

On the Wheel

A number of years ago, during the time of our First Vision Statement, I said this about the kind of church I wanted to be a part of.

See what you think.

I said: I would like to be part of a church:

- Led by leaders who lead diligently
- That has effective ministries
- Where Life Groups are vibrant and significant
- Where worship is alive
- Where the lost are a burden on our hearts
- Where people are devoted to Christ
- Where we live for the truth of the Kingdom of the Heavens
- That serves the community in love
- That supports families
- Where everyone is fulfilled in their gifts
- Where we see God at work in our Frontline – in all the places we go

I said I wanted to be part of a church like that because, it seems to me, a church like that would bring honour to God's name. I asked if we, you, in CBC wanted to be part of a church like that.

So, I'm wondering: How are we doing?

A number of years ago, during the time of our first Vision Statement, I asked how you would respond to God giving His excellent best for you. I offered this as a possible response to the truth about Jesus.

In response to God's excellent best, the gift of Jesus:

- I will do whatever it takes to honour God.
- I will withhold nothing
- I will not try to cut corners
- I will not try to find an easy or comfortable way out
- I will not try to cheat on what God has given to me
- I will not squander my talents, gifts or abilities
- I will not keep for myself that which God has blessed me with

- I will live by truth, integrity, generosity, gratitude, fidelity, love and hope
- My life will be characterised by a 'Whatever it takes' attitude in all the places I go
- I'll do whatever it takes to fulfil my part in the Vision of this church – the place I am now, as one of God's dearly loved children
- I resolve to do this – as God himself resolved to do whatever it took to win me by his love.

Maybe, at the time you joined in with that response. I'm wondering, how does that sound today, right now, here, in these moments?

I'm going to give each of you a piece of clay this morning. As we go through this talk, you can do whatever you want with it: mould it, shape it, ignore it! But, I might ask you at the end to reflect on what you did with it!

I'm going to read something which, I think, might bring together a challenge to the church, a challenge to each of us and the clay!

At the Potter's House

18 This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: ²“Go down to the potter's house, and there I will give you my message.” ³So I went down to the potter's house, and I saw him working at the wheel. ⁴But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so, the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him.

⁵Then the word of the LORD came to me. ⁶He said, “Can I not do with you, Israel, as this potter does?” declares the LORD. “Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, Israel. ⁷If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, ⁸and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. ⁹And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, ¹⁰and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it.

¹¹“Now therefore say to the people of Judah and those living in Jerusalem, ‘This is what the LORD says: Look! I am preparing a disaster for you and devising a plan against you. So, turn from your evil ways, each one of you, and reform your ways and your actions.’ ¹²But they will

reply, 'It's no use. We will continue with our own plans; we will all follow the stubbornness of our evil hearts.' (Jeremiah 18 v 1-12)

God desperately wants to speak to his people. He desperately wants to speak to them because he loves them and he wants the best for them. He desperately wants to speak to them, because, right now, they are simply not living in God's best way. So, God is going to get creative once again!

I'm wondering: is it possible that God might want to speak to us as his people today? I'm wondering: is it possible that God might want to speak to you today?

God takes Jeremiah to the Potter's house and shows him a potter working at his wheel. Pottery, it turns out, is one of the most significant inventions in human history. Before the invention of pottery there were only wandering tribes of people who survived by following the animals they wanted for food, moving from one food supply to another. It was a hand to mouth existence, influenced by drought and famine.

Pottery made it possible to remain or dwell in one place: it provided storage for food supply, a means of carrying water and cooking and transporting produce. Pottery signalled a revolution – what we now call the Neolithic Age.

The invention and use of pottery made a whole new way of life possible.

Pottery was extremely important because it was extremely useful! And that's important: every pot made had a use – an important use. In Jeremiah's day no-one made a pot simply to look at it. In Jeremiah's day a potter made a pot because they had something in mind for that pot to do!

Does that truth remind you of anything?

It probably reminded Jeremiah of a very important truth that he'd already learnt:

Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you. Before you were born, I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations. (Jeremiah 1v5)

Jeremiah was chosen to be on God's side, to participate in something that God is doing.

What is God doing? He is healing; he is saving; he is rescuing; he is blessing; he is providing; he is judging; he is fighting against the spiritual forces of evil; he is fighting for life and hope and heaven.

His part in all that? Jeremiah is chosen to be a prophet to the nations – telling God’s bigger and better story! You too, have been chosen to be on God’s side. Jeremiah was a pot, created by the potter to be useful in the kingdom of the heavens. Friends, the deep and profound truth revealed here, in this visit to the potter is that, you too are a pot, created by the potter to be useful in the kingdom of the heavens.

