

As clay in God's hands

That reading from Jeremiah always conjures up an image on the black & white television of my childhood ...

When Jeremiah sees the potter at work, he hears a message from the Lord about nations, and for the kingdom of Judah in particular. For them it's a message of judgement, intended to shatter their spiritual complacency. Jeremiah is given to understand that there is nothing fixed about the contemporary world order and Judah's status as a nation, for the nations are as clay in God's hands, liable to be reworked if they fail to achieve their desired form.

Jeremiah isn't the only biblical author to find meaning in that image of shaping clay – a familiar material for our ancestors. In the second creation story in Genesis, God formed the first human from the dust of the ground. We are now in the optional church season of Creationtide: we might see in the potter's wheel a metaphor for God's ongoing relationship with his creation, shaping a dynamic, evolving entity; drawing out new possibilities, while others come to the end of their time.

In Paul's letter to the Romans, drawing on Isaiah, the clay has been fired into pots and the sovereignty of God is to the fore: it is not for the clay to say to the potter, *Why did you make me like this?* The pottery is destined for a variety of uses, some noble, some everyday; but all serving God's greater purposes.

Through firing, clay becomes functional, or beautiful, or both; but it also becomes fragile, impermanent. That's to the fore in Paul's 2nd letter to the Corinthians, where the treasure of the glory of Christian faith is held in vulnerable *jars of clay*.

Let me play with those metaphors a bit more, in the context of our existing Diocesan Vision and the Strategy currently under development.

I like that image of being as clay in God's hands. In Psalm 139, set to complement today's reading from Jeremiah, the psalmist reflects on God's loving formation before he or she was born: *you knit me together in my mother's womb. I thank you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made ... when I was woven in the depths of the earth ... already in your book were all my members written, As day by day they were fashioned.* The metaphorical materials are textiles, rather than pottery; but it's still the work of God's hands.

But does that process come to an end with our birth? Or, if you prefer, our spiritual rebirth at our conversion or baptism? Are we then fired into something serviceable or useful, but fixed and ultimately fragile? Or, through the working of the Holy Spirit, does God still want to reshape us, if we'll let him; if we are malleable, as clay in his hands? Our diocesan vision, formed a few years ago, is to be *Transformed by Christ*: that indicates an ongoing process; that God hasn't finished with us yet.

The vision applies to us collectively, as the Church, as well as as individuals. The strategy currently under development comes partly out of a realisation that our current general trajectory is a cycle of decline – something we're well aware of in our congregations in this benefice. The way we are might have been useful and attractive in the past; but the surrounding culture has changed: if we carry on in a fixed way, the prospects don't look good. But is that what Christ wants from the Church of England in the Diocese of Norwich – in our rural areas, often the only denomination which retains a physical presence?

Perhaps it is: perhaps we, like those Jeremiah addressed are heading for exile; and one day we'll be set aside like an out-of-fashion tea set on a bric-a-brac stall, in favour of some other form of collective Christian faith. But I think we have to be open to the other possibility, which is that he might want to transform us, to *proclaim the faith afresh in each generation*, as the preface to the clerical Declaration of Assent puts it. Certainly our Bishops remain committed to our parish system, looking for its revitalisation, rather than its replacement, as has happened in some other dioceses.

If that transformation is to take place, it will need to happen in several dimensions.

- Each of us will need to open as an individual: with the sense that we are not members of something fixed, but continuing disciples of Jesus Christ, open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit; as clay in God's hands.
- We will need to renew our sense that we are shaped, or reshaped, not just for our own benefit, but for God's greater purposes: the work that he wants to do among the people in our parishes and within the whole of his creation. That is what we are here to serve.
- Those of us with responsibilities in our parishes, deanery or diocese, will need not only to be open ourselves, but to lay hold of the hope that is at the heart of this process, for the benefit of those we lead or influence.
- And it will need to affect the way that we seek to work with others: internally, within the diocese, and externally, with those with whom we have values in common.

Those are present indications of what the strategy may contain: not because it's confidential, but because it is work in progress, clay on the potter's wheel. There's more on the diocesan website, together with invitations to contribute and to pray.

But whatever the Strategy will say, or not say, the biblical invitation to us to go down with Jeremiah to the potter's house still stands. As the potter shapes and reshapes the clay, what does that say to you: as an individual, *fearfully and wonderfully made*; and in the light of God's wider purposes?