

## Readings for the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Second Sunday in the Season of Creation

7<sup>th</sup> September 2025

### First Reading: Jeremiah 18:1-11

The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: “Come, go down to the potter’s house, and there I will let you hear my words.” So I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was working at his wheel. The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter’s hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.

Then the word of the LORD came to me: Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says the LORD. Just like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it. And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it. Now, therefore, say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: Thus says the LORD: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you, from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings.

### Second Reading: Philemon 1-21

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow-soldier, and to the church in your house: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith towards the Lord Jesus. I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love – and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back for ever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother – especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my

heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

Gospel: St Luke 14:25-33

Large crowds were travelling with Jesus; and he turned and said to them, 'Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, "This fellow began to build and was not able to finish." Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.'

A Reflection for the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

About twenty-five years ago, I remember being on a church weekend away from the church near Edinburgh that I was a part of at the time. At one point we were each given a lump of clay and asked to mould into something that, if I remember correctly, symbolised our approach to God. I remember one person sculpted a beautiful pair of praying hands. Not me! This really wasn't my thing at all, and everything I tried bore no resemblance to my intentions. I ended up burying the result in my garden! It was much the same when I was at school and we sometimes had pottery as part of our Art lessons, so I have every sympathy with the potter in today's passage from Jeremiah whose vessel was spoiled. However, unlike my lack of skill, this is not a story about an incompetent potter but about recalcitrant clay.

I've always loved the imagery here and the idea that, even when something is completely and utterly messed up, it can be re-shaped into something new. Maybe that new thing is not the same as was originally intended but, nevertheless, it is something good and beautiful. As God goes on to say through the prophet, just as the clay responds and yields to the potter's hands, we are like clay in God's hands, to be re-shaped, the result depending on our response to God.

We are in the Season of Creation, and I am reminded that creation is an ongoing process, continually changing and adapting. That change and adaptation is a natural part of evolution through which species change and new species come into being. It has natural cycles of growth, flourishing and decay that sustain life in all its richness. Now, those processes and the balance of nature are in trouble because of human-caused climate change.

The problem is not so much that change is happening, but the pace of change. As a result of human activity, that pace is so great that natural processes of evolution and adaptation can't keep up. We could say that the clay of creation is messed up and there is an urgent need to re-shape what is happening in the world. And as we are part of that clay of creation, we need to be willing to respond to God the potter's hands, to heed the signs of our age and seek paths of justice and peace for all of creation.

You may have come across the term 'Just Transition'. It's a concept that originated in trades union movements in the 1980s that was about working for fairness and sustainability. More recently, it has been adopted by the Scottish Government as an initiative about working in partnership with one another to establish "a greener, fairer, future for all". It's a secular idea, but one that really resonates with our Christian faith, although I would extend its reach beyond Scotland to the whole world.

An important part of 'Just Transition' is working together, which is very much a part of Paul's letter to Philemon. This is a very short letter, at least by Biblical standards, and most of it is included in today's reading. As the text says, Philemon was one of Paul's co-workers; he seems to have been a man of wealth and with a church that met in his house. In the letter, Paul affirms the importance of relationships with others, speaking of love, faith, sharing, service and partnership, in order to do good for Christ. He mentions a number of individuals by name, both here and in later verses, as well as groups of people, which encompass people of different genders, social standing, wealth and age. And it includes an appeal to Philemon to restore his relationship with his former slave, Onesimus.

This letter is a reminder that we are connected by our faith to many others, and that community, connectedness and diversity are all important if we are to effect change in the world. If we are to care for Creation, we do so in partnership with a huge range of others and with the whole web of life. And, just as Philemon was invited by Paul to see Onesimus as a beloved brother rather than a slave, so we are invited to see ourselves as partners, siblings even, with all of creation, working for the good of all.

To do that work is not easy and, in today's Gospel, Jesus speaks of the cost of discipleship, the cost of working for the good of all.

Jesus is speaking to a large crowd who would have been diverse in their backgrounds and commitment to his cause, and there is no doubt that his words sound harsh, though I believe they were spoken in love. In part, he was confronting the hypocrisy that was present amongst at least some of those who hung about him, trying to catch him out and destroy his influence. But he also cared deeply that all people should follow God's ways. So he tells them that genuine discipleship is a radical, costly commitment, not for the faint-hearted.

And our attitude to caring for all of God's Creation should be radical and costly too. Think of some of the things you may have heard said, maybe even said yourself at times: 'we're not so bad, others are worse...', 'the little I do isn't that damaging, it doesn't really matter...'; 'it won't do any harm just this once...'; 'net zero is an aspiration but not really achievable so it's not really worth trying...'; 'we've found lots more oil, so we might as well use it...', 'it won't happen in my lifetime...'; 'I'm a good person...'

I agree with that last one: you are a good person; we are all good people. And as good people, we all have our part to play; we are all disciples, those who learn from our teacher and working together to put that learning into practice in our lives.

At the end of this passage, Jesus says: 'none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.' I don't think this is about making ourselves destitute, but it is about sitting lightly to possessions and wealth, about genuinely making those gifts which God has entrusted to our care freely available for God's purposes, as and when he calls on them.

The more things have been messed up, and the world looks pretty messed up in lots of ways at the moment, the more damage has been done and there is more to be sorted out. But just as the clay on the potter's wheel can only be sorted out and re-shaped once the wheel has stopped turning, so we need to find some way of stopping the ongoing cycle of environmental damage. It's a tall order and hard to envisage, but we all need to stop carrying on as we have been, we actually have to change. Only then can there be a fresh start to re-shape the world as God intends.

God the Creator, the God of love, can bring about a world of beauty and justice if the clay is willing. The question is: are we willing? Like you, I imagine, I want to be willing, I want the world to be a better place for all life on Earth, I want there to be that Peace with creation that I spoke of last week, the peace that is about healing and wholeness and restoration of relationships. But I too find it hard not to be overwhelmed by the enormity of what we face, to know what to do next. Yet I know that I simply need to take the next step and trust God to take that offering and re-shape it anew, and that many people of goodwill doing this will bring about beauty and justice and peace.