

Introduction

The image of the potter in Jeremiah is one of the best known passages of this prophet. However it raises within it an important theological issue – the tension between divine sovereignty and human freedom. Do our actions as human beings really have any effect on what God decides to do? Are we as individuals and communities locked into a course of events that God has already determined?

Much has been said and I think possibly even more written about these questions and you'll end up having a debate whichever side you come down on. However let's explore further both Jeremiah and the passage given to us in today's Lectionary reading.

Background

The context for Jeremiah's preaching in this text is probably a time in his ministry when he has been forced to resume his preaching after the death of Josiah in 609 BC. Josiah had been a faithful king who re-invigorated the worship life of Judah and made God's covenant central in the life of the people. He was followed by Jehoiakim, a self-serving puppet of Egyptian power, who had no intention of continuing Josiah's covenant reforms. It is into this scenario that Jeremiah resumes the preaching he had suspended during the reign of Josiah, to warn of the danger of disregarding Judah's covenant relationship with God. God's judgement can sweep Judah away and in fact this happens in 586 BC when Babylon destroys Judah because of their alliance with Egypt. However, at this point in his ministry, Jeremiah is addressing a key question with the people as to whether God's plan of judgement is fixed and inevitable or whether it can be averted.

The text

The passage opens with a command to Jeremiah to go to the potter's house, where the word of the Lord will come to him (vss 1-2). What follows is a straightforward description of the potter at his wheel. Anyone who has observed a potter at work knows that working with clay is demanding and time consuming. The vessel or object the potter is trying to make sometimes becomes misshapen in the potter's hands. The only thing to do is for the potter to collapse the clay and begin again from scratch. You can't even go part way back – rather you need to begin again.

Jeremiah observes this practice in vss 3-4 and then the word of the Lord comes to him, making the work of the potter into a metaphor for the way God works with communities and the nation. In God's metaphorical teaching, God's people Judah takes the role of the clay and God is the divine potter. Judah is the only portion of God's covenant people remaining, so it is referred to as the house of Israel in verse 6. Implied in all of this is the care, love and effort that God has committed to Israel like a potter giving of themselves as a beautiful piece of pottery is created.

Then comes the negative side of the metaphor with God, the divine potter, emphasizing that if the nation does not listen and respond God will ‘pluck up and break down and destroy’ the nation in verse 7.

However, in the next breath, we hear ‘and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned’ (verse 8).

This may be a surprising statement both to Jeremiah and to us. God changes the planned outcome if and when the people change their ways. Can God’s plan be changeable? Can human change bring about change in God? Perhaps so! If a nation judged by God turns from evil, then disaster can be averted. God’s judgement is not fixed in some deterministic way. God responds to repentance. The Hebrew verb ‘to turn’ is used in the Scriptures to mean ‘to repent’. Of course it can go the other way as well.

The passage concludes with words given to Jeremiah to 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.” (verse 11)

Oddly enough, Jeremiah was not listened to and in chapter 26 he is threatened with death for what he is preaching.

As a prophet true to God, his prophesies came to fruition with the downfall of the southern kingdom of Judah.

Conclusion

One of the great teachings of this passage is that ‘the plan of God is not fixed’. However to change it requires a change of heart in the way that the people lived in their relationship with their God.

In a sense this is what the Gospel is also talking about today. At the heart of discipleship is transformation.

As part of this transformation, the cost of discipleship means entering into an intimate relationship with God in and through Christ, that teaches us that obedience to God is not blind. It is a thought probing and deliberate process in which we grow in our ability to ask the tough questions about life and living, not only of God but also of ourselves. This intimate relationship invites us to mature in faith.

In a real sense we may well need to be re-made like the potter’s clay which at first did not produce what was required. May be time and time again it needed to be squashed into a lump and re-worked.

What incredible imagery for ourselves as we journey with Christ being remodelled along the way.

Play with that imagery for yourselves and see what it says to you!