

Jeremiah 18:1-11 We are vessels in God's hands.

This is one of my favourite keepsakes. Toby made it when he was in year nine. The school he attended required all year nine students to undertake a creative project of some kind, which they would display at the end of the school year. It had nothing to do with art as a subject - it was simply meant to encourage the students to express themselves in a creative way. Toby chose to create a series of slab pots. It took him nearly the whole year, and it was a fascinating process to watch. He'd make his pot, begin to decorate it, and then he wouldn't like the way it was turning out. So he'd squish it all up and start again. Finally, he was reasonably happy with the result, his work was glazed and fired, and his project was submitted. This is the only pot that has survived, unfortunately, but I really like it.

The reading we had today from the book of Jeremiah uses the metaphor of God as a potter.

Chapters 18 through 20 are all about the sovereignty of God; that is, God's supreme power and authority over all things. The same theme also is one that permeates Jeremiah's own walk with God. You'll remember the words God spoke to Jeremiah when he called to be a prophet. In Jeremiah 1:5, we hear God tell Jeremiah "I formed you ... I knew you ... I sanctified you ... I ordained you" ([Jer 1:5](#)) - God was at the helm right from the start in Jeremiah's life and ministry.

While Jeremiah thought he understood these words at the time God spoke them to him, as he continued to serve God, he gained an ever deeper understanding of what God meant.

In today's passage, we find God once again affirming his sovereignty, through giving Jeremiah a vision of God as a potter. It's through this vision that Jeremiah gains a much deeper understanding of what it means to live under the power and authority of God.

As we look briefly at Jeremiah's encounter with the potter, and so with God, I hope that we too will find new insights about the way God works in our own lives.

God said to Jeremiah, "*Come, go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words.*" ([Jer 18:2](#)).

1. Here was his first new insight. Up till now, God spoke and Jeremiah listened. But in this instance, the revelation from God would be a result of Jeremiah's obedience. He had to get up and go, responding to God's first instruction, before God would communicate further with him.

So often, this is the way it is for us in our own relationship with God. If we want to grow spiritually, we cannot allow ourselves to become stagnant. One of my lecturers at Theological college once said that in spiritual growth, there were no plateaux. If we weren't moving forwards, then we were slipping backwards. I'm not sure I fully agree with him on that, but I do think that if we become stagnant in our relationship with God, with neither forward or backward movement, we lose touch with the voice and working of God in our lives.

It is important to be obedient to the revelation God gives us. Why should God continue to speak to us, if we haven't acted on the last thing that he said to us?

2. Once Jeremiah had obeyed God, and gone down to the potter's house, he saw the potter at work. "*There he was, making something at the wheel*" ([Jer 18:3](#)). Here was a second insight. **Jeremiah saw in this that God's work had a purpose.** As the potter, God wasn't just fiddling with the clay. He wasn't just amusing himself. He had a purpose in what he was doing. He was making something at the wheel.

This gives us food for thought. The dramas and struggles in our lives don't have to define us. It is God who is the potter - not the circumstances in our lives. God can take any situation or eventuality and use it to shape us and refine us. I don't for a

minute believe that God *visits* calamities upon us, but as we work with him, he can *use* them to make us more like Christ.

This is underlined by the beginning of the next verse: *“The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand..”* ([Jer 18:4](#)). Notice it doesn't say that the clay was spoiled **by** the potter's hand; rather it was spoiled while it was **in** the potter's hands.

This allows for human responsibility - either ours or someone else's. God does not do the spoiling or damaging.

At a national level, God's people were spoiled. On the individual level, each one of us is spoiled. Paul tells us that we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

Once the clay was spoiled, it needed the intervention of the potter to put it right - just as Toby needed to re-shape his pot when it went pear-shaped.

3. Then there was a positive insight for Jeremiah. **He could see that what had gone bad was able to be re-created.** The rest of verse 4 says, *“So he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.”* ([Jer 18:4](#)).

There in the potter's shop, with the earthy smell of the clay and the clunking of the wheel, Jeremiah was given an insight into the God's sovereign plan to make an entirely new humanity from the spoiled nation of Israel. Given his usual brief, I'm sure Jeremiah would have found this insight most encouraging.

This is also encouraging on a personal level because it means that no matter how flawed or spoiled we think we are, in the potter's hands, we too can be made new. Paul reminds us of this in 2 Corinthians 5:17, when he says, *“If anyone is in Christ, he or she is a new creation. The old has passed; the new has come.”*

We also need to remember that God reworked the clay *“As seemed good to him.”* He didn't ask for the input of the spoiled clay on the wheel, nor did he take a survey or consult a committee -

(thankfully!) He reworked the clay according to his own perfect and powerful vision.

And just as well. How could any of us have envisioned the redeeming power of the cross to make all things new?

God then spelled it out to Jeremiah. We read in v6:

“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, O house of Israel.”

As God’s people, we need to hold fast to the truth that the mighty creator, the king of the universe, does know what he is doing. It is up to us to trust him, and work with him as he fashions us.

4. Finally there is a more sobering insight in this passage. The vessels in God’s hands carry a measure of responsibility. Speaking to Jeremiah, God says, *“Now, therefore, say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: Thus says the Lord: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings.”*

The metaphor changes at this point showing that while the potter is sovereign in his decision about how to fashion the clay, the clay can respond and work *with* the potter - or not. In this instance, the inference is that Judah, the vessel God is fashioning, is able to arrest her destruction by co-operating with the potter. The potter wants Judah to turn from her evil ways, and change the way she was behaving. We read in v8 *“If that nation against whom I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I thought to bring upon it”*

Sadly though, in the next verse we find Judah stubbornly refusing to change, so they are destined for destruction rather than renewal. v17 gives the sad ultimatum, *“Like the wind from the east, I will scatter them before the enemy. I will show them my back, not my face, in the day of their calamity.”*

So while God as the potter can fashion us in a way that will bring glory to him, and enable us as his people - and his church - to be all he wants us to be, it is necessary for us to work with him in order for him to fashion us in the way that is best for us.

How then - if we can see ourselves as clay - can we be more responsive in the potter's hands?

1. We need to be **alert to the nudgings and promptings of God** in our lives. If we think God has spoken to us, then we need to respond, as Jeremiah did, and then we will continue to hear from God.

-though there may need to be some checks & balances here. Sometimes we can get our wires crossed when we think we're hearing from God. We should always measure any revelation we receive alongside the Scriptures, and it's always a good idea to run it by a Christian friend whom we respect.

2. **We need to trust the potter**, knowing that he can remake and renew even the most broken pot.

3. **Let our lives be marked by praise and thanksgiving**, rather than resistance, as we determine to work with God as he shapes us into his likeness.

God is the potter. We are the clay. We will be the best that we can be if we allow the potter to shape us.

Shall we pray?