

Father's Day

4 September, 2016

Reading: Jeremiah 18:1-11

The year was 1973 and Dad got a new car. I thought it was so cool. It was a Mark III Ford Cortina. It had all the whistles and bells. We had never seen a car with a radio. The car had little jets of water that cleaned the windscreen and that new car smell. I use to sit in it, aged 8, waiting for the cat to sit on the bonnet and then I would blast it with the windscreen washer. Anyway it was total rubbish. One thing after another went wrong with it until it was shamefully towed back to the garage. You may have heard of a Friday car, which the workers finish in a hurry to go home for the weekend, and the Monday car, which the workers build after a hard weekend. We concluded that Dad's Cortina had been started on a Monday and then put to one side and finished on Friday.

I'm here to tell you that God doesn't make junk! You and I have been carefully and wonderfully made. In fact, after God had made humans on the sixth day of creation, He looked at what he had made and declared it was very good.

Jeremiah lived in changing times. The decades following the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C and the exile to a foreign land were very hard for the Hebrew people. Everything that could go wrong did. The Temple was destroyed and vast numbers of the population were taken off into slavery. Jeremiah was in the thick of it. He really struggled, but through it all he learnt to listen and to trust in God.

Jeremiah wrote as brilliantly as he lived and he gives us our first reading today. Much as our last two weeks have focused on Jesus noticing, first the bent over woman and then the people pushing for a seat, so Jeremiah is guided by God to go and notice the potter at work. Unlike potters today who live in Nelson and have long hair, potters in Jeremiah's day would have been important and respected people at the heart of the community. As Jeremiah watched the potter at work, he was given a beautiful image of God at work with his people. A good potter knows how to bring the best out of the clay, to mould it and shape it and to find in it the object it was created to be. A good potter is like God: strong, loving and wise.

Once when talking with a potter, it was explained to me that each piece of clay has an object already in it, maybe a vase, or a cup, a bowl, or a lamp stand, something that the clay is longing to be. To really work with clay well is not to have a predetermined idea of what that piece will be, a cookie cutter mould that it must conform too. Rather it is to wisely discern what it is created to be and to bring it to its full potential.

We are all created in the image and likeness of God, uniquely ourselves.

It's rather like what the great sculptor Michelangelo said of his masterpiece David. "How did you make such a great work of art?" he was asked, and he responded, "I just chipped away every piece that didn't look like David."

To know God is to trust that He is bringing out the very best version of you. He already knows what it is that you are created to be, and gently and lovingly is bringing that out of you. This is your God given potential. Often though, rather than trusting that we are made in the image of God, we try and do it on our own. We have all done this. Without God's help we tell ourselves all sorts of self defeating messages like "I'm no good", "I'm ugly", "I'm stupid" or whatever. It's if we really believe that, when we were made by the Divine Potter, we were somehow rejected and then thrown into the seconds' basket for cups with no handles and teapots that won't pour, or that God was having a Friday on the production line when He made us.

On this Father's Day sometimes we even set up parenting as a competition. You, like me, must have been to those dinner parties where people are playing competitive parenting. It starts innocently enough, someone says, "My son is doing well at kindergarten." And then it begins, "Well my daughter is top of her class in maths," and before you know it, someone has a son with the Nobel Peace Prize, a PhD from Yale, and has invented cure for cancer.

Good parenting is never a competition. There is no such thing as a perfect parent. Parenting is much more an art form than science. We simply offer love, we offer encouragement.

Like God, the Divine Potter, our task as parents is simply to bring out the child's potential. It is God who ultimately brings out the best version of us.

But how can we with all our imperfections trust the Divine Potter?

Once upon a time a water bearer had two large pots, one hung on each end of a pole which she carried across her neck.

One of the pots had a crack in it, while the other pot was perfect and always delivered a full portion of water. By the end of the long walk from the stream to the house, the cracked pot arrived empty.

For a full two years this went on daily, with the bearer delivering only one pot full of water to her house.

The cracked pot grew increasingly ashamed of its imperfection. It wasn't able to accomplish anything of what it was created to do.

One day, out of its bitter failure, the cracked pot lamented to the water bearer as she bent by the stream.

Words came slowly. "I ... I am ashamed of myself and my inability to fulfil my role. This crack in my side causes water to leak all the way back to your house."

Great compassion welled up in the bearer's heart, "Ah, my little friend! As we return to the house, notice instead the beauty around you. Not your perceived inadequacies."

With pots full, the bearer rose from the stream and headed home. The meandering path led through a mostly parched land.

Before opening the wooden door to her humble home, the bearer said to the pot, "Did you not notice the flowers and green grasses on your side of the path but not on the other pot's side?"

"Yes...well, no. I tried to see the beauty but the disgrace of my imperfections blocks out much of my vision."

"Know this, my little friend... I have always known about your imperfection. I planted flower seeds on your side of the path. Every day while we walk back, you've watered them. Your water has brought beauty to a parched land. This is what you were created to do!"