

“A New Creation”

8 May 2022 - Led by Ray Speer

Welcome & Call to Worship

Hymn of Preparation: God of Wonders

Prayers of Adoration & Confession

Reading: Jeremiah 18:1-12

Sermon:

At the opening of the service I mentioned that many people from the congregation enjoy arts and craft and making all sorts of things. One impact of the COVID lockdowns has been an explosion of interest in crafting and making. The TV schedule is full of all sorts of craft orientated programs... The Great British Bake Off and a string of look-a-like shows... The Great British Sewing Bee, Pottery Throw Down, Blown Away (glass blowing), Handmade: Britain's Best Woodworker, and reruns of the fantastic RTE series Hands... but my favourite comes from the USA. 'Forged in Fire' where men and women compete to make working knives and blades. Nothing causes Mark and Carole to leave the kitchen faster than an episode of Forged in Fire coming on the TV. My hobby interest is wood turning... there isn't a woodturning TV program... yet... but there is a host of online internet channels to follow. Last weekend I indulged my hobby interest and headed off to the NEC Birmingham to attend the Maker Central exhibition. A gathering of all sorts of crafters, men and women from all over the world getting together to enjoy demonstrations, meet the TV personalities and internet influencers in person, and see what new tool and gadgets the manufacturers are bringing out. The demonstrations were superb. Seeing a master craftsman or woman at work and the ease with which they control the tools and manipulate their materials is truly inspiring. And this was the backdrop God chose for the message He had for Jeremiah.

Jeremiah was an old testament prophet who was active from the time of Josiah, king of Judah in 626 BC, through the reign of five different kings, up the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC. Jeremiah was prophesying at a very challenging time, Judah (the southern kingdom), was witnessing the growth and increasing aggression of Babylon. This was a time of national, political, economic, and humanitarian crisis. But it was also a time of spiritual crisis. Judah belonged to God, had been blessed by God, but Judah had forgotten God. God was no longer the centre of their lives... Was this to be the end of Judah, would God abandon them?

In the passage Carole read God had a tough message for Jeremiah to deliver to Judah so to drive it home God gave Jeremiah a stunning visual image. Verse 2, God tells Jeremiah to go the potter's house. There Jeremiah sees a craftsman at work. There is moist, workable clay spinning on the wheel and the potter is using his hands to shape and craft the clay into the desired shape... a pot, a bowl, a cup, a wine jar... a practical vessel that will serve a useful purpose. But during the crafting process something goes wrong. Was it a piece of dry hard inflexible dry clay, we don't know, but the potter instinctively knew that the pot was marred... but he doesn't stop working, he continues to manipulate the clay with his hands and reshapes it as seemed best to him... maybe the intended wine jar would now be a bowl.

In verses 6 to 10 God explains to Jeremiah the meaning in the visual image. The nation of Israel is like clay in God's hands... He could do with them as He pleased. He could bless

them and build them up or He could inflict disaster and uproot them depending on their response. This message is to be a strong reminder to the nation of Israel that God's covenant is a two way deal... blessing is promised, but it is conditional, Israel has responsibilities... to obey God's laws... or there will be judgement if they choose to disobey.

Jeremiah is sometimes called the 'weeping prophet' and you can understand why.. The painting of Jeremiah by Michelangelo on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, shows a man in a worried pose, as if all the worries of the world were on his shoulders. We can look at the passage and just see disaster but there are **important three positive messages of hope**. Let's explore these.

I. God is at work.

I think of that verse I read at the opening of the service, Ecc 3v11 'He has made everything beautiful in its time'... and also the understanding about the randomness of life that we appreciate from studying Ecclesiastes over recent months... regardless of the chaos we see around us or the crisis we find ourselves in... God is still at work and in control. Israel was God's covenant chosen people but they had forgotten Him, rejected His Law, and had not fulfilled their part of the covenant... but God was patient with them, He would give them every opportunity to repent and turn back to Him, He is still at work.

II. God works to restore.

As I mentioned my hobby is wood turning, the process is very similar to that of pottery. I start with a piece of wood... called a blank... it is mounted securely on the lathe which spins at high speed. When I bring a chisel into contact with the spinning wood material is removed and all sorts of circular shapes can be created... to make bowls, plates, lamp stands, bottle stoppers, pens, etc. Just like in pottery things can go wrong... and in my case frequently do... a tool slips while making a cut, or a crack appears and the planned item or intended shape is no longer possible. I could just throw away the piece and start again but that would be a waste of the wood and also the time and effort... I usually try to rethink the design and see what can be done to work around the flaw and still end up with something functional and attractive.

One restoration technique wood turners have uses epoxy mixed with very fine metal filings to fill cracks or blemishes. When the piece is sanded smooth and polished the repair looks for all the world just like a fine gold inlay. The restored blemish becomes an attractive feature and these unique pieces are highly sought after. The bowl at the back of the church has a polished inlay, it's not gold, it's brass... you can see this for yourself.

