

Jeremiah / Micah Network.

A sermon by Ron Port 24/10/2004

In the Jeremiah reading, God told Jeremiah to go down to the Potter's house where he would give Jeremiah a message. So Jeremiah went down to the house and watched the potter working at his wheel. If the pot he was shaping was marred or not right, the potter would break it up and form it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him.

Do you ever wish that time would turn back a little, and you could start a project or event – or even your life – all over again. Somehow it seems that things are not working out the way we planned or dreamed. Maybe their component parts are not holding together; their essential relationships are frayed, or their purposefulness is obscured. In essence, their shape seems all wrong. We might whimsically reflect “If only I could give it another chance.”

That is an ancient dilemma into which Jeremiah's acted parable at the potter's house speaks. With God, there is always another chance, well nearly always. The potter's reshaping had a particular political and social application for Jeremiah's time. Both God's people, and those outside Israel, to whom his message of judgement was sent had to make choice about their response – their future depended on it. In verses 7-9, God said “ If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down or destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of it's evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it.”

What does this parable have to say about the impact and urgency of our choices? Being put on the spot is often an important catalyst to decision making, Issues and outcomes need to be understood, consequences weighed, values clarified and priorities determined. We do this many times a day for the less significant issues in life, but we might do it only a few times in a life time for major life choices. Regular reviews of the shape of our 'pots' is a positive and recommended practice. There are some areas of our lives which might need God's reshaping, in order that we might recapture some of our original vision and God given purposes. We begin with a call to see the wider world and it's needs differently, in order that we might better fulfil the mandate to “do justice, love, and mercy, and walk humbly with our God” in a needy and unjust world. We need commitment to impact the hearts and minds of Australians by being faithful messengers of God's love in a needy world. It is only as we allow ourselves to be reshaped by the values of the Kingdom of God that we will ever see the fulfilment of our vision for all people - life in all it's fullness as offered by Jesus.

Psalm 82 is an amazing piece of biblical material. It is a very profound, prophetic vision because the writer of the Psalm is drawing us a picture of an extraordinary gathering of the world's political leaders. The Psalmist writes about the divine counsel of the Gods. He describes this divine council where all the gods are brought together. He pictures the world's political leaders brought together into a global forum. But what takes place, the Psalmist tells us, is dramatically different from anything ever seen when the world leaders

have gathered together. There is no opportunity for posturing, for politicking, or pontificating, no photo opportunities in matching attire. None of that happens at this gathering because God is in charge.

He has taken his rightful place and he has one question to ask these powerful men and women: “How much longer will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked.” He doesn’t ask them what sort of economic growth they have achieved in the last financial year; or how secure are their borders against interlopers. But instead he asks them how much longer will they judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked? Then the creator of the universe gives these leaders gathered from every part of the world his instructions “ Give justice to the weak and the orphans, maintain the rights of the lowly and the destitute, rescue the weak and the needy, and deliver them from the hand of the wicked.

What is spelt out for us in the Psalm is the mandate that God has given to all political leaders regardless of their political ideologies, or their religious beliefs – or lack of them. We are told in Psalm 82 that all political leaders are going to be held accountable by God for what they deliver in terms of policies that bring new opportunities and new life to poor communities. This conviction ought to fundamentally shape the way that we as Christian individuals relate to each other and to every person. The conviction is this: that we are all made in the image of God, and every human being, no matter how tall or short, smart or silly, beautiful or plain, skilled or unskilled, abled or disabled, no matter what their circumstances, every person is made in the image of God. Every person therefore has immense value. What this means is that the way we behave toward one another reflects and affects our relationship with the creator. Some time ago, the Micah Network held a consultation in Mexico where the Sri Lankan theologian Vinoth Ramachandra gave this challenge to Christian action. “ It is God’s love for all human beings that authorises the poor and oppressed to stand up and claim their rights to sustenance and freedom. Injustice is a violation of God’s own being. Both the Bible and Christian tradition have taught that the poor and oppressed have legitimate claims on us, so that striving for economic, social and political arrangements that help them secure their rights is a matter of doing justice, not merely engaging in acts of compassion”

Thus the Church is called to bring before the public gaze the forgotten people in our societies, - the poor, the disabled, the elderly, the outcast, - both in it’s public proclamation of a different understanding of humanness and its demonstration of it in the Church’s own social practices. If ethics is the Achillies Heel of late modern secular culture, then the ethical becomes the site of gospel proclamation. To champion human rights in global and local contexts, and to argue that such respect for human dignity only makes sense within a biblical worldview, is to bring political action and evangelical apologetics into a powerful harmony.

Like the potter in Jeremiah, it would be good if we could rewrite the history books to show a just world. All we can do is to work to rebalance our world to give everyone the chance for a life that is secure.