

Of Potters, Clay and Plans

This is the sermon given by the Very Revd. Professor Martyn Percy, Dean of Christ Church, at St Nicholas on Sunday 4th September. He gives us much to think and pray about during the vacancy. The lectionary readings to which he refers are Jeremiah 18: 1-11, Luke 14: 25-33 and Philemon 1-21

Let me begin with a story. A true one, too. I was trying to raise some money for a new education centre and chapel in my previous job as Principal of Cuddesdon. We needed about £6.5 million to do the job. I had got off to a good start with a member of our own Governing Body, who kindly gave a tidy sum so we could hire a fundraiser for a few years. And I found a partner and donor to meet half the cost. And some trusts and foundations had been very generous.

But on the day appointed for signing the building contracts and breaking ground, we were £1.25 million short. Not much if you are an Oxford College. But potentially terminal for a Seminary such as Cuddesdon. The alumni at a theological college are all clergy, so they don't have much money to spare. It was a Friday morning, and at 10am, I started signing the documents, knowing I did not have enough in the bank. The contracts ran to three fat volumes, requiring multiple signatures and witnesses. It would take two hours for us all to sign them. At 11am we broke for coffee, and gave our wrists a chance to recover.

I made a 'phone call. Because six months earlier, I had gone to see a trust recommended by a colleague and the meeting had gone well. I was asked for a one hour meeting; but it lasted three hours. A good sign, I thought. Then nothing. Silence. Not a dicky bird. Total quiet. For six months. So, on this day, when I was about to commit financial hara-kiri for the seminary, and I was £1.25 million short, I thought - 'I'll ring the trust'. I spoke to a pleasant woman, and reminded her of my visit some six months back, and, slightly dry in the mouth, tentatively asked, is there any news...? She snapped. 'There is a letter in the post - that should help. Now, anything else?'. 'Er, no' I said. I was reconciled to a rather meagre response - a pleasant letter, and a book-token for the library, perhaps? I drank my coffee, and was about to return to the signing, when the postman came. There was a letter from the trust. I opened it. And there was a cheque. And yes, it was enough to make sure we could finish the job. An unreachable seven figure sum was now an attainable six figure sum.

I tell this story against myself, and against a literalistic and solitary reading of today's gospel. Because we take risks all the time. And discipleship is a mixture of prudence and vision; of risk and caution. How else could the parable with the talents work? Jesus wants us to think and plan carefully. But he also wants us to take risks too; some leaps of faith.

As the saying goes, there are lies, damn lies and statistics. For example, did you know that 19% of Americans believe that they are in the top 1% of income earners in the USA. 80% of clergy in an average deanery think that their churches are growing, despite the fact that the number of communicants shows a small drop each year. Apparently, I have even been known to make up statistics when I find myself in a tight corner in arguments or debates; but on average, I only do this for 5% of the time. But I might have made that figure up.

Well, it is something of a surprise to discover that there are some apparently sound statistics in today's gospel. Who would consider building a tower that costs 500 shekels when they only have 200? Who would fight a battle with 10,000 when the opposition has 20,000? You wouldn't. You'd look for a way out. A way to avoid the statistics: the numbers don't lie. Jesus, it seems, preaches common sense as well as spirituality.

This is why Jesus exhorts his disciples to be as wise as serpents yet as innocent as doves. To take up their cross - very uncompromising; and yet negotiate with the world. We are to be salt and light, yet also in the world; part of it, but yet not of it. Resisting culture; yet accommodating it. Christians are, in other words, a rather pragmatic bunch of folk who are not afraid to embrace the world with all its complexities. Just as God set Jesus within it, so are we to remain, living in the constant tension between the real and the ideal.

This aspect of the gospel resonates with one of the most abiding images we have from the Old Testament - the potter's wheel from Jeremiah. In Jeremiah's parable, he suggests that the people of God have forgotten that they are fashioned by God. They are not self-made. They have not become what they are by their own efforts. This is a sobering parable for us. It is tempting, sometimes, to imagine that churches are built and created by stalwarts in congregations. Or by especially gifted or entrepreneurial clergy. To be sure, such contributions are a vital part of God's economy.

But the lesson of the parable of the potter is a simple one: God is crafting the pot. God is creating something that the clay cannot and should not seek to control. The only thing to be done - especially in times of change - is NOT to cling to the shape you prefer, but rather to offer yourselves afresh as malleable material in the hands of God. Do not ask, 'how can we stay as we are?', but rather, 'what kind of shape does God want us to be?'. To be obedient to the parable, we hand ourselves over to the hands of God; we pray for *his* shaping and crafting. To be made into the vessels he wants and needs, rather than the shapes that we desire. We pray such a prayer not only for ourselves as individuals, but also as a church, and for our future, with all the attending uncertainties and opportunities.

There is also, let me say, a further way in which the parable of Jeremiah could be taken. It might perhaps be tempting to read the potter and the clay as a rather passive-active parable. But anyone who has ever made a pot will tell you that this is not quite right. There is, in fact, a more dynamic relationship between the clay and the crafter. The clay - like all artistic materials - also changes the one who moulds it. I think that this is true of God and his people. And I also think it is true of churches and their people.

And what of absence? In today's epistle, Paul writes as a prisoner. He can no longer be with the church that he longs to nourish, but he can write - and his letter survives to this day. The letter is interesting in all sorts of ways, but what I take from it at the moment, especially as you enter this vacancy, is that the Christian faith transcends absence. Paul is not there; but the work of the gospel continues. The church continues to survive and flourish, even without its chief pastor. It is another reminder that God is the potter here, not the Vicar. This is not Paul's church; it is Christ's, and he will continue to take it to himself, crafting and shaping the witness, if we will but offer ourselves afresh into his hands.

So, pragmatism, principle, pottery and absences: much to ponder in the months ahead during your vacancy. But all of this needs to be held together in prayer, and with a sense of expectancy. God will do something new, and he will do that through you if you can continually offer yourself and one another to God. As Jesus says in the gospels: 'none of you can become my disciples if you do not give up all your possessions'. This is true, but one of the most subtle problems that Christians often encounter is that they think they 'possess' the church - granted as tenants, not owners, but possess nonetheless. But the gospel

challenges us to relinquish our grip here too. The church is not 'ours'; nor is its future shape. Let go; offer yourself; and let God shape.

The good thing about letting go is that God is likely to surprise you. When you look back on this time, you will almost certainly realise how far you have travelled. The leap of faith. There will be births, deaths and marriages. Laughter and tears. Change and continuity. But above all there is companionship: a deepening of your life *together* with God, in prayer, worship and study.

Be in no doubt that we, as your Patron will hold you in our hearts and our prayers. And please continue to hold us in yours. But above all look to God, who even now, spins the wheel - not of fate, but of the potter - and is looking to fashion us all afresh, making us once again into his vessels for today's world. His world. His church.