

Sermon: At the Potter's House

Jeremiah 18:1-11

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Is God calling you to be involved in his mission? If you are part of the church of Jesus Christ, there is no way around it. By being part of the Body of Christ on earth, you automatically share in the mission of Christ on earth. The question is not - is he calling you, but what specific ministry of mission is he calling you to.

Potter's work

Jeremiah was told to go and have a look at the work of the potter, in the potter's house.

Such a workshop was familiar in many villages in the ancient middle east - so familiar that if today we go to any archeological site here in Egypt, we find potsherd of pottery all around. Archeologists are interested in this, but mainly to find out whether they contain any inscriptions. If they do not, they are usually not interesting because there is so much of it.

God used a very common matter, a potter's house to teach us something. He often speaks through the normal world around us - if we have eyes to see.

He speaks through his word, surely. But is his word - the Bible - not also a collection of stories and experiences of people who found God through the world around them?

God also speaks to us through the beauty and sometimes the ugliness of nature. And other people are used by God to speak to you. God often speaks through our circumstances. This means that an open attitude to life, to people, is the best way to be assured that God can speak to you. And we listen to Gods Word above all.

The church plays a very central role in all this - it is the guardian of the message of God. The church has safeguarded the words of God throughout the centuries; it exercises theological intelligence to understand the words of God; and it has a history of 2000 years of experience.

So if we think we know better that the church of God, we might suffer from an overdose of individualism, even pride maybe. It is wiser to try to understand the will of God together, in the community of the Church of God. A community that is, after all, the Body of Christ. In that body, God makes himself known to us and others. So what did Jeremiah see?

Vs 3: "So I went down to the potter's house, and I saw him working at the wheel." The Hebrew word for 'wheel' is literally 'two stones'. The potter would sit on a bench and with one foot he would move a horizontal circular stone

around. That was connected with a higher, smaller circular stone on which he made his pottery.

From a lump of clay, the potter slowly shaped a mug, a vase, and most often, a jug. In ancient time jugs for keeping water or wine were very common in every home. And as they were fragile and broke easily, the potter was always busy making new jugs and whatever people asked for. With an unseemly lump of clay, a potter could do miracles.

Jeremiah saw the potter at work, vs 4: "But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him."

And Jeremiah got the message. We humans are like clay in the hands of God.

Message of God to Israel

Jeremiah's lesson from what he saw the potter do, was this rhetorical question of God to Israel, vs 6: "Can I not do with you, Israel, as this potter does?"

God is like a potter, and Israel is like clay. He is God. They are just humans. And what should the people of God understand from this comparison?

God says through Jeremiah: "I have the right to treat you as I like, and I have the power to treat you as I like. You are in my hand not more than a lump of clay."

God is almighty. He is able to do with us whatever he wants. But mind you, He is not whimsical. He is not like the Greek gods on Mount Olympus, who for the fun of it, descended to the world every now and then to toy with people, to tease them, to make their lives hard for having a good laugh. And He is not like the god of Islam whose greatness and might shows itself in doing whatever he wills, not bound by any rules of morality or covenant with people.

Our God is almighty but his acts are always in accordance with his Word; and his Word, especially as incarnated in Jesus Christ, is totally in accordance with the character of God.

For Israel, this message meant, that they could not play with God. They knew the words of God, spoken to them on mount Sinai and through Moses. God is who He says He is; he treats the people of God in accordance with his words to them.

Do not think you can cheat God or that we can get around his words. His words are who He is; He has made a covenant with his people, and the covenantal contract is clear. God's people have to serve and obey him - love God with all your heart, and love all people as God loves them.

This is clear, is it not?

Jeremiah also made clear to Israel that they could not claim special status with God. To be born in the covenant nation gives no special privileges for those who do not obey God and live for Him. God says that he treats all nations in the same way as he treats Israel. The parable of the potter and the clay is not only about God and Israel, but also about God and all nations.

