

Called to be potters

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Pentecost 15C, 9th September 2007

Jeremiah 18:1-11; Psalm 139:1-5, 12-18; Philemon 1-25; Luke 14:25-35

When I first read the Jeremiah lesson I read on to verse 18 by mistake; — and verse 18 caught my attention.

That bit goes, “Then they said, ‘Come let us plot against Jeremiah — for instruction shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet. Come, let us bring charges against him, **and let us not heed any of his words.**’” Odd sort of thing to say we might think, until we realise that, in Jeremiah’s time, the priest, the wise and the prophet were all professionals, appointed and paid by the state, and as prone to corrupt practice as any other person in the street.

In contrast God’s words to Jeremiah are open ended, “Come, go down to the potter’s house and there **I will let you hear my words.**”

On the one hand, Jeremiah is invited by God to hear; on the other hand, Jeremiah’s detractors, who, by the way, would prefer to see him dead or incarcerated, will not heed any of his words.

Jeremiah was a political realist who suffered a fair bit because, as an unpaid prophet who had the ear of the Lord God, he spoke out against the prevailing injustices of his time — injustices perpetrated by the state and its servants. It would seem that both God and Jeremiah believed in the right to free of speech, whereas those in power believed quite the opposite.

No doubt many of you read the rather poorly edited transcript of Geoffrey Robertson’s speech to the *Right to Know* campaign launched by Australian newspaper publishers last week. This campaign covered issues of natural justice like free speech, whistleblowers, freedom of information, a Bill of Rights, and hastily forged laws such as our sedition laws as they now stand.

We all remember the customs official who copped a criminal conviction and a suspended jail sentence for blowing the whistle on the very serious security problems at Sydney Airport which had been ignored by the government. That man was doing no more than Jeremiah and his peers did in their day — telling it as it is. Jeremiah, for his pains got thrown down a well and received death threats; the customs man had his reputation forensically sullied and his career prospects attenuated. This action was foreshadowed many years ago when a customs official lost his job for jobbing a polly on his way through customs with a large undeclared bit of contraband.

Likewise, journalists regularly run risks when they refuse to reveal their sources. Yet, as Robertson said, “In this time of the dark tailors of public relations spinning the most fabulous fancy dress for our political leaders, we must rely on journalists to play the part of the small boy in the fable, pointing out that the emperor has no clothes” How can this be?

When, Oh when, will we see a Bill of Rights in Australia? “**Let us not heed any of his words**” could almost be a catchphrase for some of the dealings in our corridors of power. The rule of law has, in some arenas, become a bad joke. This was precisely the sort of thing that Jeremiah spoke against.

As Geoffrey Robertson said, “We abandon the fair trial right at our peril.”

Ben Sirach¹ wrote that the potter is “always deeply concerned over his work.” The verb used in Jeremiah for **shaping** the clay (*yasar*) is the same as that used in Genesis, when “the Lord

God **formed** man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life..." (1 Sirach 38:29,30)

This careful God who is always deeply concerned over his work said to Jeremiah, "I will **let** you hear my words." It is our privilege that we, also, are privy to these words, which come to us in the form of both image (potter, clay etc) and lexicon. The essential message, as is that of the gospel, is that we have, if we so wish, the privilege of working for the greater good, even when that might be at some personal cost. Our calling, if you like, is to also be potters, deeply concerned over our work.

The bloodthirsty Martin Luther once remarked, "A religion that gives nothing, costs nothing, and suffers nothing, is worth nothing." That is a fairly unyielding remark; but so, it appears at first sight, is our Lord's injunction to "hate" father, mother, sister and brother. However, the translation "hate" is much too strong for the real intent. Better to say something like "love less." It has something to do with leaving the nest, growing up, maturing and taking a responsible place in society. Someone once said or wrote "it's a matter of choosing a loyalty higher than family and self." This involves sometimes painful loss as the clay of our souls changes form. There are two potters involved — God and self.

It is not just the outward form of a pot that gives it true shape. The inward form is just as important a factor in its functioning. It has been suggested that it's the interior space which we don't see that gives the pot its basic shape — which begs the question "What's your interior shape like?" Only you, and that still quiet voice deep within you, which knows these things can perhaps answer. All I know is that when I look inside, I see that what this particular little pot needs is a lot more space inside.

It is risky and painful to be a Jeremiah or an Amos or any kind of person who challenges injustice at its source, that is, at its shaping and execution of justice, the crucible of justice, if you like, which allows the abuse of justice. Some may think that the Chasers go too far. But perhaps it is one of the few ways of getting a hearing from those without ears to hear, and who, albeit unconsciously, follow a creed that says "let us not heed any of his words" — in effect, a creed that has lost its saltiness.

I know which crowd I would rather be associated with.