Every pot is useful. Which means God created you too, and desperately longs for you to be useful in the kingdom of the heavens. That’s another way of saying that you, yes you, are vitally important and significant in what God is doing. Yes, you!

Actually, it’s better than that! Every pot is useful but every pot a potter makes is also unique! And because every pot made by a potter is unique it has a beauty that no other pot has. So here it is: You are, wonderfully, useful and uniquely beautiful! But, you are also usefully unique, and uniquely useful and beautifully so!

Maybe that’s what God desperately wants to say to you today and for you to know and understand. And maybe, God is shaping you right now in these moments. Maybe right now, in these moments, you are on the wheel as God shapes you and moulds you and speaks his gracious word to you.

How are you doing?

Another perhaps quite challenging question is: “What kind of clay are you?”

Jeremiah saw a pot that was marred in the hands of the potter. There is a theological debate that rages around this image. What does this say about God? What does it say about God’s people? Here is what I think:

I think, sometimes, the clay is marred: we have a choice – and choice is a very powerful thing. Because God is love he gives us the freedom to choose his best or to resist it! That’s another way of saying, we don’t always choose God’s best. Actually, I think we all know that truth in our lives, don’t we?

Because we are flawed, fallen human beings, we sometimes choose the way of evil: we mess up, we deliberately make bad choices, destructive choices, selfish choices. We can, I believe, say “No,” to God! The question then becomes: “What does God do?”

Jeremiah sees a potter re-making a pot that is marred. This is a theologically loaded statement, but one I am convinced is true: God is big enough and loving enough to work with us even in our mistakes and our deliberate and wilful sin.

He will never discard us, reject us or abandon us. He is the potter who can make something beautiful out of something that is marred. God is the potter who always sees the potential in the clay, however marred it turns out to be. But the clay and potter must work together.

God longs, desperately longs that we participate with him as he shapes and moulds us in his infinite wisdom and love. And it is on the potter's wheel that shaping and moulding creates something useful and unique and beautiful. And here's a challenging thought: perhaps being on the potter's wheel is, in truth, the very best place to be. Perhaps another way of saying all of that is simply this: You are loved with a love that makes you beautiful. And the question becomes: "How much will you let God love you?"

Jeremiah's visit to the potter's house was for the nation of Judah. God wants the best for them, but they are marred clay in his hands. I'm wondering: what might God say about the commitment of his people called Crawley Baptist Church? It seems that it is possible for the clay to frustrate the potter. I'm wondering, what might God say about the community of his people called Crawley Baptist Church?

The people of Judah appear to refuse to respond to God's invitation to live his way. God warns them of what will happen if they continue to live the way they have been living (verses 5-11) but they respond: "It's no use. We will continue with our own plans, we will all follow the stubbornness of our evil hearts." (v 12)

So, I'm wondering: what kind of clay will the people of Crawley Baptist Church be? Last week in the All Age service, we took time to look back at some of the ways we have seen CBC 'Bursting with Life.' I think (you can take this away and reflect on it), I think we are, again, at the Potter's Wheel. We looked back at how our Vision Statement has burst into life, but now it is time to look forward to a new Vision. We are on the Potter's Wheel, and we can allow and invite God to shape us and mould us and bring about his best in, and through this community.

I invite and encourage you to be thinking and praying, even now, as to what God might be speaking to us. We'll do it in Life Groups, in ministry teams, as leaders, as God's people. Put aside the weekend of 12-14th June, as we come together to seek God's vision for us. We may be marred but we have been chosen to be on God's side, participating with him, in his bigger and far better story.

How are you getting on with your clay? I'm wondering, what kind of clay will you be? In response to the shaping and moulding of the potter, how much will you say:

- I will do whatever it takes to honour God
- I will withhold nothing
- I will not try to cut corners
- I will not try to find an easy or comfortable way out
- I will not try to cheat on what has been given to me
- I will not squander my gifts, talents or abilities
- I will not keep for myself that which God has blessed me with
- I will live by truth, integrity, generosity, gratitude, fidelity, love and hope
- I will do this wherever I go
- I will do whatever it takes to be part of God's vision in Crawley Baptist Church

And how much, I wonder, will we as CBC allow God to shape us and mould us so that this community:

- Is led by leaders who lead diligently
- Has effective ministries
- Has Life groups that are vibrant and significant
- Has worship that is alive
- Has a heart and a burden for the lost
- Is full of people fully devoted to Christ
- That lives for the truth of the Kingdom of the heavens
- Serves the community in love
- Supports families
- Sees everyone fulfilled in their gifts
- Experiences God at work on our Frontline – in all the places we go.

God is, even now, shaping and moulding. The question is: On the Wheel: How will you respond? How will we respond?

Preached in Crawley Baptist Church, on Sunday 16th February 2020, by Rev. Ian Phillips.