

## **Sermons at the All Saints Anglican Church of Luxembourg**

**Preached by Rev Alison Heal on Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> September, first Sunday in the Season of Creation**

**Bible passages: Jeremiah 18:1-11 and Luke 14:25-33**

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I visited an exhibition at the Casino art gallery last year, and I was slightly hypnotised by one of the installations. Su-Mei Tse, who's a Luxembourgish artist, had filmed a potter taking a lump of clay and shaping it on a wheel, and the film just looped and looped. It was quite mesmerising. Did any of you also see it?

The commentary to that exhibition said: "We sense that Su-mei Tse's artistic approach is shaped by a Buddhist world view'. That interested me, because as I was watching it in my slight trance, I had the words 'I am the potter, you are the clay' running through my mind. Perhaps it's not a specific religious world view that sees life as like a clay pot being formed, but a spiritual understanding of not being the centre of everything, not being the still point in the universe about which everything else turns.

To admit that we are just clay in the hands of a potter is quite an admission of powerlessness. We use phrases like: 'He's just putty in her hands' to describe someone who is helpless to stop another person controlling them. Why would we, fiercely independent, can-do people, put ourselves into any other hands but our own?

For this, it clearly depends a lot on who the potter is, and also on who we understand we are. In one sense this is easy. In our Jeremiah reading, God says he's the potter, and various nations are the clay. We can extend this to ourselves, but as usual, remember that the clay is a group of people, not just you, not just me, but a nation at a time.

Good. God is the potter, we are the clay. But the question of 'who is the potter, who are we?' is more complicated too. Is God a good potter? Is it safe for us to leave ourselves in his hands? Are we actually perfectly adequate potters ourselves, capable of shaping our own lives, our own world, without intervention? That's certainly a modern outlook on the whole thing. If that's the case, maybe it's just safer if we keep on shaping our own lives, because trusting this to God sounds fairly risky, particularly when you add in Jesus' words about the cost of following him.

Maybe we can just keep God at a polite distance, Sunday mornings only, and shape our own lives the rest of the time? Seems less risky... Maybe we can build our own lives the way we know we need them, ask God to bless that... Seems less drastic than putting ourselves as clay into his hands... Maybe we can manage our own world, exploit its resources and its people as we need, and then ask God to keep the climate nice and safe for us... It begins to sound ridiculous when you put it like that.

We can look at the world around us, seeing how horrifyingly out of kilter both the environment and the international world have become, and we can see who we are, as clay, as a human population. We are people who are in serious need of a potter with more wisdom and balance than ourselves. We are people who sorely need to be remoulded by the skill and patience of a good potter. And that's the beauty of what Jeremiah sees when he goes down to the potter's house. There in the workshop he observes the slow, steady rhythm of **creation**. The clay resists; the pot collapses; the

potter begins again. This is not a story of failure. It is a picture of patience, of ongoing relationship between hands and clay.

So God is a patient and skilful potter. And we are not as good at life-formation as we'd like to think we are. But does God care about our lives as much as we do? Isn't he, at best, a bit of a dispassionate potter who doesn't care much about what his poor human clay wants? This idea of a distant, maybe judgemental God could be at the heart of why we don't want to trust the formation of our life to him. To get the correct picture, we can look at Jesus, God who came to live with us, seeing us as the treasure, the pearl of great price, for which he was willing to give up everything. If we're not sure God has our best interests at heart, we look to Jesus and we find a challenging but absolutely loving picture of God's heart of love and peace for you, for me, for the people of the world, and for the entire creation.

In Hebrew, the word Shalom - which we translate as God's peace - has layers of meaning far beyond the absence of conflict. Shalom speaks of wholeness, harmony, right relationship. It describes a condition in which things are in their right place and working for the good of everything else. When we speak of "Peace with Creation," we are not just talking about preserving wild places or polluting less. We are inviting God to shape our lives in such a way that all life can flourish together, in a way where nothing is exploited for short-term gain, and where we fully understand creation not to be something to conquer but something to care for.

The task before us isn't small. But neither is the hope in our loving potter's hands, God at work in us through the Holy Spirit. Allowing God to reshape our lives and our world is not only about avoiding disaster. It is about rediscovering joy, simplicity, connection. It is about recovering that sense of Shalom - not only in our prayers but in our habits, in our choices, in the ways we grow food, use energy, design cities, treat neighbours.

In this first week of the Season of Creation, we are invited to hold two things together at once: the weight of the crisis we face, and the trust that we are still in God's hands. The clay is marred but not discarded. The world is wounded and embattled, but not forsaken. As we place ourselves as clay in God's hands, he shapes us to live more gently, more gratefully, more justly.

To truly follow a path of peace with creation we must go beyond theory and renew the understanding of how we live, in Shalom, with Christ and the world. Renew our understanding, as apprentices of Jesus, about what we do with our time and money, how we travel, what we teach, how we pray, and how we listen to the world around us. We may not be able to change everything, but we are not powerless, and we start with small steps and build to larger ones. We are clay that can be reshaped.

Let's bow our heads and pray:

Creator God, Saviour Jesus, we come before you to begin again. We come before you with open hands and with humble hearts, asking you to fill us with your Holy Spirit. We trust as you formed the earth from nothing, as you love us in Jesus, you can form in us a new way of being. A way that makes peace with creation - not in word alone, but in life.

Amen