

Our Old Testament Lesson begins with an image that would have been familiar to the citizens of Jerusalem at the time of Jeremiah. Jeremiah is watching a potter working at his wheel. This is a very skilled job. The clay has been properly prepared, kneaded to make sure there are no air pockets to cause the pot to crack when it is fired. The lump of clay has to be centred on the wheel. Then begins the process of carefully forming the pot. The potter must keep his hands moist and steady – any sudden movement and the pot goes all over the place and he has to start the process all over again.

We don't get a chance to watch a potter at work very often but we might get a chance to see any craftsman or artist. I remember the Professor of Physics in Trinity when I was there (and this was a man who had won the Nobel Prize for his work in splitting the atom) telling a group of us that he loved just standing in the workshop in the Physics Department and watching the Chief Technician working on the lathe. He was, he said, a true artist. Or closer to home you could drop into the Hall on a Thursday morning after service and watch Len and Albert painting.

There can be nothing rushed in pottery, in painting, in drawing. There is a patient working in and through the materials to hand. There is that willingness to go back, to start again and again; to mould, to paint, to draw until the desired result is obtained. There is a commitment to the work in hand. It is a work in progress. Only when it is complete does the artist put her or his initials in the corner.

That day, we find Jeremiah standing, looking at the potter at work at his wheel as he takes the clay from the earth and patiently working it, forming it until he has formed the clay from the earth into something useful, even beautiful. As he stands there, he thinks of God patiently working in and through our frail and wilful humanity.

If we step back from that scene and look at the broad sweep of the Old Testament, we see two inter-twining threads running through the story, those of judgement and new beginnings. Mankind is very much a work in progress in the hands of God. We see it in the story of the Flood; out of the devastation of the Flood, a new start is made in Noah. We see it in the Exodus – there is the disobedience at Sinai as the people make and worship the Golden Calf; the people who left Egypt do not enter the land, but their descendants do. There is the recurrent cycle in the period of the Judges. Israel sins; Israel suffers; Israel makes a new start. This continues through the story of Saul, of David, of Solomon. There is the Exile and the return from Babylon. In all of this we see God working through humanity in all its gifts and in all its frailties.

Jeremiah feels a profound call of God on him to call Israel to repentance, to make a new start with God. For Jeremiah that day, the potter patiently working and reworking the clay is a powerful symbol. There is the power, the patience, the purpose of God. This continues through into Incarnation. God in Christ; at one with God, at one with man. As we are reminded in those opening words of John’s Gospel:

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

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¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

God so loved the world – the world in all its frailty, its messiness; its glory and its shame – that he gave, gave his only begotten son, to take on our human nature; to know what it is to be human, what it is to be loved, what it is to be rejected, what it is to know death.

What we have here is a picture of the commitment, the total commitment of God to this world he has made. There is a challenge here for us. We, made as we are in the image of God, ones for whom Christ died, are called to reflect, to incarnate something of the divine commitment to the world, channels of God's love, channels of God's giving. We're not there yet, for we too are a work in progress.

It is with this picture in my mind that I turn to the Gospel appointed for today, from the Gospel according to St Luke, with its call by Jesus to his hearers to follow in his footsteps the way of the cross. Jesus uses the image of a man building a tower, the need to think through what is needed to complete the task. Jesus, who in himself embodies God's abiding commitment to man, calls us to a service in which nothing is held back, that has something of the character of God's abiding commitment to us.

In this section of Luke's Gospel, the Gospel writer tells us of Jesus making some very uncompromising demands in our attitudes to our material possessions. So, our Gospel reading ends with the words:

So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.

It is one of those sayings of Jesus that, as I read it, I find myself saying, 'Lord, I wish you hadn't said that.' We all have responsibilities, to family, maintaining a roof over our heads, to paying taxes for services provided by the Government, supporting the work of the Church and the charities we support.

But the words are there in our New Testament – what are we to make of them? As I thought about that, that word possessions. In the Greek and in the English, the word ‘possession’ is linked to the verb to possess. And the word that we translate as ‘give up’ in our Gospel reading, carries the meaning in the Greek in which the Gospel was first written of ‘bid farewell to’. As I mulled over all that in my mind, these themes of saying farewell and possess and possessions, I got a sense of we are not to be possessed by our possessions. Our possessions are seen as ultimately not belonging to us, but gifts held in trust to be used and enjoyed in the context of our love and service of God and one another.

These intertwining themes of God’s commitment to us and our response to God are brought together in the sacrament of Baptism. In the past I would have sometimes said to parents as they prepared for their child’s Baptism, that God for his part has given his all – it is for us, for our children to pick it up and run with it; for we are all a work in progress. And so, in the Church of Ireland Service of Baptism, as the child is marked with the sign of the Cross, I would have said:

Christ claims you for his own.
Receive the sign of the cross.

Live as a disciple of Christ,
fight the good fight,
finish the race, keep the faith.

**Confess Christ crucified,
proclaim his resurrection,
look for his coming in glory.**

So, on this day, as we have stood with Jeremiah and watched the potter at his work and thought of God’s patience, God’s purpose; as we have heard again Jesus’ call to wholehearted discipleship, may we live out in daily living the call of our Baptism and

Live as a disciple of Christ, fight the good fight, finish the race, keep the faith.