

## **St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore**

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### **IN THE HANDS OF THE POTTER**

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Jeremiah 18:1-12  
1 Peter 2:9-10

One of the things which I have been hearing regularly for years is that the Church is in decline. Fewer people attend church on a Sunday, fewer people pay attention to the church, any church when it voices an opinion on matters of public concern. And this is true – at least, it is true in the west, in Scotland, in Europe, and it is becoming more true in north America as well. It is far from true when you consider the world as a whole where the Christian faith is spreading and growing, where more and more churches are springing into new life, where daily thousands and thousands turn to follow Christ. Never let anyone tell you that the church is in decline, unless they want to define their parameters.

But if you define these parameters as Scotland, Britain, or Europe, and if you want to throw in Australia and New Zealand and north America you can, then it is true. The church is in decline in number and influence and status. Of course, even within these parameters there are pockets and congregations which buck this trend, but the overall picture is accurate. There are all sorts of reasons to which you can attribute this – the seventeenth century enlightenment, the utter horror of two world wars within half a century are some. Another is the almost 2000 year-old idea of Christendom: Christendom, which tied up faith with politics and gave the Church a sense of entitlement. Christendom was a model adopted with the best possible reasons – to help spread the Christian ethos through the people by means of laws and jurisdictions. But in the end, and we are now at the end of traditional Christendom, it was bound to fail, because Jesus did not come endow his followers with worldly power, and his own power and kingdom is the antithesis of worldly politics.

Feelings of entitlement are easy to fall into. You see it every day with people who have got used to something – to sitting in a particular seat in the home – or in church, children, or fathers, who always assume that they will get the biggest piece of pie – whatever. It is easy to assume that what has happened once or twice is how things ought to be, and so you are entitled to it. God's people have often been prone to feeling that they are entitled to things: respect, maybe, or power; or God's favour. Recently when I was thinking about the decline of the Christian faith in our context, I began to wonder which part of the Bible would speak best to people living in a situation where nationally or regionally faith is in decline.

The first thing I found I had to do when confronting that question, was dismiss the whole of the New Testament! Not that I would ever dismiss the New Testament as Scripture – it is the best

part of the Bible, the part that makes sense of all the rest, the part that brings us the good news about Jesus. But it is not written to people whose faith is in decline. It is written to a small church, a beginning church, a struggling church, and oppressed church, all of which things we also are at times; but always it is written to a church with hope and expectation of growth.

Instead I found that I needed to look to the Hebrew prophets. The situation that they write for is different. The prophets speak and write because they fear that God's people have become unfaithful. In their day God's people was synonymous with one nation, the nation of Israel, and within that nation there were those who remained faithful – the prophets among them – but they speak to the bulk of the nation, which has lost its way in terms of faith. They speak to a people, God's people, who have been adopting a mix-and-match approach to faith; a pragmatic take on worship; a laissez-faire attitude to devotion.

The prophets spoke to a nation because that nation was supposed to be the covenant people of God. As we read their words now we remember that the people of God's new covenant are not found in one nation, but found in the Church in all its forms and branches. As Peter said:

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people.  
So what the prophets spoke to their nation we take first of all as applied to the church. Some of it may then be applied beyond the church as God's word for the nations of the world, but first of all we need to read their words and hear them speak to us – not as individuals, but as the Church.

And so we come to Jeremiah, and the famous passage about the potter. Jeremiah goes to the potter's house and he sees the man at work, [show some plasticine] bending and shaping and moulding the clay to make – well to make something. Jeremiah just describes it as a “vessel” which is a useful catch-all term. But then, maybe Jeremiah couldn't see, couldn't make out what was supposed to be forming under the potter's hands as he spun the wheel. If you ever have watched a potter, it is not always easy to see what they are doing, because it is such a hands-on craft.