In the same way God knows our nature, knows our past, knows the blemishes in our character and the things that hold back our spiritual development. He sympathetically works with those who allow him, to make us into vessels He can use for His good purpose. Nothing in our past, no deed, no transgression is too great to stop God using us to His glory. I give you the example of the life of John Newton, in his young years he was the captain of a slave ship and a slave trader...but after a miraculous conversion he renounces slavery and works tirelessly for its abolition, he becomes a gifted evangelical preacher and hymn writer, penning probably the most popular Christian hymn of all... Amazing Grace. Talking of his transformation John Newton said 'I am not the man I ought to be, I am not the man I wish to be and I am not the man I hope to be, but by the grace of God, I am not the man I used to

be.' God worked miraculously in the flawed, blemished life of John Newton turning him into a worthy vessel to carry God's word to a needy nation.

In preparation for this talk I read a number of commentaries on Jeremiah 18 and many of them stop at v11. But v12 disturbs me... it is not a happy ending. Let me read verses 11 and 12 again. Verse 11.

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.'

And the sermon could end neatly here... with God appealing for His covenant people to return to Him, to His ways, to keep their side of the contract and receive the blessing He has promised and avoid the judgement and disaster that will surely come if they follow their own desires. It's an appeal that God made many times to His people. But God's message to Jeremiah did not end there, verse 12 reads. Remember this is God speaking.

12 But they (that is the people of Judah) will reply, 'It's no use... We will continue with our own plans; we will all follow the stubbornness of our evil hearts.'"

After all this... God giving Jeremiah the stunning visual image, explaining what it meant, building Jeremiah up to deliver this message in a time of imminent disaster... this is going to be a very tough assignment for Jeremiah. Then God tells him... in an almost 'by the way' comment... the people will not heed your warning... v12 they will reply 'It's no use... We will continue with our own plans; we will all follow the stubbornness of our evil hearts.'"

I said this response disturbed me. Their reply, 'it's no use'... why would they think it's no use? Did the people think the Babylonian invasion was inevitable and God could do nothing to stop it, did they think God was just all talk and wouldn't act in judgement, or maybe their hearts were so hardened by their stubbornness that they were trapped... frozen stiff like a rabbit in the headlights of an oncoming car. The more I thought about this the more I was concerned about the phrase 'the stubbornness of our evil hearts'. What God was looking for... and is still looking for is 'Real Change'... a radical change of the heart. God's work of restoring humanity was not complete in the time of Jeremiah... He was still at work.

III. In Jesus, we are a 'new creation'.

This brings me to the 3rd point of hope ...in Jesus we are a 'new creation' we have 'new life'. In the weeks running up to Easter, 12 people from this church took part in a program called Real Change, or to give it its full title... Real Change, Becoming More Like Jesus in Everyday Life. This program was led by Katie and over 6 weeks we looked at, and submitted ourselves to, the heart transforming process that Jesus works in the life of every believer. Ordinary believers like you and me. Now let me make one thing clear... if you think because I'm standing here talking about this that I'm the finished article... you are mistaken... Carole, Mark and Aaron will testify to that. I'm very much a work in progress in God's hands... He is very much still moulding and shaping me. Jesus wants to work with us, through the stresses, choices, and opportunities in everyday life. We all have our own unique ways of reacting to things... how we instinctively respond to disappointment, or disagreement, or conflict, or financial challenges, or a difficult medical diagnosis. The things that cause us stress and anxiety. We often react in ways that are not constructive. The Bible refers to these reactions as the 'old self'. But as believers in the risen Lord Jesus He is constantly at work within us.

When I first became a Christian I was struck by Jesus's promise in John 14 to provide a Helper... back in 1983 I read these words in the Good News translation

John 14 v15 "If you love me, you will obey my commandments. 16 I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, who will stay with you forever. 17 He is the Spirit, who reveals the truth about God. The world cannot receive him, because it cannot see him or know him. But you know him, because he remains with you and is in you.

The people of Judah said 'it is no good' and rejected God's plea and suffered the consequences. As God had warned Judah was uprooted by the Babylonian invasion and the temple was destroyed. Unlike Judah in 625BC we do not undertake this heart changing process under our own strength... we have the Spirit of Jesus... a powerful Helper who is permanently with us. Jesus died on the cross to save people like you and me and when we trust in Him our 'old self' nature is put to death with His death and we are reborn to a 'new self' nature with his resurrection. Jesus himself said this is a heart changing process that the secular world will never understand, accept or receive.

The people of Judah responded to Jeremiah and said 'it is no use'... When God calls you, whatever your condition, whatever your past, whatever your age, whatever challenge you face, whatever the pending crisis... do not let your response be 'it's no use'... Jesus has given his life to give us a new life in Him let us all grasp it with all our strength.

'Lord I pray that you soften our hearts so that we may see you more clearly, love you more dearly, and follow you more nearly'. Amen.

Praise: Knowing You (All I Once Held Dear)

Announcements

Prayers for Others

Closing Hymn: Be Thou My Vision

Benediction