

Building and Planting

Jeremiah 18:1-11; Luke 14:25-33

In the 1980s and the 1990s I had a strong church connection in Pennsylvania, and one of the delights, away from church work, was to visit the Amish Community around Lancaster County. Originally from C17th and C18th Switzerland and Germany, they were a sect of Christians who believed that baptism was only for adults. Seeking a land of greater religious tolerance, many emigrated to the America and set up farms and homesteads there, refusing to engage much with the local communities, and avoiding contact with anything modern. A tradition maintained to this day. Their clothes are plain, they don't use electricity or cars of modern equipment. They speak a form of Swiss German, and some might argue that their society is a closed, slightly oppressive one. But, they look out for each other, and support each other in ways which we can only envy.

On one occasion I was invited to help with a barn raising. My carpentry skills are less than zero, and I had no idea what kind of barn they wanted to build, so I was asked to help count out the wooden pegs that were used to hold the barn together, and there were a lot of them. It was a fine vantage point to watch how they whole community, who had previously helped the young farmer and his wife build their home, helped raise their barn. The whole community, grandparents, grandchildren, women, men, each had something to do and to contribute as they built the barn. Some helped plant crops in the nearby field. I remember really young children with a little supervision planting flowers in tubs around the home. People had brought tools, plants, wood, food, everything to make the day go well, and the main structure was raised in that day. The foundations had already been laid, and everything prepared in advance. It was exhilarating to watch the people, with their horses, raise the walls, and lift on the roof.

Metaphors about building and planting and making and shaping are often found in the Bible. Even in our digital age, we all get the idea. Jeremiah talks about the potter and his clay; he also

talks about a God Who will pluck up and break down, and a God Who will build and plant. Jesus talks about a man building a tower, and planning how it was to be done.

People of faith, as well as being faithful, are also called to be creative and imaginative. People of faith, as well as being thoughtful are also called to be active. People of faith, as well as being aware of the traditions of the past and the realities of the present, are also called to be curious about and preparing for the possibilities of the future.

For Jeremiah, his visit to the potter's workshop gave him an insight about the nature and the determination of God. Sometimes a potter, working away with clay, doesn't get it right first time round. Pottery is a messy business and there can be multiple attempts to shape the thing that you want to shape. The potter is invested in making a useful vessel out of the clay, and will mould and remould until he gets it right. So too with God: God is deeply invested in you and your life and what it might become. "The potter does not work aimlessly, nor does God. Every turn of the wheel matters. God means to shape us for purposes that often exceed our vision and imagination, and which most certainly exceed our typical preoccupation with congregational maintenance."ⁱ

The potter is not indifferent to the condition of the clay, so God is not indifferent to the way our lives take shape. There is a robustly dynamic relationship between potter and clay; there is an equally robust dynamic in the relationship between God and the people of God. God shapes and moulds us and builds within our DNA the possibilities, the choices that will turn our lives into what they will become.

It's interesting to note that in Jeremiah's story the clay can resist the hand of the potter, just as people can choose to align themselves, or not, with the purposes of God. We can work with God, or against God. It is an interesting idea in itself: why has God helped mould us in a way that allows us free choice. It's a risk God takes. We don't always turn out well, but I believe there are times when we can reshape, reinvent ourselves when life goes wrong; and that give me hope.

There is another point to this story of the potter. In the process of raising a pot from the wheel there comes a point when its future shape is set. “For communities of faith, too there are watershed moments when the community faces choices that will have a profound impact on its future.”ⁱⁱⁱ Our Church is going through one of those times now, with the building work we are doing. We are shaping our buildings to affect our present and our future so that we can create and provide buildings fit for God’s purpose, and our purpose. Flexible, welcoming, safe, warm usable spaces that will enable us, and generations to come, to do the things Jesus Christ is calling us to do in, for and with our parish and our community. What a wonderful story we have to tell, and what wonderful faith we are showing in the future. Like the tower builder in Jesus’ parable, planning to build and to finish and ensuring that resources needed today will be sufficient to complete the work proposed. Within our walls, not built for our but God’s glory, we enable love and learning, believing and fellowship, support and inclusion to take place. That is what Jesus is calling us to do and to be. And, good Scottish Presbyterians though we might be when it comes to Jesus talk, our worship and coffee times, our charity support and choir singing, our Wednesday Club for disabled men and our engagement with people with dementia, our growing awareness of the need to support people in abusive relationships and our encouragement of our young people – this is part, and only a part, of what we are doing in God’s Name in this place. It is our story, and it is a wonderful one that we share in as we make it together. Our Church continues to grow its story generation by generation. Look at what God has enabled us to do in these recent years.

It goes without saying that our country is facing a watershed moment. What kind of country do we want to become, and our understanding of that, is shaped by the kind of country we are now. Are we as kind and compassionate as we should be? Are we as inclusive and welcoming as we should be? Are we as honest and fair as we should be? Are we as industrious and generous as we should be? Are we as forward-thinking and open-minded as we should be? That’s what this current meltdown in our political world is really about. As people of faith are we helping to shape the kind of country, and kind of community, that we want to live in and hand on

to the next generation? We are both clay being shaped, and potters shaping the clay at one and the same time. We are builders and planters at one and the same time.

In amongst all this aspirational talk about churches and nations and communities, there is also the fundamental need to remember the personal. What are we, with our own lives, seeking to build and to plant? Are we in need of being shaped and reshaped in the way we say things and treat others, and also treat ourselves? Are their broken parts of our lives that God is calling us to do something about, with Him, today?

Over the last few months I have been privileged to see some intense pastoral situations affecting people who have been forced by circumstance or personal choice to face up to things in their lives that need to be addressed. Things from long ago that needed sorting out, and things more recent that have suddenly grown out of all proportion. Situations where the hands of God have nudged chance meetings, or new awareness into being, that have led women and men to take a big, deep breath and say, “This needs to change. I can change this; or I need help to change this.” That mixing image of potter and clay, clay and potter comes to mind as I have watched people begin to shape and reshape their lives, sometimes in unimaginably painful circumstances, and begin to start again.

Clay work is messy, as those who have tried their hand at the potter’s wheel know. We don’t always get it right, and we can expect to get our hands dirty, run some risks and – on occasion – face failure as what God wants to do with us doesn’t work, or what we want to do with ourselves doesn’t work. Participating in the creative work of God is always messy and risky, and it is sometimes hard to see what is going to emerge from the clay and the water and the spinning wheel. “At the end of the day, a potter steps away from the wheel covered with the stuff of her art, spattered head to foot with clay. Jeremiah invites us to envision God up to the elbows in our making and remaking.”ⁱⁱⁱ Today, what are you building and planting; what are you shaping on the potter’s wheel of your life? And might it just be that, feeling God’s hands on yours, you might be in the process of shaping and reshaping something that will be truly wonderful. God will help.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Sally A Brown, Feasting on the Word, Year C Vol 4 p29

ⁱⁱ ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ ibid p31