

**THE TEXT:**

JEREMIAH 18:1 The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: <sup>2</sup>“Arise, and go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words.” <sup>3</sup>So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. <sup>4</sup>And the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to do.

<sup>5</sup>Then the word of the LORD came to me: <sup>6</sup>“O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done? declares the LORD. Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. <sup>7</sup>If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, <sup>8</sup>and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it. <sup>9</sup>And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, <sup>10</sup>and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it. <sup>11</sup>Now, therefore, say to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: ‘Thus says the LORD, Behold, I am shaping disaster against you and devising a plan against you. Return, every one from his evil way, and amend your ways and your deeds.’

**MANUSCRIPT**

“He’s got the whole world in his hands” is a Christian folk song with very simple, but profound words, often sung with accompanying actions for children. Have you heard of the song? The lyrics consist of the refrain: “He’s got the whole world in his hands/he’s got the whole world in his hands/he’s got the whole world in his hands” with each verse beginning with a new subject: “He’s got the wind and the rain in his hands...He’s got the sun and the moon in his hands ...He’s got the itty bitty baby in his hands,...He’s got you and me, brother, in his hands,...He’s got you and me, sister, in his hands...” and so on.

God’s got the whole world in his hands.

That’s reassuring to know in these times of environmental and health crises. It’s reassuring to know in the midst of international tensions and conflict. God’s got the whole world in his hands. No matter how chaotic things are, no matter how powerful particular nations may be, or how harmful the agendas of their leaders—no one can wrest away control from God.

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That was God’s message through Jeremiah. Jeremiah was a prophet during the reign of King Josiah, who was just 8 years of age when his rule began. At the time the spiritual state of the nation was desperately serious. The people had poisoned themselves with the religions of their pagan neighbours and inconceivably had turned away from the living God—who had rescued them and claimed them as his own holy people. Josiah led a huge reform, purging the land of all the idols and pagan altars the people had made. In the eighteenth year of his reign, when the Temple was being repaired, the priest Hilkiyah happened to find a book. Do you know what it was? The Book of the Law of the LORD given through Moses—the scriptures! That it had been found suggests that it had been lost; forgotten about for some time—and with it, God and his will. The people didn’t even know what God’s word was anymore. When it was read before the King, Josiah tore his clothes in grief (2 Chronicles 34).

And so, just before today’s text, in Jeremiah 17, God sent Jeremiah to deliver this message to the people: “...you shall say to them: ‘Because your fathers have forsaken me, declares the LORD, and have gone after other gods and have served and worshiped them, and have forsaken me and have not kept my law, and because you have done worse than your fathers, for behold, every one of you follows his stubborn, evil will, refusing to listen to me. Therefore I will hurl you out of this land into a land that neither you nor your fathers have known, and there you shall serve other gods day and night, for I will show you no favour.’ (Jeremiah 17:11-13)

This is the backdrop to our reading today, where God told Jeremiah to go down to a potter's house, and there he would speak to him. Jeremiah went down to the potter's house and sees the potter working at his wheel. And the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to do. Then the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah: "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done?" declares the LORD. "Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel."

God brings the necessary perspective: his people, who seem to think that they are the wise ones who are in control, are in fact like clay on a potter's wheel. The picture of the potter shaping clay was probably intended to bring to mind the account of creation in Genesis 2 where we hear how human beings are entirely dependent on the grace of God for every single breath: "The LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground. But, like clay on a wheel, Adam was inanimate; he had no life in him. It was only when God breathed into Adam's nostrils the breath of life that the man became a living creature (Genesis 2:7). It is the potter that determines what the purpose and outcome the clay is to have. Clay is unable to shape itself. It is totally dependent on the Potter's moulding of it. The clay does not control the wheel, the potter does. In the Book of Job, Job prays: "Remember that you have made me like clay; and will you return me to the dust" (Job 10:9). In the same way, the lives of God's people aren't under their own control; the clay is in the power of God's hands to do as he wills.

But Israel had forgotten this. They had shaped God in their own image. They thought they knew better than God, living as if they were God, controlling their lives and running after the spirituality of their pagan neighbours. The mind boggles as to how the people had so quickly turned away from the one true God to be so self-centred and committed to the idols of their own making.

And so God says: "If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it. And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it" (Jeremiah 18:7-10).

While Jeremiah's prophecy speaks of nations and kingdoms, it is primarily for God's own covenant people Israel: "Now, therefore, say to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: 'Thus says the LORD, Behold, I am shaping disaster against you and devising a plan against you. Return, every one from his evil way, and amend your ways and your deeds.' God's judgment would come through the Babylonians who were going to invade their land and exile them to Babylon as captives.

Yet because the sovereign Lord who has the whole world in his hands, he can do as he pleases. The good news is that as well as a dire warning, there is also promise, because by nature God is compassionate and merciful: "If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it.

The people did repent. Under harsh captivity they had come to realise what they had turned their backs on: the merciful rule of God and his blessing and favour from the Temple. They sang another song; a lament, which are the words of Psalm 137: "By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion."

God did relent of the disaster. Through Jeremiah he proclaims to them: "I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the LORD, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile" (Jer 29:11-14).

In the picture of the potter at the wheel, rather than throwing away the disfigured, unsatisfactory, ruined vessel, the potter makes something new from it, as seems good to them. From the descendants of those whom God faithfully returned to their land would come the promised Saviour. This was the beginning of the new vessel the potter was forming—the children of God from all times and places, joined to Jesus.

How might this prophecy through Jeremiah of God making a new vessel from his clay apply to us today?

The word of the LORD comes to us also: “Can I not do with you as the potter does, in my hand?” declares the Lord.”

God has a plan in mind for us.

Rather than trying to reshape ourselves, and trying to reshape the church, we are invited to dwell in the potter’s house. We come to the potter’s house every time we come to God’s word. Through his word, God goes to work in us, like a potter with careful touch, reworking our hearts, gently pressing together the fissures caused by the hurt of others, smoothing over the bumps of our sin, softening harsh edges so that his Fatherly compassion would seep through our thoughts and attitudes, moulding our hearts so his own desires would become ours too.

We have all made a mess of things at times, as attitudes and actions of the old Adam, the sinful nature, come to the surface, and we fail to listen to the voice of God, just like Israel of old. But God will not bring disaster on his people. For he brought disaster upon his own Son, in whom the new shape of salvation is seen; the shape of a Cross, upon which his precious blood was shed to redeem the world. The new shape of the Cross is why there is now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus. The new shape of the Cross placed upon your heart at baptism is why, as we heard last week, God the Father in Heaven is your Heavenly Father, who lovingly looks upon you with approval and pleasure for Jesus’ sake, and who declares: “You are my son, you are my daughter with whom I am well pleased.”

God’s reshaping of his clay is more than individual works of art. God the potter shapes and moulds us together as his holy and dearly loved people, building us up in the one body of which his Son Jesus is the head. In Matthew’s Gospel Jesus promised: “I will build my church, and not even the gates of hell will overcome it.” You and I are a part of the clay on the Potter’s wheel, and as God goes to work, he continues to shape us together as his church—everybody here, from the oldest member to the family who brings their baby to baptised, from the longest serving person to the newest visitor coming through our doors—no matter what our gifts and talents, no matter what our competencies or public standing we have. He gently shapes his clay, making something new of us; fashioning a people of grace: from the Pastor and Chairperson to the people on the bin roster—smoothing the roughness, making us loving, patient, kind, faithful, gentle, and having self-control.

For it is just as God has promised, and just as the song leads us to sing: “God’s got the whole world in his hands...God’s got everybody here in his hands.” Amen!