

The House of the Potter

Jeremiah 18:1-5

This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord. 'Go down to the potter's house, and there I will give you my message.' So I went down to the potter's house, and I saw him working at the wheel. But 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. Then the word of the Lord came to me. He said, 'Can I not do with you, Israel, as this potter does?' declares the Lord. 'Like the clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, Israel.'



In Nazareth the market square is the place where people come to shop for things they cannot make or grow for themselves. Nathan's and my basket weaving workshop faces onto the square, with Joseph's carpenter's shop next door. Opposite Joseph is Simeon the Smith. Around the rest of the square there is Ezra the Mat maker, Marco the merchant and Joash the Potter. The house of Joash the potter is opposite our house, and between our house and the well. I regularly have to pass by it to fetch water.

Joash creates the most wonderful bits of pottery, which he sells not just in Nazareth, but across the whole area. He makes everything from beakers to drink out of, to plates and bowls of all sizes, to pitchers for the oil and milk we have with our meals and decanters to serve wine at the table. There are amphora to store wine and large jars with lids to store grain and oil for our daily use. Then there are the lamps to light our houses. He makes our cooking pots in which we cook our soups and stews, some of which he makes pottery stands for, so that we can light a fire under them, others he takes to Simeon the smith who makes a metal stand for them so that they can be suspended over a fire.

Joash needs to be near the well, as he uses a lot of water to make his pots. Every few weeks a big cart arrives up in Nazareth from the Plain of Esdralon. Joash has a series of three stone troughs, behind his workshop, each with an exit channel, the biggest leading to the next in size, which leads in turn to the smallest. The load of clay is tipped from the cart into the largest trough. Joash and his assistant then have to make lots of trips to the well and fill his trough with water.

The children in the village love to help him with the next stage. They gird up their loins and then jump into the trough and start making mud pies with their feet. As they jump up and down the mud begins to separate out, and the muddy water begins to flow out through the channel at one end, and into the second trough. At least that is what is supposed to happen. Joash loses a lot of his clay due to the enthusiasm of his 'helpers'. When the children stop jumping up and down because all they are jumping on is little stones, and the second trough is full of muddy water, Joash sluices off the mud covered objects standing in his trough, and sends them home.

Over the next day or so, the muddy water in the second trough gradually dries leaving a muddy sludge in the bottom. Then Joash and his 'helpers' start again. The mothers of Nazareth really love mud stomping days. Especially as it has to happen for a third time. By the time the third trough dries out, Joash is left with a lovely smooth brown/grey clay ready to make his wares.

One day, not long before he departed to begin his ministry, I saw Jesus sitting watching Joash work as I was passing by to get water from the well. He had obviously been doing something strenuous in his workshop as he was just in his kethonnet, which he had girded out of the way. He held a pottery beaker in his hand, and he was gulping down water as if his life depended on it. On my way back from the well with my jar of water, I sat down beside him, and offered to fill his beaker again, which he gratefully accepted. Neither of us said anything as we watched Joash skilfully turn the potter's wheel with his feet and gently with his hands cause a beautiful small amphora to rise from the lump of mud. As we watched he stretched the mud to its fullest limit, and suddenly something happened and the thin sides of the amphora began to wobble, and then collapse. Joash straightened up, and stretched his back, then began to pound on the clay to produce a lump again. He added a bit more clay, wetted the whole lot with more water, and began again to make an amphora rise from the lump.

Beside me Jesus began to softly sing,

Go down to the house of the potter,
Watch him work the clay,
Listen to what I say as you watch him
Go down to the house of the potter,
Watch him turn the wheel,
Know that's how I feel as I'm working
That is how I need to mould you,
Form a vessel in my hand,
Just to let me have and hold you,
Break you, make you, to my plan.
For I need these earthen vessels,
Filled with life that overflows,
Put my treasure in earthen vessels,

Then the skill of the potter shows.

When he had finished he turned to me. That is from the book of the prophet Jeremiah. I remember the Rabbi teaching me those verses. I think that they are some of the most beautiful written in the books of the prophets. I am always reminded of it when I take the time to sit here and watch Joash work. In my workshop I create tools and practical items like doors. If I make a mistake then either I have to begin again or the mistake remains. The customer might not see the mistake, but I know that it is there. Joash, if he makes a mistake, gathers everything back up again, and has another go. Jeremiah says that God is continually making and remaking us, until we are made in his image, then and only then are we ready to be brought before God, and fired in the heat of his love for us. Soon, very soon, I shall need to go, and begin my part in the remaking of God's people, and I shall remember Joash and his pots.

Jesus got up to go, commenting that he had better go and start finding some wood for Joash. He has a lot of pots of all shapes and sizes drying in the sun, so he must be about ready to make a kiln and fire them all. It will be a good place to get rid of all my mistakes. He gave me a hand to pull me to my feet.

'Don't tell mother yet about what I said about leaving. She knows that I have to leave, to be about my father's business. I don't want her to worry until I know the time is right.'

I looked into his face, and saw there something I had not seen before, a determination, and something more I could not define, maybe a bit of sadness, but then he smiled, and he was just Mary's son, the carpenter of Nazareth again.