However in this case it was not easy to identify the vessel, because it wasn't coming out according to plan. Whatever the potter had in mind, the clay and his hands were not coming together as one to make it happen. The vessel was spoiled [show plasticine again]. I could try to tweak a bit of this vessel here and pull and bit there and patch a bit round the back to try to improve it, but it is never going to look like this [show jug] is it? If this jug was broken, the only thing for it would be to gather up the pieces and try to put them back together as best I could, but it would never be a perfect jug again. However before the clay is fired that is not what you do. You do what the potter did – squeeze the clay back into a ball and start again.

And the word that Jeremiah brought to God's people from the potter is not, as I have often heard preached from this metaphor, that we have to be flexible folk in God's hand. I am sure that it is very helpful to God if we are not too firmly wedded to our own ways and traditions, so that he can keep making us anew in his image. I am sure that is true for the church as well as for individuals. But it is not what God moved Jeremiah to draw from his visit to the potter's house.

Jeremiah talked of the potter, not the clay. The potter working at the wheel changed his mind about his clay. He decided that he would do something else with it. He didn't have to stick to what it seemed that he had decided to do. So with God. He is allowed to change his mind as circumstances change. It is not a capricious changing of the mind, so that you can never depend on God's word. That would be dreadful and would make a mockery of the most important and most divine quality that God shows us – steadfastness in his love. The potter doesn't arbitrarily

change his mind about what he is making or how he will make it, and nor does God. But God declares himself free to revise either his threats or his promises in order better to work his will in the world.

Jeremiah shows us God who having spoken against a people, sees them repent and so changes his mind – you have only to think of the story of Jonah to get an example of this. Jonah declared that in 40 days the city of Nineveh would be destroyed, but the people repented and changed their ways and so God also changed his mind - though Jonah didn't change his! Similarly, in a more obscure story in the Old testament, God at one point promised the priest Eli, the one in whose care the boy Samuel was left, that his family would always be priests in his service. But when Eli's sons proved unworthy of that honour, God revoked it (1 Samuel 2:30).

Circumstances change, and God is able to change with them, but he always works towards his own perfect ends. This doesn't mean that we can't trust his promises, or that we can ignore his threats. But it does mean that in every situation we need to look closely to see how they apply. People who think that Christians are those who live with closed minds, having their opinions immovably set on every subject just don't get it. We are God's people, and God who is working to perfect his fallen world, knows how to act and react, how to judge each circumstance on its merits, how to rejoice when people change and turn to him.

Jeremiah ends this message with a stern warning to God's people that they should turn from their evil ways, because God was going to react to that and change the pattern to one they wouldn't like so much. And what did the people, God's people, say? They said no. They said “each of us will act according to the stubbornness of our evil will.” I am sure no one actually said these words! But actions speak louder than words, and Jeremiah wants them to hear the words that their actions speak.

You see under the new covenant, the new agreement which God has with his people, which Jesus brought into being by his death and resurrection, we have the same task to do as God's people of the old covenant had. Peter tells us what it is. We are called to proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.

In St. Bride's church, unusually for a Church of Scotland, we have a lovely mosaic of St. Francis of Assisi. One of the things which he may have said is this: “Preach the gospel; when necessary use words.” If we are called to proclaim God's mighty acts, if we are called on to talk about living in the light, then the best way we can do this is if first of all our lives show it. As God's people we are called on to live together in such a way that shows God's light and so, without needing to try, shows the darkness that shrouds so much of the way of the world. It is seen in the way we care for each other, in the way we go about our daily business of living, and working. It is seen in how we care about those suffering who are far away. It is seen in how our church organises itself, in the welcome we give to others, in the way we talk to and about each other. It is seen in how we do not cling to our own pride, but allow others the privilege of helping us when they offer. And when it is seen, then we can talk about it, explain it to those who are curious. It is then that we can say, without sounding unapproachably pious, that we are living in the light of God, and that for this we are thankful.

God's light searches out every corner of life. He sees what is really going on with us and with the world, and he is working with us if we will let him, or despite us if we will not, to bring his mercy to all who will work with him. We who live in a land where our faith seems to be under threat and in decline, should remember that, and ask God to help us look at our new situations with his eyes, trusting him to know and act, and putting ourselves in his hands. Amen.-- o --