

Reflection for Pentecost 13 by Rev'd Canon Michael Last

“So I went down to the potter’s house, and I saw him working at the wheel. But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him.”

The image of a potter working at a wheel creating a pot is one I am sure we are familiar with. The way, as the wheel turns and the potter’s hands work the clay, that lump of wet, formless material it is turned into a thing of great beauty. There are times, however, when the potter notices something is not going as it should; the pot is too thin or out of shape and then the creation is returned back into that lifeless lump of clay before a new creation rises as the potter again works it on the wheel.

The pot rising and falling on the wheel before it is complete.

In the Old Testament reading we see this image used to show Jeremiah and, through the prophet, the people to whom he is bringing God’s message how God is like that potter: the way the divine hands like those of the potter’s have similar capabilities, they can both create and destroy that which they have made at will. As the potter can crush the pot, so God can destroy a nation or kingdom. Echoing through this passage is a message calling for repentance and obedience - repentance and obedience that will allow God to mould them, to work them into something of beauty - something worthy of its creator and reflecting his glory.

Today marks the start of the creation season: not just a time to wonder and marvel at creation and its awe-inspiring beauty, but also a time to reflect on our place within that creation and our responsibility for it - the way we so often leave it damaged and broken. We do not stop there though, we must also allow ourselves and society to be reshaped, just as that potter reshapes the clay: reshaped into a society that does not just talk about climate change and disaster, but acts in ways that really makes a difference, not sometime in the future, but now.

Remoulding and reshaping is never easy and often comes with both sacrifice and cost.

Our New Testament reading highlights an example of reshaping, highlighting the time and effort involved and illustrating what can be achieved: the way in which God, through his spirit, can reshape individuals.

The central character and main subject of St Paul’s letter to Philemon is a man named Onesimus. When Onesimus first meets St Paul, he is little more than a lump of useless clay and yet, with the writing of that letter, Paul sends him back to his master as a useful and beautiful jug. As God works in the life of Onesimus using Paul as his tool, Onesimus is radically changed and reshaped.

As the Onesimus story begins, Paul finds himself under arrest “a prisoner of Christ Jesus”, accompanied by “Timothy”. Quite where Paul is being held we are not sure but it may well have been during his time as a prisoner in Rome under house arrest. It is while there that Onesimus meets Paul and becomes of great help to him in many practical ways. As you read the letter, Onesimus becomes more than just a helper - also a friend, a companion to the apostle.

There is a problem, though. Onesimus was a runaway slave at the time he met Paul. Paul describes Onesimus in the letter like this *“Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.”*

In the Roman world, slaves formed a major part of the socio-economic structure of the empire, making up between 35 & 40 percent of the total population. In many cases, they are little more

than objects to be used by their masters. There were strict boundaries they had to stay within: step outside those boundaries and they could be severely punished. The penalty for running away could include death; something Paul was all too aware of.

Onesimus' master was an influential Christian at Colossae named Philemon.

What had caused Onesimus to run away we are not told. What is clear though, is the way that, having been around Paul and Timothy, he had changed. Paul describes him as *"my own son in Christ"*. Faith in Christ had changed this life forever, it had completely remolded him - as in the hands of a master potter.

The question Paul grapples within the letter is what should happen to this now changed man. He may be a Christian, but he is still a slave. Paul knows he should go back to his master, but what will happen when he does?

As you read the letter, two important things stick out.

Firstly, that following Christ does not wipe the slate clean in an earthly sense; it does not remove us from the situation that we are in or from the past. It may well help us make more sense of it, providing us with a new perspective, even giving us the assurance of sins forgiven, reshaping and remolding us for the future, but it does not remove the past. If anything, it is that past onto which God begins to build the new future. Think of the potter - the new pot does not come from new clay it comes from the same clay, just reworked.

Secondly, maybe because Paul is aware that slaves form one of the backbones of Roman society, he at no point in his writing challenges the very institution of slavery, something we may find hard to accept or understand. For Paul it is a given: his concern is about the relationships within that society and his views on these push the boundaries of his day. So, within the confines of the system, Paul has to help Onesimus deal with his past so that he can begin his future.

Paul decides that he must return the slave back home to his master, with all the uncertainty that could bring and he writes his letter to accompany Onesimus' return.

"I am sending him back to you now, and with him goes my heart. I would like to keep him here with me, while I am in prison for the gospel's sake, so that he could help me in your place. However, I do not want to force you to help me; rather, I would like you to do it of your own free will. So I will not do anything unless you agree."

One of the frustrating things about this letter, is that we do not have a reply from Philemon. Was this remolded runaway slave accepted back? The only other mention in scripture of a man by the name of Onesimus is in Colossians 4:9 *"He is coming with Onesimus, our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you."* Is this the same man, the runaway slave now a faithful and true worker for Christ? If so, what a contrast!

Maybe the challenge for us as we look at the image of the potter and reflect on how God can and does reshape lives, even those of a runaway useless slave, into something useful and beautiful, is to ask whether there parts of our lives or the life of our church community that we need to allow God to remold? Are there people that we write off as beyond help that God can reshape? And as we enter this Creation season are there aspects of our lives that need to change and be remolded for good of our plant and society as a whole? Are we willing to allow that to happen, not sometime in the future, but now?