

Sunday 4th September 2016; 15th after Trinity; Canongate Kirk

Jeremiah 18:4 *...and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.*

Quite frequently in the course of the Gospel narratives, we are reminded how Jesus was inclined to take by way of illustration of his theme a common or garden everyday sort of object with which his listeners would be immediately familiar - a mustard seed, a pinch of salt, a stone jar full of water – and use it to make a point that was far deeper or more meaningful than the simple object would of itself suggest. Our Old Testament reading today suggests that there was nothing new in this technique, that the prophets had been doing it centuries before Jesus of Nazareth burst onto the scene, and none more obviously or effectively than Jeremiah and his telling reference to the potter and the clay. To this day when ancient Greek and Roman archaeological sites are uncovered it's often the evidence of broken bits of pottery that points to civilization in a dim and distant age, pottery that would have been made and used and broken and discarded locally within the community. And even as an image, a simple illustration of a point, it is surely every bit as enduring. "So I went down to the potter's house," says Jeremiah, "and there he was working at his wheel. The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him." *...and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.* According to its dictionary definition a vessel is something that can carry something, it can be anything from a milk jug to a battle ship, but the key to a vessel is that it does something useful, that it has a particular role to fulfil, a specific purpose. We're not told how or why the original vessel the potter was making was spoiled in his hand, presumably there was a flaw in the clay that meant the vessel would not fulfil its intended role, it would leak or wobble, it just wouldn't work as it was intended to. But the potter is undaunted *...and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.* This new vessel would be much better, much more suited to its purpose, and the potter would be well pleased with his work. *...and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.*

We don't need to wait long in Jeremiah's account for the deeper meaning and significance to be revealed. Then the word of the Lord came to me, he writes: "Can I not do with you, o house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says the Lord. Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, o house of Israel." Suddenly the passage becomes much more than an ordinary everyday event in the life of a local community, but a model of reshaping of a whole nation, a whole people that God wants to take and rework into something much more useful, much more beneficial, much more constructive. At this weekend's G20 summit of world leaders much is being made of the need to rework relationships not least between the United Kingdom and Europe and the rest of the world. It is and will continue to be an ongoing process. It's a process with which even the Church of Scotland is familiar, proudly subscribing to the Latin tag of *ecclesia semper reformanda*, a church that is always reforming, always reworking its theology and practice that it may become a better, more useful and more purposeful vessel of the Holy Spirit. And for each of us in today's Church, at whatever age and stage in the journey of life and faith, a powerful reminder across the centuries from Jeremiah that we too can be reworked by God's grace to God's own purpose.

*For you created me and shaped me, gave me life within my mother's womb.
For the wonder of who I am I praise you; safe in your hands, all creation is made new.*

...and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him. And now may God bless to us this preaching of his most holy word, and to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be all praise and glory now and forever. Amen.