

Sermon: 4 September 2022
RCL Yr C 23rd Ordinary



Jeremiah 18:1-11
Philemon 1-21
Luke 14:25-33

A church on a wheel

Today's readings come across as relatively straightforward:

The prophet Jeremiah shares a powerful image of GOD as **artisan**, shaping and reshaping his people. We are warned to mend our ways and our actions.

The letter to Philemon shows careful persuasion aiming to have a runaway slave (possibly a *thieving* runaway slave) restored to a useful place in the master's house, based on the slave converting to Christianity. That sounds nice.

Luke recounts a teaching from Jesus that rather firmly reminds us to enter the journey of Christian faith with our eyes wide open to the cost. The most confronting part here, about hating one's family, has some scope for discussion, but the key point seems clear: discipleship comes ahead of other priorities.

So, if you've been in church a few times, perhaps nothing here sounds exceptional: it could be tempting to skim over this week's readings looking around for some better click-bait to discuss ... surely we need to stir up excitement with some controversy?!

But our Sunday readings always reveal more depth if we sit with them for a while.

In this parish we have sometimes borrowed the motto: "*the new is in the old, concealed; the old is in the new, revealed; and the key is in the gospel*" That's really about whole-of-testament meanings, but it sometimes works with a short weekly selection. So I wondered: 'how do these readings interact?'

Jeremiah reminds us that the sovereign of the universe can (and sometimes does) reshape us. There is an element of '*you'll get what you deserve*' here, but perhaps it's more than a sense of angrily smashing failures, because re-making clay is also taking the same GOD-breathed stuff we are already made of, and shaping it into something of even more beauty and worth (remember – spiritual metaphor here, we don't have to be beautiful on the outside) So, a transforming aspect of GOD is in the OT.

The extent of GOD's transformations begins to be revealed in the second reading. Through joining the church, Onesimus the runaway slave– and maybe thief – has transformed into a self-disciplined and willing servant ready to return to work, penitent, and respectable again...remarkable re-hab! Inconveniently though, Onesimus doesn't seem to get what he deserves, at least in one legal sense: a death penalty was normally available for runaway slaves.

But if the key to unlocking greater depth in this scriptural dynamic is in the gospel... we have today a reading about how it costs to follow Jesus. What does this add?

God's biggest surprise for Philemon & Onesimus, is not that Philemon makes a financial gain by recovering a productive household asset. The cost here is Philemon giving up his superiority – his ownership of an inferior person. The cost is giving up on a lawful understanding of heir relationship and what's possible in it. The plan for Onesimus is not just the re-hiring of a reformed worker, its more like a family merger, where Philemon gains a brother-in-law and equal... as a permanent house-hold member!

The cost for us, too, is sometimes giving up our superiority, our lawful claims, on demanding our rights, or letting go of how we believe a relationship works.

From this, and other readings, we believe that in GOD r'ships are not just restored or healed, not just renewed, but transformed into almost unimaginable acceptance, closeness, dignity and love.

And this is a key part of the Gospel – GOD's desire is for relationships consistent with Shalom – with reconciled flourishing. For relationships that rightly recognise the true nature and dignity of each participant. For relationships that lovingly promote and encourage each other's flourishing.

That's a wonderful message for each of us as individuals but, as I understand it, both the Jewish and the Christian approach has a strong element of community focus. GOD speaks to, and about, communities as much as God addresses individuals. In Jeremiah today he addresses the whole "house of Israel" – a whole nation is the clay on that potter's wheel.

So what might GOD be saying to *us* as a community? Perhaps we might consider that the divine Potter reshapes churches as well as individuals.

Our parish is temporarily without an ordained priest assigned to us. It may feel like our shape has gone all wobbly, but we are in the very best of metaphorical hands here. Perhaps this time is an opportunity for the Potter.

A couple of us recently have mentioned the rich resource of our NZ Anglican prayer book – how the collected experience it transmits can support us and

provide a scaffold or a trellis for our spiritual lives to grow on when we might be unsure how to proceed.

I suggest that as we are re-shaped during this time, we can lean on that trellis, including the basic teachings [catechism] from page 925 onwards.* In particular, please consider the bottom of page 931 onwards:

34 Who are the ministers of the Church?

They are the lay persons, deacons, priests, bishops; all the baptised.

35 What is the ministry of the lay persons [us: baptised, not ordained]?

From baptism, our vocation is to witness to Christ in the world using the gifts the Spirit gives us. Within the church, we share in the leadership of worship and in governance.

Our faith is a journey not a destination, so let's keep growing into fullness of the 'priesthood of all believers' which means that we can each speak directly to GOD ; we make our offerings of thanks and praise, and pray directly to GOD. To avoid going off-piste with this, we lean on scripture, tradition, and reason...

Anglicans are part of a wider tradition that considers a few actions so special that we reserve them for ordained people – often called priests. But it helps to be a bit careful about what 'priest' means. There are aspects to that word which are not a great fit for New Testament churches. [*i.e. all Christian churches*]

It's often useful to remember that the NT generally refers to church leaders as servants, elders and overseers. These are roles within the group, not a special sacred tribe like the Levites were in OT framework.

And Jesus said: "*Wherever 2 or 3 gather in my name, I am there among them*" so Lay-person-led gatherings of the church are in every way legitimate church services. We are not a ship adrift while we're between priests: our Lord and Captain is still very much on deck.

We have quite a number of elders here with gifts in the many valid ministries and worship forms that don't require an ordained priest.

We have quite a number of people here who serve effectively and with dignity in our parish life, or in the community, or both.

We have an element of oversight with local 'vestry' committee and especially our Wardens; & we have the Diocese at Wellington Cathedral in the background.

So we are well-equipped with the leadership of a healthy church, so long as we use our various gifts, as ministers – all of us – as ministers of our faith in the saving power of GOD's redeeming grace.

What's the Cost? I don't know what it is that you, personally, will let go as we flourish together.... Perhaps it may be releasing our expectations about the relationship we have with an ordained priest, or with our bishop, or ...

In time, a sister or a brother will come to us, one who is anointed to serve for specific parts of ministry, & they will work for us as our priest but, like Onesimus, s/he will not arrive as our slave.

In the meantime let us continue to grow fitter and stronger in faith, like long-distance swimmers in the broad Anglican branch of that great braided river called Christianity. Let us continue to grow into all the ministries open to us, knowing the cost but counting instead our gains.

So let's pray: May we find joy in our walk with you, Lord; joy in our various ministries, joy which overflows until others want to know where they too can find the wellspring of our living waters.

Amen