremiah is reminding them that the covenant is a two-way proposition. God has chosen them, but they have a responsibility under the covenant to obey God. If they are not faithful, God is under no obligation to take care of them. Jeremiah makes it clear that the behavior of the people of Judah is crucial to their future. While God is all-powerful, God has chosen to give these people power to choose their destiny. Everything depends on their decision.

For them to understand better, Jeremiah had to speak to them in their ordinary language, **“Arise, and go down to the potter’s house, and there I will cause you to hear my words”** (v. 2). God has been revealing his word to Jeremiah through ordinary things, and he continues this practice in Jesus through parables. Today God chooses to reveal his word through one of the most ordinary aspects of life in those times, pottery.

In the ancient world, pottery was everywhere. People used clay jars for storage and cooking. They used clay tiles for roofs. They used clay bricks to line their ovens. They even used clay toys. The potter was one of the most important craftspeople in the community. God is preparing Jeremiah for an object lesson, revealing God’s word using pottery as an example. I want to believe that this was one of the most powerful sermons in ancient times because, the moment women grab their clay jar to fetch water, they would be reminded about this sermon; men of top of the roofs laying out tiles they would be

reminded about this sermon and children playing with clay toys in the streets would also be reminded about Jeremiah's message.

“When the vessel that he made of the clay was marred in the hand of the potter, he made it again another vessel, as seemed good to the potter to make it” (v. 4). This is the first part of God's object lesson, the object, so to speak. God will reveal the second part of the object lesson, the lesson or application in verse 6.

As Jeremiah watches, the potter determines that the clay piece on the potter's wheel is unsatisfactory, so he reworks the clay into another vessel. We don't know what the defect in the original piece was. It could have been that the clay was too wet or dry. It could have been that there was a small stone or other foreign object embedded in the clay.

Whatever the problem, the potter must destroy the imperfect piece before forging the clay into a new piece. He must take the imperfect piece in both hands and crumple it so that it becomes a lump of clay again. He must work the lump in both hands until it has a smooth consistency. He might need to add water to make it more pliable or add clay to give it more structural integrity. Only after this careful preparation can he begin again to create a new, more perfect, vessel.

It is important to note that the potter does not pitch the imperfect piece into a pile of rejects, never to be seen again. The clay is still usable, so the potter begins what appears to be a destructive process but is really a creative process.

But what is Jeremiah saying? Just as the potter turned the imperfect vessel back into a lump of clay and began again to fashion a usable vessel, so God will do with Israel. The Bad News is that Judah is about to go through what will appear to be a destructive process. However, the Good News is that, in God's hands, the process will be creative rather than destructive. God will create a new and faithful people out of the remnant of the old and sinful people. This is, in the end, a message of hope to a people in difficult circumstances.

Listening to Jeremiah's message, God is giving Israel (and all of us) a great deal of power to determine our destiny. The clay cannot challenge the potter, but Israel can act so that God will change. Israel, facing disaster from the Babylonians, can

change its ways and enjoy God's protection. People today have become skillful at finding some way to evade taking responsibility for the effects of their moral choices. There is always someone or something else to blame. The task of the preacher is to lead people to accept their moral responsibility for creating the world we live in. As a Church, as Christians we are called to remind people of their moral obligations in making the world inhabitable not only to the present generations but for thousands of generations to come.

In the name of God, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.