Let us listen again carefully at vs 7-10

If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it.

In fact, we read here that Israel is treated in accordance with how God treats all people. This will be worked out later by the apostles after our Lord Jesus had died and risen for all of mankind. God makes no distinction between people, is the message of the Old Testament prophets and of the New Testament apostles.

God had great plans for Israel but if they would not listen, they would be knocked down like a failed piece of pottery. This is a stern warning to Israel. But as God treats all nations the same, as he can only act in accordance with his character, the same warning is of course true for all people, from whatever nation we are.

Message to us and for all nations

God warns and threatens people with the consequences of not living for Him; But He also offers gospel. Listen to the Gospel in the words of Jeremiah, vs 11:

Now therefore say to the people of Judah and those living in Jerusalem, 'This is what the Lord says: Look! I am preparing a disaster for you and devising a plan against you. So turn from your evil ways, each one of you, and reform your ways and your actions.'

God can do with any nation as he likes - but he wants all nations to be saved. He invites Israel, as he invites all people, to turn to Him. And today, worldwide, people embrace this invitation. There is no nation without people who follow Jesus Christ. Do you know that over 2 billion people on earth call themselves after our Lord

Jesus Christ? That is 1 in every 3rd person on earth.

Since the coming of Jesus Christ to our world, there has been a succession of maybe 65, maybe 75 generations. That is all... And during those generations the church of God grew from 12 disciples to over 2 million Christians.

What will God do during our generation? We cannot know yet. But clear is, he calls us as he called our forefathers to tell all people of the love of God; He wants to be a Father to all people and he used the collective testimony of our forefathers to bring us and 2 billions others to Christ, likewise we have a message for the 2/3s of this world who do not follow Him yet. And just as Jeremiah told Israel", we tell our friends today, "turn from your evil ways, each one of you, and reform your ways and your actions."

In New Testament terms that is, "be reconciled with God through Jesus Christ. Join the new people of God. Live for him." That is a message we need, a message Egypt needs, a message the whole world needs.

Already in the Old Testament, God was interested in all nations. People who turned to him could become part of the people of God. When Israel left Egypt, many Egyptians joined the nation of Israel, to be part of God's covenant people. And throughout the centuries, many more joined Gods people... Think of Ruth from Moab, and of the many non-Jews we meet in the New Testament, people who had joined the synagogue because of its message.

Many of those non-Jewish visitors to the synagogues were the first to accept the Christian message of the apostles - a great message because the apostles taught that they did not have to adopt the culture of Israel before being fully accepted by God.

God's people are all those who want to follow Jesus Christ, and this is irrespective of their culture or language. Every one is welcome as he or she is.

So now our arms should be just as wide open for outsiders as when Israel left Egypt, and as at the time of Jeremiah. All people can join the feast of God and join God's worldwide new nation.

We open our arms wide. This is not just waiting for people to come, but in accordance with the Gospel of our Lord, we also go to all nations, to all people. We reach out to speak of our Lord and to call people to turn to Him.

All people are like clay in Gods hands. He wants to make something beautiful out of All of us; he wants to use us for his glory. As a church and as individual Christians, we glorify him most if we do what he wants.

And He will for us is crystal clear: He calls you to mission. To pray for his mission, to pray

for missionaries, to support financially and otherwise those who spread the Gospel, and maybe he calls you to go.

Listen carefully... Maybe he calls you to go and serve Him in mission, here in Egypt or abroad.

In the Anglican church here in Egypt we have decided to set up a formal structure, an organisation, for sending people abroad. We need people in Ethiopia, Libya, Algeria, Tunisia. Just as we need new leaders for church plants in Egypt.

Conclusion

Pray to God what your role in mission is. We desire to honour God by being perfect clay so that he can use us. Allow him to mold your life into the shape that he wants. So offer your life, your time, your money, your prayers, to serving him, here in Egypt or elsewhere.

Allow God to speak to you and direct your life.

Amen