

Sermon preached at Gisborne, 4 September 2022

Holy Shaper of hearts and minds, as Jeremiah came to know you in the work of the potter's hands, teach us your ways in reading your Word. Lead us into a deeper understanding of your ways so that we may know and do your will. Amen.

*Jeremiah 18:1-11; Luke 14:25-33 – Clay and the potter*

Happy Father's Day!! We'd like to thank all the fathers in the world, including God, who is called 'Abba - Father.'<sup>1</sup> When it comes to life, we can't help but thank our biological fathers, through whom we also learn about the heavenly father (& mother) - God. Research shows that a person's relationship with their father is directly related to their overall well-being in later life. Traditionally fathers were more authoritative figures than mothers, especially in Jesus' time. In the book, *The Historical Jesus: The life of a Jewish Mediterranean peasant*,<sup>2</sup> John Dominic Crossan defines the Roman Empire as one big extended family. At the top of this pyramid-like family the structure was an emperor – a symbolic father of all people in the Roman Empire and virtually a god for them. At the same time, Jesus taught people that God was his and all people's fathers. Nowadays, this absolute father figure seems to be replaced by something else. But, the reading in Luke, together with Jeremiah, informs us that no matter what historical time we live in, the relationship with God – Abba is exclusively covenantal and cannot be broken by anything in all creation.

In today's reading, Jeremiah was told to go down to the potter's house to see what he was doing at his wheel. The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel as seemed good to him. Here we can see two mutual movements: one is the potter's will to rework the clay into another vessel. In this way, the potter didn't waste the clay but made it useful. The other is the total submission of the clay to the potter. Reworking means that the clay will lose its previous form while maintaining its characteristics as clay, such as softness, moisture and flexibility. God tells Jeremiah that God's people are like clay that has not yet been fired. If the clay is hardened or fired in the kiln already, reworking the clay into another vessel may not be possible. Since clay has not been fired, it is still a mouldable, flexible, and responsive material. Through this, God showed that living as clay was what was expected from Israel. We see similar elements in Luke 14:25-33 under the title of the cost of discipleship.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 14:36; Romans 8:15

<sup>2</sup> HarperCollins, 1993

In Luke, Jesus defines a family quite differently from the social norm at that time (and even today!). He says that whoever comes to him and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even life itself cannot be his disciple. The word ‘hate’ (*miseo* -μισέω) seems very strong. But why did Jesus especially tell his followers to hate one’s family as an example of self-denial? Does Jesus really call us to hate our biological families and our very lives?

Two things can be noted: first, Jesus is using hyperbolic language here as he frequently does in his teachings. For example, In Matthew 18:8, it reads, “If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life maimed or lame than to have two hands or two feet and to be thrown into the eternal fire.”<sup>3</sup> Here Jesus plainly says not to sin but be faithful to God.

Likewise, when we read the parallel saying to Luke in Matthew 10:37, we see that Matthew used a word ‘love’ rather than ‘hate’: “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.” Since Matthew and Luke shared the same Jesus tradition, both sayings urge that our primary loyalty must be to Jesus rather than to family. Therefore, ‘carrying the cross’ is also giving up self-interest, and competing loyalties are central to discipleship. Luke’s Jesus calls people to a kind of discipleship that is not cheap, not easy, and not to be entered into without deep consideration of the consequences and costs. It emphasizes the importance of loyalty to Jesus over all other competing loyalties, including family, self-interest, and possessions, just like the total submission of clay to the potter. So what does it tell us today?

We - the church has always preferred telling people about God’s grace and love in that God’s own covenant loyalty to redeem and save. Yet the covenant involves both parties, and loyalty to God is expected from us in return. Still, the covenantal relationship is not merely a transaction. Its origin is from the love of God, so does it end with the love of God. So when we are called into costly discipleship, Jesus’ command to ‘Follow me’ is both a gift and demand, as if clay must put its trust in the hands of the potter.

When God shaped humankind and breathed life into its nostrils, God did not fire the clay from which God made us. No one of us is only a tile, a pitcher, or a lamp. God can tirelessly shape and reshape us and labour at the wheel on our behalf. God assesses our

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew 18:9 -And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into the hell of fire.

character, perceives our strengths and our weaknesses, builds on our strengths, and, when flaws are found in us, works diligently to remedy them.

Being clay and being Jesus' disciples seem foreign to us as they require self-denial and taking up the cross in this self-assurance age. Yet the flip side of self-denial is our self-assurance in God. The new family in God's love also strengthens our earthly families' relationships because what we learn from Jesus is to love one another till the end. The life of clay in the potter's hand and the life of disciples are not static but dynamic, a continuing process of reshaping and reforming. May the Lord of Wisdom help us become the vessels that will continually build up the family of God in that God is the sole father. Amen.